

# **The *Laozi* and Anarchism**

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## Abstract

In this article I will discuss the anarchist and non-anarchist interpretations of the Laozi and argue that the political philosophy of the Laozi does not completely conform to Western anarchism. Thus, firstly I will give a brief introduction to Western anarchism. Then I will present the strongest arguments of the anarchist interpretation and try to find their mistakes and refute them. Finally I will try to give an acceptable non-anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the Laozi. In doing steps 2 and 3, I will base my arguments in a way that is consistent with the text of the Laozi itself. Thus, I hope that this article will bring a deeper understanding of the political philosophy of the Laozi and break with the widely spread opinion that the Laozi propounds an anarchist theory.

## Introduction

It is almost a common opinion among the scholars today that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is a kind of anarchist theory. This view is also widely spread among Western anarchists themselves. As A. C. Graham (1989) says, ‘Western anarchists have claimed Laozi as one of themselves ever since his book became known in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century’ (p. 299). During the twentieth century, the identification of the political philosophy of the *Laozi* with anarchism has become so common that almost every textbook on contemporary political philosophy mentions the possible connection between the two. For example, Richard Sylvan (2007) explains that ‘there are significant anticipations of anarchism in earlier philosophy (notably in Stoicism and Taoism)’ (p. 257). Andrew Vincent (1992) similarly notes that ‘it is also asserted that anarchist themes are to be found within ancient Chinese texts like the *Tao te Ching*’ (p. 116). This trend continues up until today and has become a popular understanding of the *Laozi*, as if it is already an unquestionable fact. Both Chinese philosophy experts and anarchist writers are among those who support the anarchist interpretation. Their arguments rest on certain statements or concepts of the *Laozi*, but we can also see that sometimes by supporting the anarchist interpretation they attempt to show that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is worthless and with no feasibility, while emphasizing the superiority of Confucian political philosophy. Or sometimes they just want to find out anarchism’s source or ancestor, as Vincent again puts it: ‘There is a strong demand for an “ancient lineage” in all ideologies which often overwhelms intellectual caution’ (p. 116). However, there are disagreements in the academic literature on the question whether the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is an anarchist theory (Feldt, 2010; Hsiao, 1979; Schwartz, 1985). In the following, I will try to break with the commonly spread anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi* and argue that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* does not completely conform to Western anarchism. In order to do this, a short introduction to Western anarchism is needed, which will be given in the first part. In the second part I will present the strongest arguments of the anarchist interpretation and try to find their mistakes and refute them. In the third part I will try to give an acceptable non-anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*. In refuting the anarchist and proposing the non-anarchist interpretation, I will base my arguments in a way that is consistent with the text of the *Laozi* itself.

## What is Anarchism?

Before we discuss the possible connection between the political philosophy of the *Laozi* and anarchism, we have to first explain what anarchism is. The scope of this article does not allow us to engage into an extensive discussion on anarchism including its historical development and detailed explanation of its various types, but only to offer an overview of anarchism explaining its meaning, implications and main concepts. Various anarchists provided their own theories and expressed their own understanding of anarchism, and sometimes different anarchist types might be in a disagreement between one another. This situation might cause difficulties in finding out unique definition of anarchism, and since this article will only illustrate anarchism's main concepts and ideas in general, I will make use of some contemporary writers on anarchism and present their general agreement on what anarchism is.

'Anarchism' or 'anarchy' comes from the old Greek 'an' and 'arkhê'; 'an' is a negative word or has the meaning of 'there is no', 'arkhê' means authority or sovereignty, thus 'anarchos' became to mean there is no head or leader, or there is no fundamental authority. Anarchist thought emerged as a critique and rejection of the modern state, thus the main intellectual anarchist work began in the eighteenth century, with the outbreak of the French Revolution (Sylvan, 2007, p. 257). However, the first use of 'anarchism' to denote a political position is to be found in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's 1840 work *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government (Qu'est-ce que la propriété ? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement)*. In this work, Proudhon defines anarchy as the 'absence of a master, of a sovereign', and because of this and other similar statements Proudhon became known as the 'father of anarchy' (Vincent, 1992, p. 115). Proudhon's definition indeed tally with the superficial meaning of the coinage anarchism, but the problem is that later, one after another, various anarchist advocates announced their own types of anarchism, so that today we are obliged to accept what Richard De George (1995) says: 'There is no single defining position that all anarchists hold, and those considered anarchists at best share certain family resemblances' (pp. 30–31). From the above we can conclude that the change of meaning and ideas of the anarchist theory is dynamic and developing.

