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The Way of Nature from the Perspective of Laozi, Confucius, and Sunzi

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Abstract: Where do ethics or morals come from? We arrive at vastly different answers, given that these answers are contingent upon various sources, such as legendary stories, the theology of various religions, Western and Eastern philosophies, etc. In the Chinese tradition, Laozi, Confucius, and Sunzi are considered as the three ancient sages from approximately 2500 years ago. Their thoughts and teachings have shaped Chinese culture and characterized the Chinese way of life. This essay attempts to demonstrate a new understanding of their philosophy on ethical principles. Herein, we present select analyses of their literary works—*Tao Te Ching* (*Dao De Jing*), *The Analects*, and *The Art of War*. These three sages posited ethical ideas inspired by nature, and a single thread—the way of nature—sewed those ideas together.

Keywords: Laozi; Tao; Confucius; yielding; Sunzi; antiwar; ethics

1. Introduction

What is ethics or morality from the traditional Western perspective? Simply put, the consensus on being ethical or moral is distinguishing right from wrong and doing the right thing. The next question becomes, what is the right thing to do or what is good? That is indeed the eternal question. From the secular perspective, quite a few modern publications (e.g., in the fields of game theory and evolutionary psychology) tell us that helping others or cooperation is good and is the right thing to do. However, few seem to specify the purpose of help and cooperation. Consider an extreme case in point—the Nazis and their allies helped and cooperated. Now, one might argue that anything becomes toxic when taken to its extreme. Therefore, let us formulate an alternative question, what is right and wrong?

An array of conceptions of right and wrong exist, and we can draw numerous worldly examples, such as running through a red traffic light. From a legal perspective, society categorizes it as wrong since not abiding by the law threatens the safety of other drivers. Well, what if you are driving an ambulance to a nearby hospital with a dying patient on board? Or, how about the assertion that killing another human being is categorically wrong? Then, the following question is, why do many nations in the world impose death penalties on criminals? Conversely, to those who oppose the death penalty, is it right to let a convict live—particularly one that has committed unspeakable atrocities? Appealing to ideas of a supreme being(s) acting as judge in the afterlife hardly sheds light on ethical issues; empirically or logically, we cannot prove or disprove of this existence(s).

These are only a few examples of questions we have difficulty in finding straight answers. It seems we require a proven or factual reference to distinguish between right and wrong and do the "right" thing. Fortunately, sages in the past left us with clues in their texts, and it may have something to do with nature and human nature.

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2. What Is Natural

An ancient Chinese sage saw the origin of ethical principles rooted in nature through his social observation and contemplation. He could be the first one in recorded history to discover the behavior of nature, namely, the way of nature. He left behind a text with about 5000 characters that was later given the title *Tao Te Ching* [1]. His name was Laozi (Lao Tzu, 571–471 BCE), and he launched Taoism about 2500 years ago. In his book, with 81 short poetic chapters, Laozi points out that nature is the frame of reference we have been searching for. Expressly, nature can be understood in two senses: The original natural world before or untouched by humanity and the way nature acts when uninfluenced by human activity. A true Taoist leads a life by following the way of nature. Let us take Chapter 17 as an example [2]:

> Chapter 17
> Who is the best ruler? He is never heard of.
> The good one? He is adored and praised.
> The bad one? He is feared.
> The worst one? He is cursed by his people.
> To rule is to distrust; he who rules is distrusted.
> Better go easy with it, and give few orders.
> When this has been achieved, the people all say, "we, the way of nature".

It is well-recognized that *Tao Te Ching* was meant to be a guidebook for rulers in ancient China, and Chapter 17 provides the best evidence. Translations of the last sentence of the chapter in many modern text versions refer to nature as "spontaneity" and "people all say it's natural or spontaneous". According to his original philosophy, Laozi most likely means nature, as opposed to (consciousness-based) human nature[1] or spontaneity. Had he been a ruler, Laozi would have chosen not to rule since his political philosophy is not to rule and not to teach at all, in order that he is in alignment with the way of nature. Therefore, the people would not even be aware of the existence of this ruler. In essence, Laozi's approach to governance is captured by *wuwei*—do nothing unto others. Another synonym of *wuwei* proposed in the book is not striving for something or not competing with others.

