

# Lao Tzu's Conception of Evil

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To discuss Lao Tzu's conception of evil may seem to be a question wrongly asked. In the universe supposedly produced and permeated by Tao, the *summum bonum*, it would seem that there cannot be any room for the existence of evils. Moreover, Lao Tzu seems to have said that the distinction between good and evil is really a wrong-headed human contrivance.

The purpose of this article is to show that there is a proper distinction between good and evil in Lao Tzu's thought and to analyze the different aspects of his conception of evil. It will be argued that he recognizes two kinds of evils. The first kind of evil is that which causes human sufferings in the world. They are supposedly originated in the assertive use of the human will. The second kind of evil is the human sufferings caused by the first kind. It will be shown that Lao Tzu's philosophy of Tao is deeply concerned with the elimination of these evils from the world. One cannot fully appreciate his philosophy without taking into account his concern with evils and the underlying soteriological motive. In the course of this discussion, we shall deal with the concepts of suffering and human will, the question of "natural" sufferings, the distinction between good and evil, and finally the metaphysical status of evils in his philosophy. We shall start with an analysis and interpretation of the evils described and explained in the *Tao Te Ching*<sup>1</sup> and then discuss Lao Tzu's conception of evil in relation to his philosophy as a whole.

## I. Causal Evils and Consequent Evils

By the term "evils" ("an evil" in singular) we mean the things, events, or actions that are regarded as "evil." "Evil" or the quality of evil is a set of characteristics, organized in some causal and/or logical structure, that are commonly found in evils. These are, of course, only formal definitions. As a practical guide to identifying the evils discussed in the *Tao Te Ching*, we can say that evils are those things, events, or actions that are either denounced or condemned by Lao Tzu, or, in his view, to be avoided. This principle is based on the reasonable assumption that only evils are to be condemned or avoided. It does not mean, however, that, in Lao Tzu's case, things are evil simply because they are to be condemned or avoided. We shall discuss his reasons for regarding them as evil.

There is also an indirect method of identifying the evils that concern Lao Tzu. It is based on the assumption that evil and good are conceptually relative to each other. Since only good is to be recommended or pursued, by knowing what is recommended we can sometimes infer that the opposites are evils. But this method is not always valid, for a thing may have been recommended because it is better than another but not because its opposite is evil. It is possible, however, to tell the difference by context.

Without going into any statistical computation of the evils identifiable by using the preceding methods, I shall offer a general interpretation of them and then choose some examples to support or illustrate it. I propose that the evils that concern Lao Tzu can be classified into two general categories, that is, "causal evils" and "consequent evils." By causal evils I mean those evils that are said to be the causes of other evils and by consequent evils those that are said to be the

consequences of the causal evils. The relationship between a causal evil and its consequent evil(s) can be a complex one. But Lao Tzu generally sees a simple and clear causal connection between them. Moreover, I shall argue that all the causal evils that concern Lao Tzu have supposedly originated from the use of the human will and that all the consequent evils are said to be sufferings of some kind in the world. This means that not all evils are sufferings, because there are evils that are not sufferings in themselves but rather the causes of sufferings.

Since all the causal evils are supposedly originated in the use of the human will, all the sufferings that concern Lao Tzu are man-made. We shall discuss later whether he recognizes the existence of non-man-made or "natural" sufferings, and, if so, whether they can be considered evil. As far as man-made sufferings are concerned, since they are man-made, in principle they are avoidable. Since sufferings are undesirable, they are to be avoided. Unlike causal evils, properly they are not to be condemned or denounced. A person, for example, may not suffer for the evil deeds he has done but may cause sufferings to others. Thus, there is good reason to have compassion for sufferings, but no good excuse for causal evils. Lao Tzu may have taught that we should forgive people for their causal evils or to treat them in the all-embracing spirit of Tao.<sup>2</sup> But there is no doubt that causal evils are more evil than consequent evils.

Before going on to use some typical examples from the *Tao Te Ching* to support and illustrate this interpretation, let us analyze the meanings of human will and suffering in Lao Tzu's thought. As stated before, the causal evils are supposedly originated in the use of the human will. On the assumption that all things produced by Tao are good, there is no good reason to say that the human will itself, presumably produced by Tao, is evil. But it is possible to say that the use of the will is the source of causal evils. Whether the distinction between the will itself and its use can be properly made must be left unanswered here. The important question we must ask is whether every use of the will is evil. This is not an easy question to answer. Generally speaking, we can say that the use of the will is evil if and only if it is used to assert something in thought or action against one's true nature, the other people, or the natural world. In Lao Tzu's language, the use of the will is evil if and only if it is used against the nature of Tao and its operations in the universe.<sup>3</sup> We may call this use of the will the "assertive" use of the will. On the other hand, the use of the will is not evil if and only if it is used to resist asserting something in the way described above, or, more positively, if it is used to follow Tao and its operations in the universe. We may call this the "nonassertive" use of the will.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the distinction between the two uses of the will depends on one's concepts of human nature, the natural world, or the ultimate reality (or Tao, in Lao Tzu's case). Given Lao Tzu's understanding of these matters, we shall discuss the actual meaning of the assertive use of the will in his thought. It may be correct to say that the assertive use of the will is the typical meaning of the will. Therefore, we shall use the term "will" or "willful" in the assertive sense. The most technical term used in the *Tao Te Ching* to express the assertive use of the will is undoubtedly *wei*. The word is usually translated as "action," but in my view the correct translation should be "willful action," which may mean either mental or physical action. The important phrase, *wu-wei*, thus means "not-having willful action." Since *wei* is evil, *wu-wei* is good. Just as *wei* is the source of all causal evils and the ultimate cause of all sufferings, *wu-wei* is regarded as the source of all that is good. This is undoubtedly the reason *wu-wei* is said to be the outstanding attribute of Tao. *Wu-wei* and Tao are almost interchangeable in meaning. The word *wei*, however, is sometimes used in the nonassertive sense. The best example is the first *wei* in the expression, *wei wu-wei*, which means "to act (with) no willful actions." This is supposed to be the way Tao operates in the universes.<sup>5</sup>

