

Lao Zi's Metaethical Thought from "Te" in Tao Te Ching

Yuhan Liu^{1,a,*}

¹Humanity Institution, Central South University, Qingshui Street, Changsha, China

a. 8101200105@csu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: *Tao Te Ching*, a spiritual treasure of Lao Zi, has been searched by numerous scholars many times. However, searching for "Te" from a metaphysical perspective is rare but valuable. By looking up and analyzing "Te" in *Tao Te Ching*, the metaphysical definition of "Te" is a law that humans and nature obey. "Te" is related to concepts such as "Tao" and "goodness," which reveal the hierarchical frame of the ethical subjects in *Tao Te Ching*, and the article also clarifies the difference between "Te" and "goodness". Moreover, it proves that Lao Zi is a naturalist philosopher and believes "Te" originates from nature, since the source of "Te" is "Tao", which human intention does not interfere with. Therefore, it fixes the blanket on searching for metaphysical "Te" and builds up a frame on the significant ethical subjects in *Tao Te Ching*, which could help people better understand and research the philosophical thoughts of Lao Zi.

Keywords: Te, Tao Te Ching, metaethics

1. Introduction

Tao Te Ching is a philosophical work of Lao Zi. It was written in the Spring and Autumn Period. Its content involves politics, traditional philosophy, religion, etc. It has a critical position in Chinese history. As for the title, "Tao Te" in modern Chinese means "moral", while in Lao Zi's book, these two words "Tao" and "Te" have independent and different meanings, of which the former means the origin and essence in Lao Zi's world view, as Plato said of ideas, and the latter means morality and virtues. According to this distinction, *Tao Te Ching* is also centered on the interpretation between "Tao" and "Te", which can be divided into two volumes as, "*Tao Ching*" and "*Te Ching*". Therefore, the academic research on *Tao Te Ching* can be roughly separated into three categories: scholars in the fields of philosophy and religion study the metaphysical "Tao", scholars in the fields of pedagogy and political science research the ethical thoughts in "*Te Ching*", and other scholars carry out research based on the relationship between "Tao" and "Te". In contrast, there is very little metaethical research on "Te".

In the *Tao Te Ching*, "Te" occurs many times and is associated with "Tao", "goodness" and other objects. However, contrary to the contemporary definition of "Te" in Chinese, it is essentially different in the *Tao Te Ching*, and the degree of difference in the definition of "Te" from this book to the ordinary meaning is unclear. Besides, "Te" is a crucial breakthrough to understanding Lao Zi's metaethical thoughts. Therefore, building up research centralized on clarifying "Te" in *Tao Te Ching* is necessary.

According to *Tao Te Ching*, besides the formal definition mentioned directly, “Te” always occurs with “Tao”, “goodness” and other objects. Thus, to analyze “Te” metaethically, it is necessary to search for its basic definition and classification among other conceptions. In the following content, the research starts with the meaning of “Te”, which is defined by Lao Zi, and then it shows where “Te” come from and how “Te” form. Later, it tells the connection between “Te” and “goodness”, which is a permanent proposition when discussing morality and ethics.

Tao Te Ching is the only well-preserved work written by Lao Zi in person. Thus, this research based on an analysis of metaethical “Te” helps study Lao Zi’s metaethical thoughts, and figuring out the logical chain concerning “Te” could help to gain a further understanding of *Tao Te Ching*. In addition, applying the framework of Western philosophy to traditional Chinese philosophy could also help Western scholars better understand the wisdom in Lao Zi and *Tao Te Ching*.

2. Definition of “Te” in *Tao Te Ching*

Tao Te Ching does not give an exact definition of “Te”, but its meaning could be clarified through dialectic comparison or subordinate concepts. For example, Chapter 38 says, “A man of high-level Te does not claim he has Te. A man of low-level Te claims he has not lost Te. A man of high-level Te does nothing on purpose; a low-level Te does nothing without purpose. A good man does good without purpose; a just man does good on purpose. When a formalist does good without receiving a response, he will stretch out his arms to enforce compliance. So Te is lost when the Tao is not followed; humanism is lost after Te; justice is lost after humanism; formalism is lost after justice [1].”