Wuwei is often translated as "no action" or "inaction" in the literature, but this is arguably not coherent or specific enough concerning the original text. Laozi's *wuwei* pertains to one's actions toward others—the actions of a ruler toward the people in the case of Chapter 17—rather than his or her actions that have few direct impacts on others. This is the way of nature. We find more evidence in Chapter 23 [2]:

> Chapter 23
> Be quiet, and it is the way of nature.
> Wind does not howl all day, and thunder does not rumble all night.
> Who makes them? Heaven and earth.
> If heaven and earth do not keep them last, why would humans?
> .....

The first verse could also be interpreted as "Verbally teach less, and better yet do not teach or rule the people at all, just like the way of nature." Talk-less is not human nature or spontaneity. The natural or worldly order proposed in Chapter 25 makes it even more specific [2]:

> Chapter 25
> .....
> Humans follow [the way of] earth, earth follows heaven, heaven follows Tao, and Tao follows the way of nature (or Tao itself).

Tao is the way of nature; however, we must clarify that this is not human nature. In fact, human nature needs a recourse in this series, as seen at the beginning of the sentence from Chapter 25. What retraces the human way or human nature? It is the way of nature.

In other words, nature is ultimately, or should be, the starting point for ethics, as indicated at the very end of the progression in Chapter 25.

One might wonder why Tao is *wuwei* or the way of nature. Let us look at Chapter 47, which delves deeper into Tao [2]:

> Chapter 47
> He knows the world without stepping beyond his door; without peeping through his window, he sees heaven Tao.
> The farther you travel, the less you know (about Tao).
> For a sage, he knows (about Tao) without traveling, understands without seeing, and accomplishes without doing (unto others).

There can be only two explanations for Laozi's knowing the (heaven) Tao without studying or traveling—he is all-knowing or the Tao is simple. The answer has to be the latter, i.e., the Tao is characterized by its main philosophical component, *wuwei*, doing nothing unto others. As long as the Tao is *wuwei*, there is no need to study or travel to learn about it.

Tao Te Ching is akin to a long poem, such as a philosophical riddle. As the beginning of the book reads, "Names that can be named are not their normal or true names." One can appreciate Laozi's ambiguity in terminology, where he also describes Tao as unknowable or incomprehensible in many other chapters. In general, works with esoteric content and ambiguous takeaways tend to engage a broad spectrum of readers and win admirers, and better survive throughout the ages. On the contrary, ethical doctrines with clean-cut portrayals of virtues and vices tend to meet the masses' resistance. Confucianism was and still is an unfortunate example.

From our understanding, Tao comes in two forms from Laozi's view, the knowable and the unknowable, or the normal Tao and the general (unknowable) Taos. The very beginning of the book says, "Taos that can be described are not the normal Tao" (a more typical translation from the literature is as follows: The way that can be described is not the eternal way). This is due to the fact that all the Taos described by others, except for his, are not the normal Tao, i.e., *wuwei*. *Wuwei* is the normal Tao or the common characteristic shared by all Taos. Let us examine Chapter 48 for a further understanding of this reasoning [2]:

> Chapter 48
> To learn is to gain every day.
> To do Tao is to lose (what you've learned) every day.
> Keep losing until you reach the stage of doing nothing (until you have nothing to lose).
> Do nothing (between one another), and everything is accomplished.
> Do nothing (unto others), and you take over the world.
> Do unto others, and you are not fit to reign.

"To learn is to gain." To learn and gain knowledge of the natural world is boundless and timeless—this is the unknowable portion of Tao. Indeed the vast universe, or those alleged multiverses, are profoundly humbling. Our human understanding of the reality of this universe is only beginning to unfold. In fact, with all the advanced and sophisticated scientific theories, including Newton's Law and Einstein's Relativity, we still do not know for a fact what gravity is truly all about.