Other words used by Lao Tzu to express the assertive use of the will are "mind" (*hsin*), "will" (*chih*), "desire" (*yu*), and even "knowledge" (*chih*). Since these words are often used in the nonassertive sense, one has to discriminate between the two uses in terms of the context in which they appear. In the following passage from chapter 3, the preceding terms are all used in the assertive sense:

Therefore, in the government of the sage,  
He keeps the people's minds empty;  
He fills their bellies full;  
He weakens their wills;  
He strengthens their bones;  
He causes the people to be without knowledge and desire,  
So that the learned dare not act willfully (*wei*).  
By acting with no willful actions (*wei wu-wei*),  
Nothing cannot be governed.

The sage is supposedly the one who can follow the *wu-wei* of Tao in his government. To fill the bellies and strengthen the bones are apparently nonwillful actions because they are supposedly in accordance with our inborn nature. It seems that to empty the people's minds, weaken their wills, and cause them to be without knowledge and desire are also nonwillful actions. Lao Tzu certainly would not advocate the use of force to achieve them. He evidently believes that if the sage himself would first empty his own mind, etc., then the people would follow him spontaneously. The nonwillful actions are supposedly to get rid of the unnatural things previously superimposed on our nature through the assertive use of the will.

We can now move to the meaning of suffering in Lao Tzu's thought. The concept of suffering presupposes an ideal state of existence. The ideal state of existence is described by him as the universe permeated by Tao. There are two outstanding attributes of Tao, that is, the source of life and the principle of spontaneity (*tzu-jan*). It is important to note that "spontaneity" is really the positive name for the negative expression of *wu-wei*. *Tzu-jan*, literally "self-so," actually means *tzu-hua*, "self-transformation."<sup>6</sup> This means that the operations of Tao in the universe are internally determined and not caused by any assertive desire or action. To interfere with the spontaneous transformations of the universe by the assertive use of the human will is to interrupt the ideal state of existence. Since Tao is the source of all things, the interruption will cause the cessation of the normal evolution of things, the destruction or "pollution" of our environment, and the physical and mental pains of living beings. "Suffering" usually means physical pains, but it can be extended to mean mental pains as well. It is essentially something one suffers when the supposedly normal life-processes are broken down.

There are many different terms in the *Tao Te Ching* that express the idea of suffering, for example, *huo* or *huan* (misfortune or disaster), *hsiung* (dreadful event, like famine), *tai* (danger), *luan* (chaos or disorder), *tsao-i* (early death), and so forth. Lao Tzu promises repeatedly that if we can only follow the path of *wu-wei*, we can avoid those sufferings. The life without suffering is the ideal state of existence. Speaking of *ch'ang* or "the constant" as the nature of all things to return to Tao as their source, Lao Tzu says in chapter 16:

Not to know the Constant is to act blindly to court disaster (*hsiung*).  
He who knows the Constant is all-embracing.  
Being all-embracing, he is impartial.  
Being impartial, he is universal.

Being universal, he is at one with the universe.  
Being at one with the universe, he is in unity with Tao.  
Being in unity with Tao, he lives a long life.  
He is free from dangers (*tai*) till his death.

The last line, *mo-shen pu-tai* implies that there is death in the ideal state of existence. We shall deal with this question later.

We are now in a position to use some typical examples from the *Tao Te Ching* to support and illustrate the preceding interpretation of evils. The best example is probably Lao Tzu's condemnation of war as evil. War is condemned not only because it will bring great suffering in the world, but also because it is the most assertive use of the will. In order to assert something, a ruler or a state imposes his or its will by armed forces on peoples or states. It is quite possible that Lao Tzu's philosophy may have been shaped largely by his concern with the question of war. Confronted by the sufferings caused by wars, he may have come to the conclusion that the assertive will is ultimately the cause of the sufferings. As the antidote, he may have purposely emphasized the nature of Tao as the source of life, as opposed to suffering, and the principle of spontaneity, as opposed to willful action. In any case, he believes that anyone who professes to follow Tao can be persuaded to give up the desire to dominate the world by force. He says in chapter 30:

He who assists the ruler according to Tao does not dominate the world by force.  
The use of force is wont to cause a return.  
Wherever armies are stationed, briars and thorns will grow.  
After the great wars, years of disaster (*hsiung*) will inevitably follow.