'What is anarchism?' is really a difficult question to answer. Different dictionaries offer different definitions of anarchism, such as, the 'lack of coercive government', the 'absence of a political state', the 'want of authoritarian political heads or leaders, institutions or organizations', etc. (Sylvan, 2007, p. 258). Thus, De George once again says: 'In its narrower meaning anarchism is a theory of society without state rule. In its broader meaning it is a theory of society without any coercive authority in any area—government, business, industry, commerce, religion, education, the family' (p. 30). We can see from this that the principles of anarchism are not related only to the state and government but also to other aspects of society. In other words, we can not only discuss state authority but we can also consider all types of authority. This is possible because the above-mentioned institutions are usually arranged in hierarchical systems, so they can also be a subject to critique by anarchism. However, using this kind of definitions to describe anarchism can easily induce us to associate it with disorder or chaos which is a misunderstanding. These statements only define anarchism in its surface and extreme. Since in this more than 100 years long history of anarchism there are various types of it, the meaning and implications of anarchism itself exceed these definitions. So we can accept the view of Leon Baradat (1984), another contemporary political philosophy writer, who says: 'At its extreme, *anarchism* means no government beyond that of the individual over himself or herself. At its mildest, it simply sug-

gests that much of the authority of the state should be eliminated' (p. 52). In sum, anarchism is a kind of reaction against state and authority; strictly said, anarchism rejects coercive authority. Moreover, anarchism excludes the governing that is separated from the people or the crowd and stresses that people should alone govern themselves.

We can see a trend in the recent literature of attempting to avoid too simplified descriptions and definitions of anarchism. So, as we said above, the development and changing shapes of anarchism already exceed the original meaning of the term. It seems that the definition the famous anarchist writer John Clark (1978) has offered can approximately be used to describe all types of anarchism. Accordingly, one anarchist theory should include:

1. a view of an ideal, non-coercive, non-authoritarian society;
2. a criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this antiauthoritarian ideal;
3. a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress toward the ideal;  
and
4. a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of non-coercive, non-authoritarian and decentralist alternatives (p. 13).

According to Clark, one can be labeled anarchist in a full sense only if he or she meets the four criteria. However, he recognizes that this definition can allow two types of anarchists, strong and weak. Thus, the strong anarchist manifests all the four criteria, while the weak anarchist does not manifest all of them, so this type can be labeled anarchist in a limited sense. Actually, Clark's description opens the possibility of a wide scope in which many political theories can be absorbed and labeled as more or less anarchist.

Or, as Sylvan explains, we normally take the conditions for anarchist theory as conjoined, but we can also consider them disjointly. Thus, we come to the so-called diluted anarchism (p. 258). But the problem is how do we know where the limit to dilution is, and Sylvan acknowledges this problem: 'There are limits, however, to how far definitional dilution should be allowed to proceed: a theory such as Nozick's libertarianism, postulating a minimal coercive centralized state, exceeds acceptable bounds of dilution' (p. 258).<sup>1</sup> We can see that the weak or diluted type of anarchism can include a wide scope of political theories, so no wonder the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is often seen as an anarchist theory.

In conclusion, on the surface and simply stated, anarchism rejects government or all forms of authority, but this definition perhaps includes minority of the anarchist theories, if such exist at all. However, the goal of anarchism is to eliminate the coercive authority or most of the coercive authority, in the same time having respect for the individual freedom. In other words, according to anarchism, the coercive authority is the one that gives rise to the state's problems and people's difficulties. Sylvan again stresses that anarchism centers on two interacting foci: '(1) a top or centre; and (2) control or dominance flowing from this top, by what are adjudged inadmissible (in particular, authoritarian or coercive) means' (p. 261). Thus, the top or central political power exercises authoritarian and coercive government, and 'anarchy entails structure or organization without inadmissible top-down or centralized means' (p. 261). What is crucial

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<sup>1</sup> According to Robert Nozick (1974), anarchy can exist for a limited time before the minimal state emerges.

here is that the structure with top-down centralized means is a hierarchical one, so in the final analysis, anarchism wants to eliminate the hierarchical structure or system.

Having thus briefly explained the main ideas and concepts of anarchism, I believe we can now turn to the problem of the anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*.

## **Anarchist Interpretation of the Political Philosophy of the *Laozi***

From the above presentation of the ideas of anarchism we can see that the matter is not that simple. Moreover, just because the definition of anarchism is so wide, it is easy for some to take the political philosophy of the *Laozi* as one or another kind of anarchism. Of course, if we say that the *Laozi* recognizes the existence of the ruler so it is not an anarchist work, those who adopt the anarchist interpretation would say that this kind of argument is an oversimplification of the matter (Ames, 1983, p. 28). If we consider the above discussion on defining anarchism, we can immediately understand the reasons for this statement.

As stated above, after the appearance of anarchism as a political theory, the *Laozi* became to be compared with it. One of the first who considered the political philosophy of the *Laozi* as an anarchist theory was the Confucian scholar Liang Qichao (Liang, 1930). He explains that Daoism believes there is a kind of natural law and that people's skillfulness is harmful to this law, so, according to Liang, the Daoist political theory believes that this natural law represents an absolute freedom and rejection of any form of interference, so people's return to nature means that the government is not necessary. Thus, he concludes: 'The ideal is that the people shall be unconscious of interference, unaware of the existence of a government. This ideal is "anarchism"' (p. 79). However, not knowing that there is a ruler does not mean that there is absolutely no government. If we continue reading Liang's exposition on Daoist thought, we can see that he has a negative view toward all of the Daoist thought, so the reason why he adopts the anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi* is because he wants to deny any value and feasibility of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*.