On the contrary, "to do Tao is to lose." To truly understand the Tao and be able to do it, you must lose all your knowledge—hypothetically speaking, it is better to lose your brain power or consciousness entirely. Picture the following: Without brain power, you would literally act like a tree. Moreover, a tree, by its nature, strictly follows the Tao, the way of nature, without any compromises contrary to nature. *Wuwei* is again neither inaction nor doing nothing at all, but not deliberately interfering or intervening with others (namely, by not using one's brain power). Therefore, *wuwei* defines the ethical principle for Laozi. It is Laozi's discovery rather than his invention since it originates from nature.

"Do nothing (between one another), and everything is accomplished." It is considered the most intriguing and inexplicable statement in the book. Intuitively, it does not make sense: Accomplishment presupposes action. With the understanding of *wuwei*, the way of nature, it is relatively simple to deduce the meaning behind this sentence. Tao is doing nothing unto others and, therefore, "minding" one's own business and achieving one's accomplishments without interfering with others. It applies to everyone and all things, respectively. Of course, animals with brain power are excluded from this case. In a sense, to reveal the way of nature is to reverse the course of (conscious) evolution. It is the typical way of thinking in Taoism.

Why does Laozi assert that "do nothing (unto others), and you take over the world; do unto others, and you are not fit to reign?" The meaning becomes clear when we return to the context of the ruling: All rulers that have the power to rule the world first are only going to lose the world later (e.g., the Persian, Greek, Roman, and Han empires). No matter how powerful, all empires inevitably fall; a dynasty is not eternal. If you understand *wuwei* and abide by the way of nature, you become a genuine part of the natural world. In addition, why would you need to have the desire to gain the world or, more specifically, seek the power to rule others?

Tao Te Ching is famous for being a collection of riddles, with its chapters intentionally written as poetical conundrums. Why is the text written in riddles? Presumably, riddles are not generally considered to be serious and moral teaching materials. Let us assume that this short discussion frames the main idea of Laozi's philosophy, the original Taoism or Laozism. This interpretation of Laozism can help us understand Confucius' philosophy, as we will find out that Laozism and Confucianism are of the same ethical rationale—the difference lies between the applications of this ethical principle in social reality.

According to the legend, Laozi had ventured to the west and never returned to the known world[2]. His poem of 5000 characters was allegedly left behind on the way to the west only due to demands by the border official (otherwise, he would not permit Laozi to pass). This story reinforces the logic supporting Laozi's "doing nothing" theory, which includes not leaving behind writings to teach others. Laozi practiced his philosophy—doing nothing unto others—by not preaching it to others. On the other hand, as Laozi's "de facto" disciple, Confucius was a social reformer and teacher. While he carried the same ethical philosophy, he acted in a manner entirely different from Laozi.

3. What Is Yielding

The way of Laozism is interpreted as being passive by most scholars, while Confucianism is proactive and pragmatic. As opposed to Laozi's way of humans following Tao in Chapter 25 of *Tao Te Ching*, Confucius (551–479 BCE) said, "Human can promote Tao; not the other way around (*The Analects*, Chapter 15)." Two questions immediately followed: Was Confucius Laozi's student, and were Laozi and Confucius talking about the same Tao?

In *The Records of the Grand Historian* (now usually known as *Shiji* or "*Historical Records*") written by Sima Qian circa 91 BCE, Confucius did visit Laozi. Laozi advised the young Confucius on how to be a wise intellectual during the well-known chaotic warring time of the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE). Based on Sima Qian's description, Confucius came back from his trip and set forth this famous description of Laozi when Confucius' students asked about his visit [3]:

> "Birds are what I know that can fly; fish is what I know that can swim; beasts are what I know that can run. The runners can be netted; swimmers can be fished; flyers can be shot. I have no idea what to do with dragons. A dragon rides on the clouds up in the sky. Today I saw Laozi, and he was like a dragon."

"Today" was presumably Confucius' figurative speech as his travel to Laozi spanned weeks or even months between the two states where they lived back then. Other legendary literature complemented Sima Qian's story with the following excerpt to reinforce Confucius' statement above:

> "The depth of his knowledge is immeasurable, and the height of his spirit is hard to reach. He coils and stretches like a snake and shape-shifts like a dragon. Laozi is truly my master."