In this paragraph, the sentence pattern of the first two sentences is similar to the explanation of “Tao may be spoken of, but it is not the true Tao” [1] in the opening paragraph and “the Dharma in words is not Dharma” in the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra* [2], “Te” is just a formation. Thus, its definition cannot be shown directly and entirely through words and behaviors; once it is revealed, it is not “Te”. Thus, “Te” is nonentity and cannot be seen in a concrete formation. In this regard, Bai Qiankun and other scholars believe this is a metaphysical “Te”, “do nothing but do everything,” which is the guiding principle of all other moral behavior, applicable to moral criticism [3]. This is similar to the moral law mentioned by Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason* [4]. Therefore, “Te” is an essential moral rule that guides people to cultivate virtue. For example, in Chapter 68, it is said that “Such is the Te of non-contention, the ability to employ men. Such is the way to match heaven [1]”, which uses one kind of Te as non-contention to regulate people to follow suit.

In addition, such a moral law applies to human beings and all things in nature, which is the unique feature of Lao Zi’s “Te”. “Everything grows by Tao; it is bred in its Te, formed by its environment, and completed by external influence. That is why all things obey the Tao and value their Te. Tao is exalted, and Te is valuable. None orders them to obey, but they obey naturally [1].” (Chapter 51). This sentence shows that “Te” has the same natural properties as “Tao”, and all things grow by “Te”. It can be seen that “Te” is not only a moral law but also contains the meaning of the natural rule. According to Lao Zi’s view, there is a connection between nature and human beings so that whether human beings or all things are equally constrained by “Te”, so “Te” is more inclined to be a law applicable to universality. Thus, it can be seen that the ethical thought of Lao Zi is to follow the laws of things themselves because following this law is a spontaneous behavior of people from the bottom of their hearts, similar to the growth of natural creatures, not obvious and not publicized, and following such a “natural law,” people will possess “Te”. In addition, because Lao Zi believes that “Te” is a state in which all things grow naturally and because both humans and nature are under the constraint of “Te”, it can be inferred that in Lao Zi’s opinion, human nature is universally good and that “Te” can be realized by following its original nature to some extent. Therefore, the meaning of “Te” in *Tao Te Ching* refers to the original nature of humans and nature, which should not be disturbed.

Moreover, the simple addition of a single moral judgment criterion such as “humanism”, “justice” and “formalism” cannot be called “Te”, but it is only a sufficient and unnecessary condition for “Te”. Conclusively, “Te” is above all entities, “give life and make life, but lay no claim, benefit but do not interfere, lead but do not rule” (Chapter 10) [1], is the connection between the substance and the spirit, is the origin of the physical world from the metaphysical world, that is, the entrance of the substantial world to the metaphysical world [5].

To sum up, “Te” in *Tao Te Ching* is like a moral law to human beings without an entity that specific human and human behaviors cannot reveal. Moreover, it should be obeyed by both nature and humans, and it is also a bridge between the substantial and metaphysical worlds.

3. Origin of “Te”

In the *Tao Te Ching*, the origin of “Te” is first discussed in chapter 21, “The content of great virtue conforms to the Tao” [1], indicating that “Tao” produces “Te”, and “Te” changes with the change of “Tao.” This logic results that the origin of “Te” is “Tao.” Thus, it comes out with a question: What is “Tao”?

Besides, according to the classification of the metaethical school, it can be divided into naturalism and non-naturalism through different kinds of moral origin, with the former advocating that moral facts derive from natural facts [6]. Thus, it yields a question: Does “Tao” belong to the scope of naturalism or non-naturalism?

To solve the first question, in *Tao Te Ching*, “Tao” is the source of all things in the universe, “One is the child of the Tao. After one comes two, after two come three, after three come to all things” (Chapter 42) [1], so it can be concluded that all of the tangible objects are produced by “Tao”.

In this case, the answer to the second question faces a problem: Since all the objects are made by “Tao”, can “Tao” be seen as the creator of the world like God in the Western world? If the answer is “yes”, Tao can be considered non-naturalism; otherwise, it is attributed to naturalism.