The most elaborate arguments for the anarchist interpretation appeared in the 1980s. First, in 1980 the International Society for Chinese Philosophy set a symposium entitled 'Is Political Taoism an Anarchist Theory?' in which three scholars presented their papers, namely Frederick Bender, Roger Ames, and David Hall. Later, in 1983, these three papers together with a fourth one by John Clark were published in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. In the Introduction to this edition, Chung-Ying Cheng (1983) says that from these essays emerges 'the general consensus that Taoist thought is supremely anarchistic—not a totally novel conclusion, but one that has not hitherto been articulated in such cogent detail' (p. 4). In these essays the discussion goes beyond the *Laozi* including the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi*. This paper of course is limited to the *Laozi* only and will not consider the possible relation of anarchism to the other two works.<sup>2</sup> Hence, I will now begin the discussion of the anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi* by the above-mentioned writers with the exception of Bender for whom the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is not strictly anarchistic.

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<sup>2</sup> One thing is possible: even if we agree that the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi*, and even Neo-Daoist thought developed one or another kind of anarchist theory—similar to Western anarchism—not necessarily will include the *Laozi*, because although the *Zhuangzi*, the *Huainanzi*, and Neo-Daoism are greatly inspired by the *Laozi*, the philosophies they have developed are their own, different from the philosophy of the *Laozi*. The other way around, if we offer a non-anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi*, it will not necessarily include the later developments of Daoist philosophy.

Roger Ames (1983) distinguishes four necessary conditions for a comprehensive anarchism which he mostly draws from Clark's criteria. Thus, an anarchist theory should include: (1) freedom is necessary to approach consummation and achieve human realization, (2) rejection of coercive authority, (3) a notion of a non-coercive, non-authoritarian society realizable in the future, and (4) an attempt to authenticate theory in practice, that is, a method or program of moving from the present authoritarian reality to the non-authoritarian ideal (pp. 30–31).

As Ames explains, Western anarchism accepts the conception of individual freedom and in accordance with the Western liberal tradition sees the person as having autonomous, discrete, and discontinuous 'atomistic' individual characteristic. No matter if it is individualist or social anarchists, they both perceive tension between individual liberty and the collective will. Off course, Ames shows that in Daoist political philosophy this tension does not exist because Daoism rejects the ego-centric understanding of the self. In Daoist philosophy, 'a person ... is understood as a matrix of relationships which can only be fully expressed by reference to the organismic whole' (p. 32). Thus, there are different views on individual freedom; in Western anarchism individual freedom has to do with self-determination and one's own intrinsic character, while Daoist freedom, in short, is the comprehension of the Dao as the whole and the source of everything (p. 33). But although Western anarchism and Daoism have different views on person and freedom, they both agree that human realization lies in the achievement of freedom, so here Ames concludes that Daoism satisfies the first condition for an anarchist theory (pp. 33–34). However, as Ames himself points out, Daoist conception of freedom is derived from a clearly articulated metaphysical position (p. 33), and this is an important difference between the political philosophy of the *Laozi* and Western anarchism. Although both the *Laozi* and the Western anarchism rely on freedom in achieving human consummation, the meaning of freedom of the latter is in politics, that is, freedom of oppression by authority, so it is a political and societal freedom, whereas the *Laozi* goes beyond this meaning of freedom. Here we can quote what Benjamin Schwartz (1985) has said about the political philosophy of the *Laozi*: 'If it is anarchism, it is anarchism completely lacking in dreams of individual freedom and "creativity" and not incompatible with the idea of sage-rulers' (p. 213). Having in mind the context of the whole text of the *Laozi*, we can conclude that the meaning of freedom in the book is not only in politics but also on a metaphysical level, that is, humans should have the freedom to obtain and cultivate their natural and simple character that originally was endowed in them by the Dao. In short, according to the *Laozi*, the political freedom of the individual is inconceivable without this metaphysical freedom. Hence, the political philosophy of the *Laozi* does not completely satisfy the first condition.

Ames continues by saying that there are philological similarities between 'anarchism' and 'wuwei'. Thus, 'anarhia' means lack of a leader, where 'arhia' refers to rule of authority, and 'wuwei' means lack of *wei*, where 'wei' refers to the imposition of authority (p. 34). But we can immediately see that this is only a difference on the surface because *wuwei* is not simply a lack of imposition of authority or lack of action. Let us see some statements in the *Laozi*:<sup>3</sup>

The sage manages affairs without action [*wuwei*]. (Ch. 2)

By acting without action [*wuwei*], all things will be in order. (Ch. 3)

The man of superior virtue takes no action [*wuwei*], but has no ulterior motive to do so. (Ch. 38)

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from the *Laozi* are from Chan (1963, pp. 139–176).

*Wuwei* actually is not no action (*buwei*) but means that nothing is left undone (*wubuwei*) (Chs 37 and 48). The above statements show that *wuwei* is actually not the negative *buwei*, and we can even see that in Chapter 3 there is another *wei* added to *wuwei* thus becoming *wei wuwei*, acting without action, which gives *wuwei* a positive connotation. So the characteristic of *wuwei* is nothing to be left undone, that is, when we talk about *wuwei*, we have to consider *wubuwei* and the result is do nothing and leave nothing undone (*wuwei er wubuwei*). *Wuwei* does not mean total passivity and doing nothing but means following Dao's natural operation so that nothing is left undone. In short, *wuwei* is a kind of *wei*, action, in accordance with the naturalness or self-so (*ziran*) that comes from the Dao.