Laozi and Confucius are considered in the Chinese tradition as the founders of Taoism and Confucianism, respectively. Though perhaps not an official disciple, Confucius was unquestionably the student of Laozi and Laozism. To the best of our knowledge, their philosophies can be considered the same or similar in ethical rationale, which differs from popular views in the literature.

What is the difference between Confucius' and Laozi's Tao? One widely accepted modern interpretation is that Confucius' Tao is humanly Tao, while Laozi's Tao is heavenly Tao. It becomes complicated when considering that Confucius' students wrote *The Analects* (between 540 and 400 BCE) rather than Confucius himself [4]. To truly understand the quotations by Confucius in *The Analects*, one must consider the context of the writing and the historical facts recorded elsewhere. Another commonly accepted notion about Confucius' Tao is benevolence, the chief virtue promoted by the later Confucians. However, there are 109 places in *The Analects* where benevolence is mentioned, and each can lead to a different interpretation. In other words, Confucius' answer was almost always different when his students asked for the definition of benevolence (their purpose being the self-improvement of personal conduct in social behavior). Confucius' changing definitions seemed illogical, and scholars interpret this as Confucius' unique teaching style that tailored answers to each student's personality. For instance, in a paragraph of Chapter 12, when two of his disciples, Zi Lu and Ran You, asked whether they should practice what they had learned right away, Confucius gave them two opposite answers separately. That puzzled the third disciple, Gong Xi Hua [5].

> Hua asked, "When You (Zi Lu) asked you whether he should do what he learned right away, you told him that he should first consult with his father and elder brother. When Qiu (Ran You) asked you the same, you told him to do it right away. I am confused. May I ask why?" Confucius said, "Qiu has the propensity of hesitating, so I push him forward. You (Zi Lu) tends toward being dominant, so I pull him back."

What is Confucius' Tao? Confucius' Tao attempts to connect social relationships with the way of nature. One paragraph in Chapter 4 of *The Analects* seems to give a clue as to what Confucius' Tao is, as seen in the following interaction with one of his disciples, Zengzi, Shen [5]:

> Confucius said, "Shen! There is one single theme going through the teaching of my Tao."
> Zengzi agreed, "Yes."
> After Confucius left, others asked, "What was he saying?"
> Zengzi said, "Our master's Tao is more or less about loyalty and forbearance."

Zengzi was saying that *loyalty* and *forbearance* are the Confucian Tao. In a typical sense of the Chinese culture, loyalty stands for ethical behavior toward superiors (e.g., king, master, father, older brother, etc.), and forbearance is the ethical behavior toward subordinates (e.g., minister, disciple, son, younger brother, etc.). However, the perception is that loyalty and forbearance are two distinct and seemingly target-inconsistent concepts, in a manner of speaking, regarding terms in cultural behavior. Both concepts have to be incorporated, such as *Yin* and *Yang*, into a consistent unifying term corresponding to Tao's oneness in social interaction. Alternatively, let us take a look at governance in *The Analects* from the perspective of social interaction or as the subject of political philosophy.

There are also many (39) instances in *The Analects* where Confucius emphasizes the importance and preference of governing by ethical virtue over governing by legal law, where all the interpretations appear consistent. One statement is in Chapter 4 of *The Analects* [5]:

> Confucius said, "Should a state be governed with [the virtue of] yielding? Where is [it]? Should a state be governed without [the virtue of] yielding, then how do you implement [the virtue of] yielding?"

We now present two viewpoints in this short paragraph's translation that differ from conventional translations. The first point relates to the virtue of yielding [6][3]. The original Chinese words of *yielding* in the text contain two characters that can be loosely translated as "yielding with propriety," which means yielding with customary rites or cultural etiquette or, more precisely, with a trained or educated manner. As a result, yielding combines the common ethical characteristics of loyalty and forbearance. In other words, yielding has the characteristics of reciprocity between superiors and subordinates; namely, loyalty is yielding toward one's superiors, and forbearance is yielding toward one's subordinates.