Wars are conflicts of wills between two or more rulers, armies, or states. There are also conflicts of wills between or among men, generally for wealth, fame, and power. They are called *cheng* or "competition." Like war, competition is condemned by Lao Tzu as a major causal evil. In fact, war is but the more extreme form of competition. He does not believe that competition can bring happiness to mankind. Even if some kind of "progress" or "prosperity" can be achieved through them, it will have no value in his system of thought. He believes that competition can cause only chaos, exploitation, and unequal distribution of wealth. He is clearly opposed to the basic philosophy of the capitalist society that was apparently emerging in Lao Tzu's times. He was a "Marxist" in his attack on oppression and exploitation, but unlike Marx, he does not believe in any form of revolution.<sup>7</sup> Revolution, like competition, is antithetical to the spontaneity of Tao. Lao Tzu frequently describes Tao's nature as *pu-cheng* or "noncompetition," which is another way of saying *wu-wei*. The sage should follow the path of noncompetition in order to win the world. "It is because he does not compete that nothing in the world can compete with him" (chapters 22, 66). Of the natural phenomena, Lao Tzu finds the best symbol of noncompetitiveness in water. He says in chapter 8:

The highest good (*summum bonum*) is like water.  
Water is good because it benefits the myriad things and does not compete.  
It dwells in places that people dislike.  
Therefore, it is near to Tao.

.....  
Since there is no competition, there is no evil consequence (*yu*).

A special kind of willful action or competition is the oppression or exploitation of the people by

the ruler. Lao Tzu considers it an outright robbery (chapter 53). The ruler's prosperity is at the expense of the helpless masses. He traces the evils of starvation, social unrest, and irreverence for life among the people to the evils committed by the ruler. He says in chapter 75:

The starvation of the people is caused by the overtaxation by the ruler (for his own use).  
Therefore, they starve.

The difficulty of governing the people is caused by the willful actions of the ruler (to dominate them).

Therefore, it is difficult to govern them.

The people's irreverence for life is caused by the overstriving after life by the ruler (for himself).

Therefore, they take life lightly.

Lao Tzu gives much advice and many admonitions to the rulers in the *Tao Te Ching*. This is apparently because the evils of his times were, in his view, largely caused by the willful actions of the rulers. It is probably not because he believed in the importance or necessity of government. In any case, if government is necessary at all, it must not assert its will against the people to dominate, interfere, or exploit them.<sup>8</sup>

Another form of willful action is the assertion of man's wish or desire against the natural world. Since the natural world, for lack of will, does not compete, man's conquest or exploitation of it can be called a one-way competition. In this form of competition, man may disrupt the natural world for a while, but, in the end, that which does not compete will win. The great value in modern Western civilization of technology, that is, the conquest of nature for man's use, is soundly condemned by Lao Tzu as a great causal evil. He says in chapter 29 with the last four lines from chapter 64:

If one desires to take over the world and tamper (*wei*) with it,  
I see that one cannot succeed.

The world is a sacred vessel (*shen-ch'i*);

One should not tamper with it.

He who tampers with it spoils it.

He who grasps it loses it.

Therefore, the sage does no willful actions,

Thus, there is no spoiling (failure).<sup>9</sup>

He does not grasp it,

Thus, nothing is lost.<sup>10</sup>

The term "world" (*t'ien-hsia*) here probably means primarily the natural world, but it applies equally to the world after it has been spoiled by willful actions or human tampering because of willful actions. According to Lao Tzu, the natural world is perfect. Being the self-transformation of Tao, it cannot be improved by man. Even after man has spoiled it, it is wrong for man to think proudly that it needs man to put it back into order. The more willfully he acts, the more chaotic and entangled the world would become. It is like pouring more oil into the burning fire. It is better for man to cease all his willful actions and let the mother nature take care of it herself. Her way is better and more efficient than ours. Lao Tzu says in chapter 73:

The Way of nature does not compete, yet is good at winning.

It does not talk, yet is good at responding.

It does not summon, yet all things come to it.

It is not anxious, yet is good at planning.  
The net of nature is infinitely great.  
Its meshes are wide, yet nothing is lost.

To try to take the place of the Way of nature (*t'ien chih tao*) or the net of nature (*t'ien-wang*) is like to hew wood for the master carpenter. Lao Tzu asks in chapter 74, "If one tries to hew wood for the master carpenter, how can one avoid hurting one's own hands?"

## II. Are There Natural Sufferings?

The evils just discussed are typical of those that concerned Lao Tzu. The sufferings are supposedly originated in the assertive use of the will, thus, manmade. We will ask whether, in his view, there are sufferings that cannot be traced to the will. Assuming that everything not caused by the will comes from the natural world, we can call them "natural" sufferings.