Now, *wuwei* is actually opposed to *youwei*, which literally means having activity, and this is shown in Chapter 75 of the *Laozi*:

They [the people] are difficult to rule because their ruler does too many things  
[*youwei*].

This *youwei* is artificial activity, completely independent of Dao's natural activity, and this kind of activity harms people and things. Thus, *wuwei* is seen as an activity like in the phrase *wei wuwei* which would mean 'do *wuwei*', so it cannot be separated into the two elements *wu* and *wei* but has to be taken together, thus *wuwei* does not oppose *wei* or action but only *youwei*, the unnatural action.

Ames goes on to say that anarchism does not refer to the contrast between political order and disorder but rather to the contrast between 'natural order emanating from below and an artificial order imposed from above' (p. 35). This is similar to Ames's view that *wuwei* means rejection of the authority imposed from above or, in more concrete terms, opposition to the coercive government. Thus, he claims that Daoist political philosophy satisfies the second condition (p. 38). And vice versa, if Daoism opposes coercive government, same as anarchism recommends a non-coercive society that might be realizable in the future. The proof for Ames is Chapter 80 of the *Laozi* and also Chapter 54 in which we can see that the Dao is cultivated in the person and extended up to his or her household, neighborhood, state and to the empire at large (p. 38). Finally, in order to prove this action from bottom up, Ames finds textual support in Chapter 49 which says:

The sage has no fixed (personal) ideas.  
He regards the people's ideas as his own.

Thus, according to Ames, Daoist political philosophy satisfies the third condition (p. 40). The problem here is that one crucial statement from Chapter 60 is forgotten:

Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish

It seems here that the *Laozi* allows the authority from above. How are these two statements to be reconciled? Obviously, Chapter 49 describes the expansion of the order from bottom up, while Chapter 60 describes the imposition of the order from top down. I propose to understand them as interrelated. That is, the *Laozi* suggests a kind of interaction between the ruler and the ruled. It means that the ruler acts on the people, but the people can also act on the ruler, and the actions of the ruler can be determined by the people. Thus, it seems that the *Laozi* proposes



a kind of top-bottom interaction. People's natural and simple character influences the will of the ruler, and the ruler's actions enable the people to maintain their natural simple character. I would agree with Alex Feldt (2010) who similarly states that 'it is conceptually unproblematic to view the ruler (the one with the ability to coerce) and the ruled (one who is coerced) as mutually determining one another' (p. 329). So, I will argue that the *Laozi* breaks up with the one-way expansion of the political order and allows for relationship of bottom-up mutual function. If we accept the above, then the political philosophy of the *Laozi* does not entirely satisfy the second and third conditions.

Lastly, although according to Ames the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* espouse definite anarchist sentiments, he denies them the apparatus for achieving widespread practical implementation. Only *Huainanzi's* 'The Art of Rulership' can contribute with a concrete political theory of anarchist type that can be applied at a practical, social, and political level (pp. 42–43). Hence, it is not necessary to talk anymore because the author himself believes that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* does not satisfy the fourth condition.

According to David Hall (1983), anarchism lacks cosmological theory because it believes that 'the received versions of cosmological theory in our tradition are little more than disguised ideologies, having their origins in precisely those authoritarian impulses which give rise to traditional forms of government and the state' (p. 49). Thus, according to this view, it is necessary that we find a novel, ideologically untainted, categorial ground for anarchism to be able to articulate its main concepts. The only non-ideological metaphysical speculation, according to Hall, can be found in Daoism, so he concludes that political Daoism is the only true form of anarchism and speculative Daoism is the only pure form of metaphysics (p. 50). Hall's purpose is to show how Daoist metaphysics suits anarchist political thought. As he says, any pure anarchist theory has five criteria and certain fundamental Daoist notions can be understood in terms of these criteria (p. 56). The five criteria are as following: (1) the totality is without a 'beginning'; (2) the totality is a 'many'; (3) ontological parity; (4) the denial of principles as transcendent determining sources of order; (5) creativity as self-creative action (pp. 56–60). In the discussion how Daoist thought satisfies these criteria, Hall mostly relies on Zhuangzi's and Guoxiang's transformation of Daoist thought, but among it we can distinguish three points relevant to the *Laozi*.