The second point pertains to the meaning of "it" in the Chapter 4 statement, which Confucius omitted in the original classic text—a common grammatical feature in ancient Chinese writings. A typical textbook translation of "where is [it]"[4] is "where is the difficulty," implying that governing with the virtue of yielding is not difficult at all. We consider this a made-up translation inconsistent with the original meaning in the classic text. Confucius meant, "where is governing, or the virtue of yielding," as there are two subjects of *governing* and *virtue* in the first sentence. Therefore, Confucius was first likely saying that the virtue of yielding does not exist when you attempt to govern with the virtue of yielding. Put differently, and it is impossible to govern by yielding. Why? It is due to the fact that the action of governing violates that virtue. Governing is the opposite of yielding and is coercive: Even in a democratic system, the majority's will superimposes its desires or preferences on a minority. In any governing system, there are those whose wills are overridden; it is simply a question of degree. Needless to say, Confucius was also saying that there is no governing once you yield. In short, what Confucius meant was that the actions of governing and yielding cannot co-exist as they diametrically oppose each other. In other words, governing with the virtue of yielding is paradoxical, an impossibility in political philosophy. This interpretation is consistent with the well-known Silver Rule exclusively associated with the Confucian teaching—"Do not do unto others the way you would not like others to do unto you." Why does the Silver Rule emphasize "do not", or yielding in contrast with "do", or being proactive in the Golden Rule?[5] This is due to the fact that *your* way may not be the way of *others*.

What is yielding? Yielding can be equated to not striving for or not contending, the same virtue proposed by Laozi in *Tao Te Ching*. In other words, yielding is a close synonym for *wuwei*, doing nothing unto others. As we can see, Confucius' Tao is virtually equal to Laozi's Tao; the difference between Confucianism and Laozism is not the virtue of ethics by definition but by its application, i.e., to rule or not to rule, and to teach or not to teach.

Upon understanding the paradoxical nature of Confucius' philosophy of governing with the virtue of yielding, one can easily understand why Laozi schooled the young Confucius during their meeting. We can even picture a hypothetical debate between those two thinkers in Sima Qian's *Shiji*:

Confucius says to Laozi, "We must teach the people and practice the virtue of yielding and *wuwei*. If we do not, people will never learn the virtue, and states can never be governed with the virtue."

Laozi replies, "Governing a state with the virtue of yielding means not to govern. Yielding is *wuwei*, doing nothing unto others. Teaching the people and governing the state are doing unto others and contrary to yielding. Any teaching is against the ethical principle of *wuwei* and yielding. Teaching and governing are unethical."

Laozi's political philosophy of no governing can be seen and interpreted in Chapter 38 of *Tao Te Ching*; see Reference 2 for details.

Many scholars interpret Laozi's political philosophy as anarchism, which agrees with our understanding. However, Laozi's concept of anarchism must be coordinated with his parallel vision of an uneducated and reclusive village of "a small state of a few people" (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 80), which is remotely similar to the modern concept of anarchism or libertarianism.

Did Confucius give up his ambition of teaching and governing with the virtue of yielding after seeing Laozi and getting schooled? We all know that history says no, and we must

appreciate that he did not. Had he relented, we would have witnessed a completely different trajectory for Chinese culture and history. A wealth of historical records portrayed the young Confucius as persistent and uncompromising. At the same time, the older and wiser Confucius was considerably more moderate and pragmatic, presumably due to his lessons taken from Laozi or his self-realization; either way, Confucius realized the paradoxical nature of governing with the virtue of yielding. Therefore, governing or conducting oneself and interacting with others cannot be extreme. Naturally, his way of exercising virtues of propriety came to be known as Confucius' pragmatic way;[6] see Appendix A for further explanation. The pragmatic way set the tone for the later Confucian scholars and shaped Chinese cultural traditions. From this perspective, *The Analects* can also be viewed as a textbook for modern ethics.

Confucius lived in the Spring and Autumn period, a time of great chaos and suffering. He had a brief political career in his home state, followed by primarily failed attempts to persuade rulers in many other states in ancient China to restore the traditional institution of propriety. He came to realize that his mandate of heaven was teaching the ruling class and future elites how to behave in ethical rituals, in order that they could set an example of propriety and lead the people in establishing a prosperous and harmonious society. Little to no historical record indicates that Confucius engaged in any discussion on the tactics of war; however, there was another sage during Confucius' era who talked of nothing but war.