Whether there are natural sufferings in Lao Tzu's thought is not an easy question to answer, partly because he does not explicitly and directly deal with this question. Moreover, there are problems of interpretation regarding passages relevant to the question. I would like to argue, however, that, in Lao Tzu's view, there are no natural sufferings. In other words, there cannot be any physical or mental pains in the universe where the assertive will is not operative. It means that all the sufferings in the world are supposedly manmade.

Our interpretation is consistent with the basic beliefs and assumptions in the preceding discussion of man-made evils and can be supported by many passages in the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu repeatedly says that if we would only give up our assertive will, the cause of man-made sufferings, there would be no dangers, disasters, etc. It is likely that the dangers or disasters referred to are limited only to man-made sufferings. Moreover, he maintains that if we would follow Tao, "all things will take their proper places spontaneously" (chapter 32), and they will "transform themselves of their own accord" (chapter 37). "Heaven and earth will unite to drip sweet dew, and the dew will drip evenly of its own accord without the command of man" (chapter 32). This is because Tao is the source and principle of purity, tranquillity, spiritual power, life, and peace in the world (chapter 39). Lao Tzu says in chapter 81, "The Way of nature (*t'ien chih tao*) is to benefit (all things) and not to harm them." Thus, the advice that the natural world should not be tampered with is evidently based on the belief that it is so perfect that no suffering exists in it.

In examining the *Tao Te Ching*, we cannot identify any suffering that is not explained as man-made. The fact that he does not deal with natural sufferings is evidently not because he is not concerned with them, but because no such thing can exist in his world-conception. Chuang Tzu, however, differs from him on this point. Chuang Tzu, the other major Taoist philosopher, definitely recognizes the existence of natural sufferings, which he explains as the effects of the wonderful transformation of all things in Tao. He advises people that the pains should be accepted as they are, and should not be regarded as evils.<sup>11</sup> The distinction between natural sufferings and evils is not raised in the *Tao Te Ching*. There is no need to do so in Lao Tzu's system. Like Lao Tzu, however, Chuang Tzu is disgusted with man-made sufferings and regards the assertive use of the will as the causal evil.

Even though no natural suffering can be identified in Lao Tzu's work, we can discuss two cases to illustrate his general position. The first case is about the whirlwind and rainstorm, which are potentially causes of natural sufferings. They are mentioned in chapter 23 and are explicitly said to be originated by nature or "heaven and earth," not by man. The relevant passage reads:

To utter few words is the nature of spontaneity (*tzu jan*).<sup>12</sup>  
Therefore, a whirlwind does not last a whole morning.  
A rainstorm does not last a whole day.  
What causes them?  
Heaven and earth.  
Even heaven and earth cannot make them last long.  
How much less can man?

It is important to note that no sufferings are explicitly mentioned as the consequence of a whirlwind or rainstorm; and heaven and earth are not blamed or condemned for causing them. We cannot assume that sufferings will necessarily happen. Lao Tzu will probably say that one who flows with Tao, knows nature, and ceases one's willful actions, will not be harmed even in the whirlwind and rainstorm. Like the newborn baby, who is full of *te* (power of Tao), he can escape any possible harm. He says in chapter 55:

He who possesses *te* can be compared to the newborn baby.  
Poisonous insects will not sting him.  
Fierce beasts will not seize him.  
Birds of prey will not strike him.

In any case, the passage from chapter 23 says that the whirlwind and rainstorm are not normal processes of spontaneity. The moral seems to be that man should not use his assertive will to utter too many words, probably referring to the orders or laws issued by the ruler. Thus, though the passage is susceptible to the interpretation that there are natural sufferings, it is not a conclusive one.

The second case is the existence of death. It is often thought that death itself is a natural suffering. But this is not a necessary truth. It is possible that death is an integral part of the natural world and that no physical or mental pains will accompany a "natural" death. This seems to be Lao Tzu's position. He certainly recognizes the existence of painful deaths, but they are, in his view, man-made. His philosophy is precisely directed for the prevention of violent, early, or untimely deaths. It is important to note that, while recognizing the eventuality of death, Lao Tzu's main concern is not how to prepare for death but how to nourish our life for a long and creative life without man-made sufferings. His philosophy is life-oriented rather than death-oriented. Tao is the principle of life, not death.

Since Tao is the life-principle, he who dwells in Tao will have a long life. The important idea of "returning to Tao," (*huan, fu, fan, kuei*), does not mean primarily to die a natural death in Tao's bosom or womb, but to tap the spring of life and to avoid disaster (chapter 16). Observing the supposed fact that man, grass, and trees are most alive when their bodies are gentle and weak, he concludes that the gentle and weak are the companions of life and that the hard and strong the companions of death (chapter 76). Believing that the newborn baby is saturated with life, he asks in chapter 10, "Can you concentrate your vital forces (*ch'i*) and achieve gentleness like a baby?" He states in chapters 30 and 55, "When things become strong, they grow old. This is called not in accordance with Tao (*pu tao*). Being not in accordance with Tao, they will soon die (*tsao-i*)." It is clear that Lao Tzu associates the gentle and weak with the lack of the will, and the hard and strong with the assertive will.