First, Hall claims, the cosmogonical explanation, 'Being and nonbeing produce each other' (Ch. 2), qualifies the understanding of 'All things in the world come from being and being comes from nonbeing' (Ch. 40). From here, he immediately goes to Zhuangzi and explains that Dao is That Which is and is-not. Thus, as That Which is, Dao is nameable, and as That Which is-not, Dao is nameless. Both nameless and nameable are abstractions from Dao as the pure process of becoming. There is no single creative act and creativity is defined as a thing becoming itself by moving from non-being to being, from indeterminacy to determinacy (p. 56). According to Hall, this kind of world view is close to anarchism. But, if the statement in Chapter 2 qualifies the understanding of the statement in Chapter 40, then how are we supposed to understand the words 'beginning' or 'origin' and 'mother' in the following statements:

The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; the Named is the mother of all things. (Ch. 1)

There was a beginning of the universe which may be called the Mother of the universe. (Ch. 52)

Or how should we understand the statement that the Dao is ‘the ancestor of all things’? (Ch. 4) The beginning, the mother, and the ancestor of course denote neither creator nor creation in time, but at least indicate logical priority, or a kind of central hierarchical system expanding from top down. Hence, according to my understanding, the explanation Hall offers does not necessarily show that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* contains anarchist sentiments.

Next, Hall points out that in Daoist philosophy there is no transcendent principle; the Dao is immanent and expressed through the De of things (p. 58). If we apply this statement to the metaphysics of the *Laozi* we can see that it is an oversimplification. The Dao in the *Laozi* is understood as both transcendent and immanent at the same time, thus if we say that the Dao is immanent, that does not mean that at the same time it is not transcendent. According to one of the first commentators on the *Laozi*, Hanfeizi, Dao is principle, so Dao determines all things, that is, all things follow the principle that comes from the Dao, hence Hanfeizi says that everything’s ‘life and death depend on the endowment of material force by Tao. Countless wisdom depends on it for consideration. And the rise and fall of all things are because of it’ (Chan, 1963, pp. 260–261). If we accept Hanfeizi’s explanation, then the *Laozi* recognizes a transcendent principle which at the same time is immanent. Moreover, the sage in the *Laozi* says:

My doctrines have a source (Nature); my deeds have a master (Tao). (Ch. 70)

James Legge’s (1962) translation of this passage goes straight to the point:

There is an originating and all-comprehending (principle) in my words, and an authoritative law for the things (which I enforce) (pp. 112–113).

Thus, it is obvious that the sage in his or her deeds follows a higher principle which is the source and origin of heaven, earth and all things—that is, the Dao itself. Thus the ruler of the *Laozi* takes the higher and transcendent principle and transforms it into his or her own immanent principle.

Lastly, Hall claims that the so-called *wu*-forms of social interaction—*wuzhi* (unprincipled knowing), *wuwei* (non-assertive action), and *wuyu* (objectless desire)—can eliminate the differentiation between rulers and ruled (p. 59). Hence, *wuzhi* is knowledge of the De of things and does not permit the imposition of principles or forms of organization; *wuwei* is action in accordance with the nature of things; and *wuyu* is objectless desire that permits enjoyment without attachment. Therefore, Hall concludes: ‘It is at the level of the *wu*-forms of social interaction that Taoism expresses its character as social anarchism’ (p. 60). Now *wuwei* is the main concept of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*, so it is the ruler’s basic principle of action, and it is not something that is demanded from the ordinary people (Liu, 1997, p. 40). Hence, we can say that *wuzhi* and *wuyu* are things that are demanded from the people, as it is stated in the *Laozi*:

Therefore in the government of the sage...

He always causes his people to be without knowledge or desire. (Ch. 3)

The conclusion from this is that, according to the *Laozi*, *wuwei* means the expansion of order from top down and people’s *wuzhi* and *wuyu* are result of the *wuwei* conduct of the ruler. Thus, the *wu*-forms of the *Laozi* do not actually express a character of social anarchism.

John Clark (1983) believes that the *Laozi* is 'one of the great anarchist classics' and claims that 'no important philosophical work of either East or West has ever been so thoroughly pervaded by the anarchistic spirit' so that none of the Western major anarchists 'has been nearly as consistent in drawing out the implications of the anarchist perspective'. The reasons are because the *Laozi* 'deals with *all* the dimensions of domination' and 'subjects them to thoroughgoing criticism' (p. 65). Another point, according to Clark, is that essential to this critique of domination is the positive view that underlies it. As significance to this negation of domination is 'a vision of the self, society and nature that can give direction to the project of social transformation: in short, there must be a coherent metaphysics of anarchism' (p. 66). Actually, Clark puts aside classical anarchism and stresses that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is in accord with the more recent organicist anarchism (p. 67). In order to support this standpoint, he first shows that the ultimate reality of the *Laozi*, the Dao, is organic, that is, a unity-in-diversity, and that it is the ideal course of development inherent in all things.

At this organicist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*, Clark believes that this kind of organicism eliminates all coercive and authoritative forms of governing, that is, this unity-in-diversity means that there is no coercive authority, and thus on the political level gives rise to anarchist sentiments. However, whether the organicist worldview brings to anarchist conclusions is a big question. I will agree with Feldt who points out that 'this does not necessarily generate a noncoercive relationship between ruler and ruled. That the ruler and ruled are understood as mutually determining and defining is not inconsistent with coercion. Mutual determination may well include coercion' (p. 329). If one system is harmonious, unified, it means that there is no conflict between the parts of the system, that is, as Clarks notes, 'each being strives only to reach its own natural perfection, and refrains from seeking to dominate others' (p. 71). Although there is no intention of ruling among things, it does not mean that there is no higher ruler that controls this situation. But Clark believes that, for the *Laozi*, attempts to control lead to disorder and says: 'Spontaneity and order are not opposites, but rather are identical. If each being is permitted to follow its *Tao*, the needs of all will be fulfilled without coercion and domination' (pp. 71–72). Nevertheless, a concept such as Dao that is inherent in the organicist system and is in charge of the order, is still not contrary to coerciveness, and can involve coerciveness. As Feldt again says: 'Coercion can only be understood through a two-place relation. In its simplest form, it is the power of one entity to force some specific action from another entity' (p. 329). Hence, although Dao is inherent in things, the two-place relation, that is, the imposition of order from top down in the organicist system is not necessarily eliminated.