“The Tao is formless” (Chapter 4) [1], which means empty and invisible that could not be seen by humans, makes “Tao” have a mysterious power to create the world as the strength of God. However, it differs from the Western God because it is impersonal and non-dominant. The philosophy of Lao Zi illustrates the natural character of “Tao.” According to *Tao Te Ching*, “Tao” cultivates all creatures, giving them their own needs and original nature without dominating them. In addition, Lao Zi emphasizes the main idea of “Te” as “Give life and make life, but lay no claim, benefit but do not interfere, lead but do not rule” [1]. In this sentence, “give life”, “benefit” and “lead” (also means born, developed, and cultivate [7]) explain the creative function of Tao. At the same time, it manifests that Te does not have a subject core and wants to intentionally disrupt the natural world and creatures. Thus, the creation process of the Tao does not contain consciousness at all, nor does it have a purpose at all, and “lay no claim”, “do not interfere”, and “do not rule”, shows that the Tao does not have the intention to possess and dominate [8]. Conclusively, Tao corresponds with naturalism since it is a supreme law without humanlike intention.

Moreover, “Man imitates earth, earth imitates heaven, heaven follows the Tao, and the Tao follows nature” (Chapter 25) [1], meaning that the Tao pattern comes from nature and mimics nature. As a clarification, it does not mean that Tao is born by nature, and it uses “follows” merely to help people figure out the meaning and so-called appearance of Tao since Tao is invisible and hard to understand. Thus, it can be seen that “Tao” and “nature” are closely related; “Tao” is objective and natural.

All in all, the origin of “Te” is “Tao”, and by using the standard of Western metaphysics, Lao Zi can be categorized as naturalism.

4. “Te” and “Goodness”

As the founder of metaethics, Moore believed that the nature of ethics is closely related to the definition and behavior of “goodness” [9]. Therefore, when talking about metaethical morality, it cannot be separated from the discussion of “goodness”. In *Principles of Ethics*, Moore proposed that “goodness” is a single concept that cannot be defined. It is the same that Lao Zi does not provide a distinct concept of goodness in the *Tao Te Ching*. However, he describes the characteristics of goodness and how it manifests itself in the substantial world by comparing it to water, “Goodness is like water. Water benefits everything by giving without taking or contending. It likes the place others dislike, so it follows closely the Tao” (Chapter 8) [1]. In addition, it can be inferred from “it follows closely the Tao” that “goodness” is an imitation of “Tao”. Thus, it indicates that “goodness” and “Tao” have similar characteristics. Moreover, *Tao Te Ching* also mentioned that “Tao” is “the treasure for men of goodness” (Chapter 62) [1]. Therefore, it could be concluded that there is a connection between goodness and “Tao” and that goodness is a reflection of “Tao,” and “goodness” is an essential factor for people who desire to achieve the state of “Tao”.

As mentioned, “Te” is also born from “Tao”. Thus, what is the difference between “Te” and “goodness” in *Tao Te Ching*? It does not mention this question directly. However, when looking through the sentences about the two concepts, there is a distinction between their antonyms. It can be seen that the opposite of “good” is “non-goodness” or “evil”, but it does not point out the opposite of “Te”. In addition, the difference can be evinced in relevant words and wording methods in the sentences. It can be seen that the use of “goodness” in the *Tao Te Ching* is mostly to modify behavior, while “Te” is usually used as a single noun. Thus, it is possible to infer that “goodness” is a practical and concrete concept, while “Te” is more abstract and integrated.

Moreover, it uses “goodness” to modify “Te”, like “Te is good [1]” (although because of the translation of classical Chinese into the modern language, some versions translate “Te” here as “get” [10]) (Chapter 49). Also, the description of “goodness” is similar to the characteristics of “Te”. For example, in Chapter 27, a series of good deeds, such as “Good deeds leave no traces [1]”, which is similar to the “doing good things and wanting people to know is not true goodness” mentioned in *Zhu Zi Family Instruction* and seems it have the same characteristics as “Te”, “A man of high-level Te does not claim he has Te”. Thus, it can be inferred that “goodness” is the attribute of “Te,” and its classification is higher than “humanism”, “justice” and “formalism”. In other words, “goodness” is like the shadow of “Te,” as it reflects the exact characteristics of Te.