We may be tempted to conclude that one can have an indefinite long life or even a life without

death. The legend that Lao Tzu lived several hundred years may reflect this thought. In fact, later religious Taoism has always appealed to the *Tao Te Ching* in support of the possibility of physical immortality.<sup>13</sup> But the little book does not make any explicit statement about a life without death. On the contrary, death is taken for granted even for those who dwell in Tao. The great promise given in chapters 16 and 52 is "free from dangers till death" (*mo-shen pu-tai*). A sentence in chapter 33, *szu er pu-wang che shou*, literally means "he who dies without destruction is a long life." I think the proper interpretation should be "he who dies a natural death without suffering a violent death is a long life."

We do not know very much about the meaning of natural deaths in Lao Tzu's thought. It may be simply a conclusion to a form of life and a return to the womb of Tao that has produced it. He does not say whether there will be another form of life after death or, if so, whether there is any identity between the two forms of life. In any case, even though there is an end to the physical body, nothing is really lost, for everything is in the womb of Tao. "The net of nature is infinitely great. Its meshes are wide, but nothing is lost" (chapter 73). It is important to note that, unlike Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu has many speculations about death. For him, natural deaths can be painful, but they should not be considered evil. Deaths are necessary processes in the wonderful transformation of all things in Tao. It is because of lack of wisdom that they are regarded as evil.<sup>14</sup> Chuang Tzu does recognize the transformation of one life into another (without assuming any individual identity between them), but it must not be understood as something determined by some kind of moral causation, like the Hindu or Buddhist idea of *karma*. For both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the processes of change in the natural world are nonmoral. They are determined by the spontaneous nature of Tao, not by the merits or demerits of human actions. Unlike Hinduism or Buddhism, Taoism does not regard the natural world as something evil or undesirable, from which one has to be liberated. For Lao Tzu, nature does not have any suffering. For Chuang Tzu, there are sufferings in nature, but they are not evil. Human actions can spoil nature, but they can never change its basic goodness.

A discussion of Lao Tzu's view of death cannot be complete without a comment on chapter 50. The first part of the chapter has been interpreted differently.<sup>15</sup> Without going into the problems involved, I adopt the following translation/interpretation:

All men are born into life and then pass to death.  
The companions of life have thirteen organs.  
The companions of death have thirteen organs.  
There are also thirteen organs that shock a man's life to death.  
Why is this so?  
Because of the over-striving after life.  
I have heard that he who is good at nourishing his life  
will not meet tigers or wild buffaloes while walking on land.  
In the battlefield, he is not vulnerable to the weapons.  
The wild buffaloes cannot find a spot in him to butt their horns.  
The tigers cannot find a spot in him to use their paws.  
The soldiers cannot find a spot in him to thrust their blades.  
Why is this so?  
Because there is no spot in him that can cause him dead.

The thirteen organs are supposedly the four limbs and the nine external cavities. The basic point in this chapter seems to be that the thirteen organs that can sustain life can also be turned into thirteen "death spots" (*szu-ti*) through willful striving after life. Lao Tzu describes in chapter 12

how the organs of life can be turned into organs of death:

The five colors cause man's eyes to become blind.  
The five tones cause man's ears to become deaf.  
The five flavors cause man's palate to become dull.  
Racing and hunting cause man's mind to become wild.  
Goods hard to obtain cause man to become neurotic.<sup>16</sup>  
Therefore, the sage is concerned with the belly, not the eyes.  
Thus, he rejects the one but accepts the other.

The second half of chapter 50 describes the ideal world of existence where there is no suffering, either man-made or natural, for those who can nourish their lives correctly. He who is good at nourishing his life is like a skillful rodeo rider or matador (if this is regarded as an art). No harm will come to him. It may be argued that the expression, "I have heard" implies that Lao Tzu does not really believe in it. But is it not more likely that he is quoting an authority to support his ideal view of nature?

### III. Good and Evil: A Descriptive Theory

It is clear that Lao Tzu recognizes a proper distinction between good and evil. One should follow what is good and avoid what is evil. We must note, however, that there are two different uses of the terms "good" (*shan*) and "evil" (*e*) in the *Tao Te Ching*, that is, to use modern Western terminology, the descriptive and the evaluative/prescriptive uses.<sup>17</sup> When used to express Lao Tzu's view of good and evil, they are used in the supposedly descriptive sense. When attacked or criticized, they are used in the supposedly evaluative/prescriptive sense. In other words, Lao Tzu holds a supposedly descriptive theory of values for his own philosophy.

The term "descriptive" is relative to a theory of reality or metaphysics. Assuming that Lao Tzu's philosophy of Tao and his account of the universe are true, we can say that his view of good and evil is a descriptive one. But if we assume or hold another theory of reality, then his view of good and evil can be interpreted as an evaluative/prescriptive theory in disguise. Lao Tzu's philosophy of Tao can be seen as an attempt to justify his view of good and evil. On the other hand, if we assume or believe that his metaphysics is true, then all the other theories of values can be seen as evaluative. This is the reason Lao Tzu criticizes Confucian virtues as being evaluative/prescriptive. But from the Confucian view of reality, those virtues are really, in essence, descriptive.<sup>18</sup> For convenience, we shall assume Lao Tzu's metaphysics in the following discussion.