According to Clark, the political message of the *Laozi* is that the government is the source of disorder (p. 81). In support he quotes from Chapter 75:

They [the people] are difficult to rule because their ruler does too many things. Therefore they are difficult to rule.

Other examples of the banishment of government can be seen, says Clark, in Chapters 57 and 58, so 'every expansion of political control for the sake of maintaining order has only further destroyed the organic structure of society, thus advancing social disintegration and producing more deeply rooted disorder' (p. 82). But Chapter 75 does not oppose government as such, it only opposes government's use of *youwei*; and the other two chapters also do not oppose government as such: Chapter 57 explains which kind of government's actions will bring to disorder, and

Chapter 58 points out which kind of government's attitude will make people unhappy, that is, lose their natural simplistic character. Thus, the *Laozi* does not oppose government itself, but only the government which is not in accord with the standard of the Dao (Hsiao, 1979, p. 299). Or, as Ames puts it, an important difference between Daoist political thought and Western anarchist theory is that Daoism 'does not reject the state as an *artificial* structure, but rather sees the state as a *natural* institution, analogous perhaps to the family' (p. 35). In sum, the statement that the governments are the source of disorder should be qualified with the statement that all existing governments are the source of disorder, and the reason why they are the source of disorder is not because they are governments but because they use *youwei* to govern. Hence, the *Laozi* does not reject government as such, but only the government with *youwei* consciousness.

Clark also points out that authority in primitive society differs radically from that of political society, that is, the 'chief' is actually not a political ruler but a primarily ritual figure with carefully delineated, non-coercive functions dealing with specific areas of group life (p. 82). Clark carefully notes that to say that such societies have existed is certainly not to say that they fully embody the anti-authoritarian ideal of anarchism. But Daoism suggests non-coercive authority, and this authority is even closer to the anarchist ideal than that of the tribal chief or elder. This is because, as Clark explains, these figures often have no personal power and serve as vehicles through whom the restrictive force of tradition is transmitted. The Daoist ruler, on the other hand, 'imposes nothing on others, and refuses to legitimate his or her authority through the external supports of either law or tradition' (p. 83). According to this view, the ruler of the *Laozi* is not a typical ruler but a model or example of personal development. However, although the ruler of the *Laozi* does not transmit the restrictive force of tradition, in fact, what the ruler rather transmits is a tradition of another kind of authority, that is, the tradition of the authority that comes from the natural and simplistic force of the Dao. In other words, the political authority of the ruler of the *Laozi* does not follow any acts of coercive law but still follows or models on the principles that come from the Dao. As the *Laozi* says:

Man models himself after Earth.  
Earth models itself after Heaven.  
Heaven models itself after Tao.  
And Tao models itself after Nature [self-so, *ziran*]. (Ch. 25)

Thus, the ruler has to model after the naturalness, the spontaneous law that comes from the Dao.

The insistence on identifying the political philosophy of the *Laozi* as an anarchist theory continues until the very present moment. According to John Rapp (1998), since Daoism advocates for rulers to use *wuwei*, which for him is to do nothing, it is obvious that Daoism is an anarchist theory similar to Western anarchism. The main support of this view is that *wuwei* is seen as non-action or as absolutely negative concept, so it is easy to mistakenly conclude that the *Laozi* recommends an ideal with no ruler at all. Ames and Hall have continued to stress the anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi* (Ames, 1994, p. 41; Ames & Hall, 2003, pp. 102–103, 166), as if it was an unquestionable fact, but they have also noticed that the *Laozi* 'assumes the need for a hierarchical political structure, with rulers above and the common people below' (2003, p. 102). The fact just mentioned may cause difficulties to those who believe that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is an anarchist theory. Ames and Hall have made an attempt to

overcome this difficulty by commenting on Chapter 57 in which, according to them, we can see the rejection of ‘a top-down and impositional attitude toward governing’, and the acceptance of ‘a bottom-up and emergent approach in which the people themselves define the terms of order’ (p. 166). However, I would like to remind the reader that although the *Laozi* recommends expansion of the order from bottom up, it also appears to accept hierarchical political structure, and this structure only means imposition of the order from top down. Hence, according to the *Laozi*, the top and the bottom are in a relation of mutual interaction, and this is not the anarchist ideal.

In the above, I have presented and tried to object the most detailed arguments of the anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*. In the following I will give a positive account of the political philosophy of the book and argue for the non-anarchist interpretation.