In a nutshell, “goodness” is related to “Te” in *Tao Te Ching*, though Lao Zi does not announce the concept of “goodness”. However, it can be inferred that “goodness” is a concrete word than “Te”. When it comes to the strategy of “goodness”, it is an attribute of “Te” and its presentation is close to “Tao”, but its classification is higher than other practical characteristics, like “humanism”, “justice” and “formalism”.

5. Conclusion

According to the above, Lao Zi is a naturalist philosopher categorized by the metaphysical standard, and “Te” is a core moral concept of his metaphysical thoughts. It has a unique definition in that it is not only a moral law but also a natural law adapted to human and natural objects. Moreover, in *Tao Te Ching*, “Te” constructs a connection between the substantial world and the metaphysical world. There is a chain of stratum centering on “Te” that “Tao” is a higher concept beyond “Te” and generate “Te”, and “humanism”, “justice” and “formalism” are the lower concept of “Te”. Besides, Te’s characteristics could be reflected by goodness which is a concrete shadow of the abstract “Te” and also has a more extensive and higher concept than “humanism”, “justice” and “formalism”. This research is partially known about the metaphysical thoughts of Lao Zi, and by analyzing the concept

and stratum of “Te”, it concludes the narrative logic concerning ethics. It also identifies the relationship and distinctions among various ethical concepts in *Tao Te Ching*. Therefore, it fixes the vacant gap about the metaphysical “Te”. Moreover, it gives scholars a metaphysical frame in *Tao Te Ching* that favors future ethical research on the content and helps them gain a relatively thorough cognition about “Te”. However, this research only concentrates on the connection between “Te”, “Tao” and “goodness”. Thus, some other concepts could also help explain the definition and position of “Te” in *Tao Te Ching*. Therefore, in the future, there will be more research based on this research to be done concerning extra information on “Te” and other relevant concepts. Additionally, future research could mainly focus on concepts like “Tao” and “goodness” to complete the whole logic map in *Tao Te Ching*.

References

- [1] Xu Yuanchong. (2012) *Laws Divine And Human*. No. 6 North Pony Factory, Haidian District, Beijing: Wuzhou Communication Publishing House.
- [2] Lai Yonghai. (2019) *Diamond Sutra. Heart Sutra*. No. 2 Cuiwei Road, Haidian District, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [3] Bai Qiankun & Lu Qi. (2019). A Brief discussion on the embodied “virtue” in *Tao Te Ching*. *Intelligence* (28), 218-219.
- [4] Immanuel Kant. (2019) *The Complete Works of Kant (Annotated)*. 31 Zhongguancun Street, Haidian District, Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- [5] Zhou Haichun. (2006). The concept of “Virtue” in *Tao Te Ching* and Chinese metaphysical Ethics. *Ethics study* (5), 86-91. The doi: 10.15995/j.carol carroll nki llxyj. 2006.05.016.
- [6] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Metaethics*. (Jan 24, 2023). Retrieved on (Aug 29, 2023). Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaethics/>
- [7] Chen Guying. (2020) *Lao Zi Notes Today and Translates Today. Heart Sutra*. No. 2 Cuiwei Road, Haidian District, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [8] Zhang Songru, Chen Guying, Zhao Ming & Zhang Jun. (1987) *Lao Zhuang Anthology*. 189 Yingxiong Shan Road, Shizhong District, Jinan City, Shandong Province: Qilu Press.
- [9] Zhao Jin. (2016). *The objectivity of moral problems from the view of Mackay’s wrong theory (Ph.D. Dissertation, East China Normal University)*. <http://libdb.csu.edu.cn:80/rwt/CNKI/https/NNYHGLUDN3WXTLUPMW4A/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFDLAST2017&filename=1017012799.nh>
- [10] Lao Zi. (2015) *Tao Te Ching*. No.5788, Welfare Road, Jingyue Development Zone, Changchun City: Jilin Fine Arts Publishing House.