A descriptive theory of values means that the terms "good" and "evil" are to be defined in terms of what things "really" are in the world or, in Lao Tzu's words, what Tao is in its spontaneous operations in the universe. An evaluative prescriptive theory, on the other hand, means that they are to be defined in terms of what man evaluates, prescribes, desires, wills, or commands. In other words, it is based on what Lao Tzu calls *wei* or willful actions. On the basis of this discussion, I shall first list three basic "descriptive" criteria for the distinction between good and evil in Lao Tzu's thought.

Good	Evil
"Good" means any action that is in accordance with Tao. Since Tao is basically	"Evil" is any action that is not in accordance with Tao. An action is evil if it interrupts or

the source of life and the principle of spontaneity, an action is good if it sustains or preserves life according to spontaneity.	prevents spontaneous life-processes, that is, if it is against life and spontaneity.
“Good” means any action that is not caused by the assertive will of man. Nonwillful actions are spontaneous actions.	“Evil” means any action that is caused by the assertive will of man. Willful actions are unspontaneous actions. They are causal evils.
“Good” means the state of life without sufferings. There are no natural sufferings.	“Evil” means the state of life marked with man-made sufferings, which are the consequences of willful actions.

"Good" and "evil" are defined with reference to actions, because, in Lao Tzu's philosophy, they are not some substantial entities, eternal forms, or God's commandments. They are qualities of actions. This explains the frequent uses of the terms *wu-wei* and *wei*. Of the three criteria, the first is based on the supposed qualities of Tao as the source of life and the principle of spontaneity; the second is based on the use of the human will; and the third is based on the question of sufferings. They are supposedly cognitive questions. A criticism of Lao Tzu's theory has to ask whether they are really cognitive questions, and, if so, whether his views are true.

Lao Tzu's criticism of the evaluative/prescriptive theories of values can be best seen in his criticism of the (supposedly) Confucian virtues of humanheartedness (*jen*), righteousness (*i*), social and ritual codes of conduct (*li*), and knowledge (*chih*, apparently understood as evaluative/prescriptive knowledge). They supposedly originate in the assertive use of the will and become the causal evils responsible for human sufferings. Many passages can be cited to show Lao Tzu's point, but I will choose chapter 38 to illustrate his conscious awareness of the distinction between the descriptive and the prescriptive theories of values and his criticism of the latter.

In chapter 38, he deals with the important concept of *te*. *Te* is usually translated as "power" or "virtue." The basic meaning of *te*, in Lao Tzu's usage, is that which is spontaneously produced from Tao. It can mean the natural universe as a whole, or the individual things in the world, or the power of Tao operating in the cosmos. The *te* that is manifest in man may be translated as "virtue," but it must be understood in the descriptive sense, never in the prescriptive sense. It is when the nonwillful *te* becomes willful that it degenerates into the virtue in the prescriptive sense. The chapter shows that there are many different grades of "virtue" or "value," both in the descriptive and the prescriptive senses. He says:

The man of superior *te* does not (willfully) possess his *te*,  
Therefore, he has *te*.

The man of inferior *te* does not lose his (willful) *te*,  
Therefore, he does not have *te*.

The man of superior *te* does no willful actions,  
and acts without any ulterior motive.

The man of inferior *te* does willful actions,  
and acts with an ulterior motive.

The man of superior *jen* does willful actions,  
but acts without any ulterior motive.

The man of superior *i* does willful actions,  
and acts with an ulterior motive.

The man of superior *li* does willful actions,

and, when people do not respond to him,  
he will stretch his arms and use force on them.  
Therefore, when Tao is lost, there arises *te*.  
When *te* is lost, *jen* appears.  
When *jen* is lost, there comes *i*.  
When *i* is lost, there appears *li*.  
What then is *li*?  
It is the weakness of royalty and trust.  
It is the beginning of chaos in the world.

Lao Tzu's condemnation of *li* is no less severe than St. Paul's condemnation of the works by "law."<sup>19</sup> Though they have different reasons for condemning *li* or law, they agree that *li* or law cannot solve the evils in the world. Whereas St. Paul appeals to God's special grace for salvation, Lao Tzu relies on the universal power of Tao for attaining the ideal state of existence. In order to do that, Lao Tzu teaches that we must first give up our reliance on prescriptive values. Thus, he says in chapter 19:

Abandon sageliness and discard knowledge,  
Then the people will benefit a hundredfold.  
Abandon *jen* and discard *i*,  
Then the people will return to filial piety and compassion.  
Abandon craft and discard profit,  
Then robbers and thieves will disappear.

#### IV. The Metaphysical Status of Evils

An important issue in Western discussions of philosophy of religion is the problem of explaining the existence of evils in a universe supposedly created by an all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing God.<sup>20</sup> A similar question can be raised with regard to Lao Tzu's philosophy. If the universe is spontaneously produced from Tao, the *summum bonum*, how can there be evils in the world? On the basis of our discussion so far, we can formulate the following form of argument to express Lao Tzu's position:

1. Tao is the *summum bonum*.
2. Tao is the ultimate source of all things and events.
3. All things and events are good if they are not the results of some interference with the spontaneous evolution of Tao.
4. The assertive use of the human will is an interference with the spontaneous evolution of Tao.