## **Non-Anarchist Interpretation of the Political Philosophy of the *Laozi***

Although we may say that today the anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi* prevails, that is, it is undoubtedly believed that the *Laozi* is a work on anarchism, there are still some who believe the opposite. We can see that as early as in the mid-twentieth century, Xiao Gongquan (Hsiao, 1979) refutes the anarchist interpretation and states that the political philosophy of inaction of the *Laozi* bears some resemblance to the European *laissez faire* doctrine, but in the last analysis it differs from anarchism. This is because ‘what Lao Tzu attacked was not government in and of itself, but was any kind of government which did not conform to “Taoistic” standards’ (p. 299), that is, the standards of the *Dao* and its spontaneous workings, or *De*. Xiao finds a strong metaphysical support to his statement; *Dao* produces things and *De* nurtures them, in governing the sage-ruler follows the operation of *Dao* and *De*. In order to prove his point he quotes from the *Laozi*:

When the uncarved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things.  
But when the sage uses it, he becomes the leading official. (Ch. 28)

We can see that in governing the sage uses the order expanded from the *Dao*—a kind of top-down imposed order of a centralized government.

It is interesting that Schwartz was one of the commentators at the above-mentioned symposium, and it is in light of his and others’ suggestions that the papers were revised and published, but he was still not convinced by the arguments of these authors. Just few years after the symposium, he writes:

In the text of the Lao-tzu, we find the universal kingship (*wang*) mentioned as one of the four fundamental components of the cosmos—the *tao*, heaven, earth, and the kingship.... Lao-tzu, indeed, offers his advice not only to potential ‘universal kings’ but even to the princes of states of his own time.... Humankind may possibly be returned to the unreflective, innocent state of nature, but people are not, it would appear, themselves capable of achieving the higher gnosis of the sage. It is the Taoist sage who is alone able to put an end to the artificial projects of civilization and make it possible for the majority of men to return to a state of *wu-wei*. (1985, p. 211)

We can see from this that in the political structure that the *Laozi* recommends the hierarchical role of the ruler cannot be neglected; the people indeed are themselves incapable of achieving the higher state of consciousness, but need the guidance of the sage ruler.

Going back to the above-mentioned symposium, Frederick Bender (1983) looks for the differences between Daoist thought and anarchism in order to claim that Daoism is not entirely an anarchist theory. According to him, in Chapter 18 of the *Laozi* we can see that ‘disorder in human affairs is attributed to the “casting aside” of the eternal *Tao*, the destruction of the natural order. There thus arises the need for an artificial order in human affairs, an “order” which is truly a dis-order’ (pp. 8–9). Under such conditions egoistic selfhood thrives, so the Daoist solution is the ruler’s cultivation of the self, that is, the transformation of ruler’s self into a realized, non-egoistic self which ‘will be the necessary and sufficient condition for corresponding transformations of his subject’s selves and thereby the restoration of harmonious social order’ (p. 9). The *Laozi* says:

Is it not because he has no personal interests?

This is the reason why his personal interests are fulfilled. (Ch. 7)

It is because he does not compete that he is without reproach. (Ch. 8)

Thus, according to Bender, it is the transformation of the self, at least at the level of the ruler, which is the starting point of the Daoist political philosophy. This is not the case with Western anarchist theories because they lack a clearly worked out and articulated conception of self (p. 10). It seems that Bender wants to point out that although Western anarchism wants to banish the coercive ruler, it still accepts the conception of the egoistic self, whereas Daoism accepts the conception of non-egoistic self of the ruler and the people. But here we need to clarify Bender’s claim: the *Laozi* accepts the conception of egoistic self that comes from the spontaneous function of the Dao, that is, the natural desires; what it rejects is the egoistic self that emerges from the unnatural selfish desires.

According to Bender, the fact that Daoism accepts the existence of the ruler indicates an important difference with anarchism. He says: ‘While Taoism has the conception of an ideal, naturally harmonious society, its acceptance of the continued existence of a ruler as the locus of political change is hardly anarchistic in the Western sense, since it retains, albeit in improved form, ruler, rule, and the means of rule; the state’ (p. 12). Therefore, for the *Laozi* the ruler is a legitimate institution of authority, whereas for anarchism all forms of ruling are illegitimate. The *Laozi* makes clear distinction between the correct and incorrect action, or the correct or incorrect grounds for action, while for anarchism there can be no correct or legitimate authority (pp. 12–13). Thus, while the *Laozi* ‘recognizes the wrong of imposing illegitimate authority, it also recognizes as legitimate the authority of action, or better “non-action” [*wuwei*], in accordance with the Way [Dao]’ (p. 13). In so far as Daoism banishes illegitimate exercise of authority as counter to Dao and harmful to the people, Bender concludes, it approaches anarchism, but since it does not regard rulership as such as evil, it is not strictly anarchistic (p. 15).

What Bender wants to point out is that the ruler follows the Dao in governing, that is, has a non-egoistic self, so the rulership of the Daoist ruler lacks the coerciveness anarchism attempts to reject, but just because there is the institution of the ruler, Daoist thought, and the political philosophy of the *Laozi*, is not strictly speaking an anarchist theory. This view may need additional argumentation, because, as stated above, the anarchist theory does not necessarily want to eliminate the government and the state, it just wants to eliminate the coerciveness of the central

political authority. In order to reinforce Bender's discussion, we have to say that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* does not only recognize the existence of the ruler and the state but also recognizes the central and hierarchical political authority which is the point in which it disagrees with Western anarchism.