4. What Is Antiwar

Ethics involves interactions between people. With that in mind, we can argue that war is an extreme expression of human interaction (while ironically considering military strategy and tactics as an art). Among hundreds of books on military strategy produced throughout Chinese history, *The Art of War* is unanimously hailed as the most brilliant masterpiece. Similar to *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi and *Analects* by Confucius, *The Art of War* was also written approximately 2500 years ago [7]. Its author, Sunzi (Sun Tzu, 545–470 BCE), served as a general during the late Spring and Autumn periods.

The Art of War has become an international bestseller, and a classic textbook studied in virtually all military schools worldwide. With all the modern advanced land-, sea-, and air-based weaponry, Sunzi's 2500-year-old theory of strategy and tactics still engages a broad audience in modern warfare. During Operation Desert Storm, a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* commented that, though China did not take part in this multi-national force, a mysterious Chinese general was in overall command of the war. He was Sunzi.

Sunzi's theory of strategy and tactics also applies to the modern capitalist competition between business corporations and the realm of politics. Large corporations in the US hire retired military brass as business executives. According to a famous saying, "The commerce field is like the battlefield."

"War is a mere continuation of politics by other means."[7] Politics is widely perceived as a dirty business, and "all warfare is based on deception." Despite its vast influence, *The Art of War* has not been without criticism. Some Chinese scholars refer to the book as "Sufficient with strategy and tactics; insufficient with benevolence and ethics." This unfolds the question: Are there ethics or morality in war? Does Sunzi talk about the ethics of war in *The Art of War*? There have been few research publications in this regard.

Let us examine the first paragraph from Chapter 4 of *The Art of War*. The following excerpt by Lionel Giles is presumably a two-tiered translation: Gile's version was translated from the modern Chinese version, which first relied on the classic text [8].

IV. Tactical Dispositions

1. Sun Tzu said: The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy.
2. To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.

3. Thus, the good fighter is able to secure himself against defeat but cannot make certain of defeating the enemy.
4. Hence, the saying: One may know how to conquer without being able to do it.

We have included a version by General Samuel Griffith in Appendix B that is similar in content and more popular in translation [9]. What Sunzi is actually saying in the classic text can be re-translated now as follows [10]:

Sunzi said:

1. Master commander of the past says that you cannot win if you go [initiate war] first [for your victory]. You can win only after your enemy [goes first].
2. Being incapable of winning is up to yourself and being capable of winning is up to your enemy.
3. Therefore, being a master commander, you know that going for it cannot win, and making [yourself] unmatchable [by your enemy] can win.
4. Thus, the saying: You can see victory but cannot go for it [first].

Granted, it is challenging to capture Sunzi's exact wording and correctly express his meaning due to the nature of the multiple meanings of Chinese characters. The virtual absence of grammar in Mandarin, generally speaking, complicates interpretation, as well. In short, Sunzi says, "You can only win your defensive war—you definitely lose your offensive one." It sounds strange and illogical when you think about victories that result from preemptive strategies or surprise strikes. However, it makes sense since he viewed the discussion from an ethical context—you cannot win in an ethical or moral sense if you initiate the war. General Colin Powell framed it as Thucydides' motto: "Of all manifestations of power, restraint impresses men the most." Through similar reasoning, Sunzi sets a clear rule of engagement for his followers by putting ethics ahead of military strategy, even if his rule plays against tactical logic and advantage. His ethical reasoning is clear—there can be no wars if nobody starts one—and this is consistent with Laozi and Confucius' ethical teaching in the same era as we have shown above. Why do we go to war? It is only due to the fact that we have to. We are compelled to prepare for war for self-defense against aggressors and to defend our home and homeland from invaders.