Therefore, every thing or event that is caused by the assertive use of the will is evil.

Premise 4 can be revised to say that *only* the assertive use of the will is an interference with the spontaneous evolution of Tao. In that case, all evils are either some assertive uses of the will or their consequences. Our discussion points to this stronger position.

Premises 1, 2, and 3 are the basic beliefs or assumptions of Lao Tzu's philosophy, which we shall not question here. The problem is, given the first three premises, whether premise 4 is consistent with them. It seems reasonable to say that the will itself is good, because it is clearly not a product of the assertive use of the will. Here we come to two important questions. The first is why man, who is supposedly good by nature, will use the will to assert something against

Tao. Would it not be possible that whenever the will is used it would be in accordance with Tao? The second question is whether the will is "free" to interfere with Tao's evolution. With regard to the first question, no ready answer can be found from the *Tao Te Ching*. The question probably had not entered Lao Tzu's mind. We can safely rule out any Satan figure who is responsible for causing man to assert something against Tao. The answer can probably be found in Lao Tzu's idea of the decline of Tao. Even though the will itself is good insofar as it is produced by Tao, it is probably a product at the decline of Tao, thus not an ideal product. It may have the inherent tendency to deviate from Tao. The idea of the decline of Tao is found in chapter 38, just quoted, where it is said that when Tao is lost, *te* appears. The appearance of *te* is apparently not caused by something other than Tao itself. A similar idea appears in chapter 18, where Lao Tzu says, "When the great Tao declines, there appear *jen* and *i*." Though the appearance of *jen* and *i* can be explained as the results of the assertive use of the will, the idea that Tao declines cannot be ignored. This seems to mean that Tao, though believed to be inexhaustible in its power, is limited in power after all. This is undoubtedly a critical issue in Lao Tzu's philosophy.

It may be argued that if *te* represents a fall from Tao, the natural world, which is *te*, cannot be as perfect as Tao itself. This is true. But we have argued that even though it is in a sense a fall from Tao, the natural world is so full of the power of Tao that Lao Tzu cannot see that any suffering exists in it. All evils, according to our interpretation, come from our assertive use of the will.

The second question, whether the will is free to interfere with Tao's evolution, is in a way related to the first question. When Tao is full of power, it is almost impossible for the will to interfere with its operations. "If one tries to hew wood for the master carpenter, how can one avoid hurting one's own hands?" (chapter 74). But when Tao is in decline, the will will be in a better position to do so. There is, however, another reason why, in Lao Tzu's philosophy, the will is in principle free to interfere with Tao. In his conception of the universe, there are no external or eternal "laws of nature" to which all things must conform. The principles of changes are internal laws that are supposed to emerge spontaneously when the relevant conditions exist. Some kind of causality certainly exists in Lao Tzu's thought, but it is something akin to the Humean conception of causality and not like the Newtonian one. Joseph Needham rightly describes the Taoist world-conception as an "organismic philosophy," similar to Whitehead's.<sup>21</sup> The "free" will is no doubt more conceivable in such a universe.

It is important to note that Lao Tzu has no doubt that the will is free to interfere with Tao. He is afraid that the use of the will, however, will cause sufferings in the world and turn the spontaneous universe into a mechanistic one bound by laws and virtues. How different is it from the dominant Western philosophy, which tries to find in the supposedly mechanistic universe a room for the freedom of the will so that it can build an ideal human society apart from nature?

## Notes

1. The *Tao Te Ching*, also known as the *Lao Tzu*, is traditionally held to have been written by a certain Lao Tzu. There are many disputes about the formation of the work and the person of Lao Tzu. For this article, I shall simply assume that the work was written by a certain Lao Tzu who lived some time between the sixth and third centuries B.C. The quotations from the *Tao Te Ching* are my own translation. Several English translations have been consulted. I find Wing-tsit Chan's translation most useful, but mine differs from his in some important points. Confer. Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *The Way of Lao Tzu*, (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

2. This idea is best expressed in the statement in chapter 63: "Repay hatred with *te*." For the meaning of *te*, see later discussion. A similar view is expressed in chapter 62, where Tao is said to be "the refuge of evil men."

3. In this article we shall assume many important ideas concerning the nature of Tao and its function. For a general discussion, see Fung Yu-Ian, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. by Deck Bodde (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 170-191. I have written an article, "Lao Tzu's Conception of Ultimate Reality: A Comparative Study," forthcoming in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, June, 1976.

4. It may be argued that the best course is not to use the will at all. Since Tao is immanent in us, there is no real need for us to follow Tao by using the will. To use the will to follow Tao is not as good as to let Tao flow in us. Yet Lao Tzu's numerous instructions presuppose that there is a place for the nonassertive use of the will. For a discussion dealing with the related question, see H. G. Creel's distinction between "contemplative" and "purposive" Taoism in "On Two Aspects in Early Taoism," in his *What is Taoism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 37-47.