Two weeks after starting the Iraq War, former President George W. Bush made a speech at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. He listed two great and just causes (i.e., the Just War theory) for his war [11]:

1. Self-defense against the possibility of an attack by Iraq; and
2. The illegitimacy and brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The second justification can be subjective: The governing system for a sovereign nation ought to be up to the people of that nation. In theory, other nations do not have the obligation or authority to interfere with another nation's sovereignty; this is an international norm. The first justification comes to be the Bush Doctrine or preemptive war strategy. Specifically, the US initiated war before Iraq had fired the first shot toward the US, i.e., the US shot first. Without considering any undisclosed justification from the government, was it ethical or moral of the US side by Sunzi's rule of engagement in theory? Theory can be simple, and reality is not. A similar case would be Russia's preemptive "special military operation" in Ukraine. How would historians write about these events? One might argue that "the jury is still out," and history will decide.

The power of Sunzi's ethical reasoning is its simplicity: An average parent or kindergarten teacher would practice it every day. Imagine the first (or second) question you would ask to resolve a physical confrontation between two children (suppose further that you did not witness the beginning). Typically, the mediator/adult asks, "Who started it?" A bully may be the "winner" of the fight, but he is unequivocally the loser in ethical or moral behavior: This is the same ethics Sunzi talks about in war.

Moreover, Sunzi's highest philosophy on war is anti-war (or, to read the classic text literally, "do no war," i.e., do nothing unto others, or yield), or zero casualties for both sides. Anti-war can be described as Sunzi's "Overcoming the enemy's army without a battle."

Many military experts treat it as an impossibility since this sentence is often mistranslated as "Victorious or breaking the enemy's resistance without a battle." Overcoming the enemy's army entails strategy and diplomacy without resorting to military force (*The Art of War*, Chapter 3). One contemporary example pertains to Syria's getaway from a US invasion by surrendering its chemical weapons in 2013. Was it a victory for them? It is hard to say, but they sure were fortunate that former President Obama and the American majority disliked war. Was it a victory for the US, as well? Is there a so-called win-win outcome in a war as in business competition? We hope so. To further illustrate Sunzi's war ethics on antiwar:

The Art of War Chapter 3:

> Sunzi said: In the art of war, it is better for the state (or states) to be intact than to be destroyed. It is better for the army (or armies) to be intact than to be destroyed. It is better for a regiment, a detachment, or a company, to be intact than to be destroyed. Hence, to fight and win in all battles is not the supreme excellence; the supreme excellence is to overcome the enemy's army without a battle.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Sunzi's military strategy begins with the way of nature, such as the Taoist and Confucian ethics, and ends with something as in the modern concept of humanitarianism, as shown in Chapter 3. In Sunzi's eyes, supreme excellence entails no battles, a perspective that resembles Laozi; in fact, Laozi would even treat a triumphant military ceremony as a funeral (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 31). Interestingly, Sunzi does not specify which opposing side of the state or army (there is no singular or plural grammatical difference in Chinese) in Chapter 3 of the classic text. Rather than suggesting that one side or the other should follow a moral imperative or justification for war, he implies that both sides should be intact and not destroyed, expressing a clear preference for no conflict whatsoever.

In stark contrast to Sunzi's theory, game theory is a popular modern strategy theory. It was invented by John von Neumann in the 1940s and later intensively studied in the West for dealing with the nuclear war strategy. Based on game theory, it is well recognized that whoever uses the weapon first wins, and the heavier the damage of the first blow, the greater the victory of whoever strikes first. History has shown that, in conflicts among the superpower countries, nobody has tried to fire the first shot to date. Perhaps Sunzi's theory of war ethics is workable in reality and has been (unknowingly) adhered to in this instance; then again, the consequence of a nuclear war is very unfathomable, with incalculable damages to humanity that nobody would dare begin one. Regardless, we must readily question our moral consciences whenever we are tempted to start a war of any scale.