5. See H. G. Creel. "On the Origin of *Wu-wei*." in his *What is Taoism*, pp. 48-78. He discusses the historical relationship between the Taoist and the "Legalist" ideas of *wu-wei* and compares them. Whatever their relationship, it is clear that the questions of *wei* and *wu-wei* are very much concerned with the ruler's actions.

6. *Tzu-jan* is often translated as "nature" or "Nature." In my judgment, this is a misleading translation. Though it does mean nature or natural world in some sense, the term is technically used in the *Tao Te Ching* to mean the spontaneous self-transformation of Tao or all things in Tao. For the idea of *tzu-jan* or *tzu-hua*, see chapters 17, 23, 25, 32, 37, 51, and 57. The idea of spontaneity is often expressed in the single word *tzu*, "of its own accord."

7. Whereas Marx regards the conflicts between classes as normal in the dialectical process of history, Lao Tzu regards them as abnormal and evil. Chinese Communist philosophers are sympathetic to Lao Tzu's attack on social evils and particularly political oppression, but very critical of his mystical or "idealistic" tendency and his passive and negative attitudes toward building any new society.

8. It is doubtful whether any government is possible without some measure of "willful action" in the sense that he uses it. Lao Tzu apparently envisions a simple form of society in which people die old without having visited one another, as it is described in chapter 80.

9. The word *pai* has the double meaning of spoiling and failure.

10. The word *chih* or grasping implies a willful action. The phrase *wu-chih* or nongrasping or nonattachment has become a very important Buddhist term to express the idea of nonattachment to the self or the world. Whereas Buddhism assumes the illusoriness of the self and the world, Lao Tzu assumes the sacredness of the individual and the universe as a whole. In the *Tao Te Ching*, *wu-chih* is equivalent to *wu-wei*.

11. A good example is a story about four friends given in chapter 6 of the *Chuang Tzu*. "When he fell ill, Master Yu said, 'Amazing! The Creator is making me all crooked like this! My back

sticks up like a hunchback and my vital organs are on top of me. My chin is hidden in my navel, my shoulders are up above my head, and my pigtail points at the sky. It must be some dislocation of the *yin* and *yang*” The translation is by Burton Watson in his *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 84.

12. In my judgment, *tzu-jan* should not be translated as "nature" or "Nature" (whatever it means). "Nature" in the sense of the natural world is referred to as "heaven and earth" here. See note 6.

13. The cult of immortality already existed in some form in Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's times. See Holmes Welch. *Taoism: The Parting of the War* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press. 1957), pp. 88..97.

14. A good example is Chuang Tzu's philosophizing at his wife's death. See Burton Watson. trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 191-192.

15. The other interpretation not adopted here is to take "ten-three" to mean "three-tenths." I think Arthur Waley's argument is convincing. See his *The Way and Its Power* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), pp. 203-204. I do not, however, interpret the first sentence the way he explains it.

16. The term *hsing fang* is not easy to translate. I think it is an act to guard the goods from being stolen or robbed. To be always in such a state of mind is, in a sense, neurotic.

17. For the distinction and the controversy, see W. D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books. 1970), chapters 5 and 6. The way I use those terms may not necessarily agree with the way the distinction is generally made in modern Western discussion.

18. In what sense the Confucian theory of values is descriptive is not easy to say. According to Mencius, the moral virtues are derived from human nature, but the use of the will is needed to cultivate them. The will is not regarded as something external to man. Thus, in an important sense, the moral virtues are to be defined in terms of what man really is. See *The Mencius*, Book 6, Part I, as translated by Wing-tsit Chan in his *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 51-60.

19. St. Paul's condemnation of the works of the Law (Torah) is best seen in his Letters to the Romans and the Galatians. He believes that the function of Law, which was needed in the past, is now replaced by God's special grace in Jesus Christ.

20. See John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 40-47.

21. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge University Press. 1956), vol. 2, pp. 46-56. He uses the term "philosophy of organism" to describe not only Taoism but also Chinese philosophy as a whole, including Confucianism. See pp. 562, 582.

*Glossary of Chinese Terms*  
(Wade-Gile System)

ch'ang 常  
cheng 爭  
ch'i 氣  
chih 執  
chih 志  
chih 智  
e 惡  
fan 反  
fu 復  
hsin 心  
hsing-fang 行妨  
hsiung 兇  
huan 還  
huan 患  
huo 惑  
i 義  
jen 仁  
kuei 歸  
li 禮  
luan 亂  
mo-shen pu-tai 沒身不殆  
pai 敗  
pu-cheng 不爭  
pu tao 不道  
shan 善  
shen-ch'i 神器  
szu er pu-wang che shou 死而不亡則壽  
szu-ti 死地  
tai 殆  
te 德  
tien-hsia 天下  
t'ien chih tao 天之道  
t'ien-wang 天網  
tsao-i 早已  
tzu-hua 自化  
tzu-jan 自然  
wei 為  
wu-chih 無執  
wu-wei 無為  
yu 尤  
yu 欲