5. Ending Remarks

What would sages of the past say to the modern questions about saving or taking a life raised at the beginning of this discussion, i.e., whether to yield to the ambulance as a bystander or punish a convicted criminal justly? We can only speculate. As a bystander, Confucius would agree to yield to the ambulance. On the other hand, it is no easy task from legal and ethical standpoints regarding the death penalty issue. Would it be better if any pertinent decisions were based on facts from this reality or hypotheses from other unproven realities to the best of our imagination? Why are we very hesitant in justly punishing a convicted murderer, while going to war and killing thousands of innocents without hesitation? Yielding does not mean surrendering. In the case of capital punishment, Sunzi's war ethics appears to be an excellent theory to practice since it is inspired by nature. Specifically, when the perpetrator commits a crime—namely, "fires the first shot" against innocent victims, he becomes immoral in the eyes of the community as a whole. The just punishment for this convict after that is formed for the sake of defense and survival of the community, which can be categorized as an amoral action. In other words, justly punishing the convict is the right thing to do, but is not an issue of being moral or immoral.

Laozi, Confucius, and Sunzi lived in the same generation 2500 years ago. No historical record has been found to date as to whether Sunzi had visited Laozi or Confucius. Nonetheless, their philosophical thoughts seem tacit to one another and coherent with a simple and clear understanding of nature. We can interpret that Laozi discovered the way of nature and passively exited from human civilization for good. Confucius inherited and proactively tried to apply it in his political career and instill it into his teaching to cultivate social order and state harmony. Finally, Sunzi tried to utilize it in strategy, state diplomacy, and military warfare. Doing nothing unto others, yielding with propriety, and antiwar sum up best the philosophies of these three ancient sages, and a single thread of nature sews their ideas together. In the views of Laozi, Confucius, and Sunzi, the principle of ethics is presupposed by the way of nature.

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Appendix A

The Analects

[6–29] 子曰：“ 中庸之为德也，其至矣乎！民鲜久矣。”

Confucius said, “The pragmatic way, being a means of exercising virtues, is at its perfection! We have missed this for so long.”

This teaching of Confucianism is often described as the Doctrine of the Mean or philosophy of the middle (common) way; but, what does it mean? As the name suggests, “aiming” in the middle or center is “hitting the target” (中的) and is pragmatically useful (实用). As advocated by Confucius throughout his life, this way of applying the virtue of propriety works not only for the elites, but also for the commoners (常人) in day-to-day social affairs (常事), which are the two major interpretations of the Chinese character Yong (庸). It well-represented Confucius’ vision of reviving the ancient propriety among the social elites and expanding it to the commoners in society. In principle, it paved an ideal and pragmatic way for the virtuous to lead by example of propriety without enforcing it on the ordinary people. It can be a public policy implemented by Confucius’ silver rule. Therefore, it is the same old way of nature, not a belief in exercising a virtue between the extremes of excess and deficiency for a balanced outcome.

In addition, from the conventional interpretation of social ethics, the middle way can be a synthesized approach to exercising Confucian virtues, such as intelligence, benevolence, and bravery. In practice, it defines no fixed rules for what, where, when, and how to use the virtue(s) as your scenario changes. When making a justification or argument, you do not always give an assertive Yes or No. Your typical way to reach a goal or agreement is to seek the pragmatic approach in the “middle” that all involved parties can reach. It is a common practice that surpasses Confucianism. Therefore, Confucius’ middle way is the *pragmatic* way.

Appendix B

The Art of War

Chapter 4, Paragraph 1, translated by General Samuel Griffith

Dispositions

Sun Tzu said:

Anciently the skillful warriors first made themselves invincible and awaited the enemy's movement of vulnerability.

Invincibility depends on ones' self; the enemy's vulnerability on him.

It follows that those skilled in war can make themselves invincible but cannot cause an enemy to be certainly vulnerable.

Therefore, it is said that one may know how to win but cannot necessarily do.

Notes

[1] Human nature refers to adults as Laozi compares Tao to human infant babies in several chapters of his book. An infant baby's brain is not developed yet and, therefore, closely approximates nature, in sharp contrast to an adult's brain that has deviated from nature.

[2] Being reclusive was the tradition for the later Taoist religion, which was transformed from Laozi's philosophical teaching hundreds of years after Laozi's time.

[3] The ethical concept of yielding was first introduced by Reg Little in his 2006 book, see the references for more details.

[4] Or "where [is it]" in proper English grammar.

[5] Do unto others the way you would like others to do unto you.

[6] Additionally known as Confucius' middle way or the Doctrine of the Mean.

[7] A quote by Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), a German general and military theorist.

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