Alex Feldt (2010) has given so far the most thoroughgoing objections to the anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi* offering a positive account of the political philosophy of the *Laozi* (including the concept of *wuwei*). According to him, if the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is an anarchist theory, at the most it is a diluted anarchism. He offers three theoretical reasons for skepticism: (1) the fact that the *Laozi* is clearly a political treatise addressed to the ruler and providing him with a philosophy of governance; (2) the Chinese conception of personhood, which creates a problem for traditional anarchist arguments that utilize a notion of the atomistic individual; and (3) the fact that the skepticism of the *Laozi* is aimed at a different target than that of anarchism (p. 327).

Today there is a common view among the scholars that the *Laozi* is a work on the art of government. Among the first who pointed out this view is D. C. Lau (1963, pp. xxviii–xxix), and so far the tendency grows toward wide acceptance of it. Thus, even those who argue for the anarchist interpretation would agree to it, such as Ames (1994) who says that the *Laozi* 'is primarily a political treatise directed at the ruler already in power' (p. 38). This kind of statements may often counter the metaphysical thought of the *Laozi*, that is, they clearly state that the main purpose of the text is to develop specific political thought and concrete advice to the ruler. Thus, Chad Hansen (1992) points out: 'If the central doctrine is mystical metaphysics, what is all this political advice doing?' (p. 222). There are also similar views in the Chinese literature, such as the one of He (1988), who at the beginning of his book says: 'Laozi is a person who has a political ideal, his *Daode Jing* is written exactly for the purpose of delivering his political view and theory' (p. 1). This kind of understanding made Bender believe that by means of the fact that there is a ruler can be shown that the *Laozi* is not an anarchist work.<sup>4</sup> According to Feldt, if we accept that the purpose of the text is to deliver its art of government, it still does not decisively reject the anarchist conclusion, but it ought to arouse our skepticism. 'The *Laozi* does not merely appear to accept the existence of a legitimate state; it accepts a state that is hierarchical and autocratic in nature. Hence the *Laozi* accepts the very thing rejected by anarchists: a centralized political authority' (p. 329).

Next, Feldt discusses the different views on the person by Daoist philosophy and anarchism. We already saw that Ames talked about this, and Feldt accepts his argument but offers another interpretation. The main point is that anarchism sees the person as autonomous, discrete, and atomistic, and there is a tension between individual liberty and the collective will, but in Daoism there is no such tension because Daoism sees the person as interdependent and contextualized. Nevertheless, according to Feldt, in this interdependent relationship of the people there is still the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and the ruling entails that there is someone who forces people to act and this ability to force people to act is nothing but coercive force. The ruler–ruled relationship would not exist without the ability to coerce and force action. This is not to say that the ruler will always be actively engaged in forcing the ruled to act, it simply means that mechanisms must be in place to allow the ruler to exercise his or her power. Thus, Feldt concludes:

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<sup>4</sup> Jonh Clark (1983), however, is an exception. According to him, 'applying "understanding of *Tao*" to government means not governing. Attempts to interpret the *Lao Tzu* as a manual of strategy in the "art of governing" inevitably fail' (p. 84). But this is a misunderstanding of the context of the political spirit of the text. According to the political philosophy of the *Laozi*, applying understanding of Dao to government means to govern with *wuwei*.

‘Once we grant that the *Laozi* accepts the existence of a legitimate ruler of the state and the Daoist conception of the person as interdependent, the text must allow for some coercive institutional element’ (p. 330). Otherwise, the mutually determining relationship between the ruler and the ruled would not make much sense, so, according to Feldt, the existence of this coercion makes the political philosophy of the *Laozi* different from anarchism.

Lastly, and the most important, Feldt points out that the skepticism in the *Laozi* takes a very different target than the skepticism of anarchism. Anarchism’s skepticism is directed solely toward political authority, while the skepticism of the *Laozi* is focused solely on social norms and culture, particularly Confucian social norms. We can see this skepticism in Chapters 18 and 19. Apart from the skepticism of Confucian norms these passages do not mention any other target and avoid saying something anarchistic. For Feldt, the only place the skepticism of the text enters into the political realm is in Chapter 17 where it says that the Confucian ruler is the one whom the people ‘love and praise’ but is not the worst; the Confucian ruler is just less desirable than the Daoist ruler. So the conclusion is that ‘there is no rejection or skepticism of the ruler or political authority generally, only a skepticism and disagreement about the worth of certain types of rulers’ (p. 331). It appears that the skepticism of the *Laozi* is directed toward different target than that of anarchism.

In sum, we can conclude that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* does not entirely conform to the principles of Western anarchism. In Chapter 17 of the *Laozi* we can see the recognition of the central political authority and hierarchical system. The beginning and ending of this Chapter are of great importance:

The best (rulers) are those whose existence is (merely) known by the people  
.....  
They accomplish their task; they complete their work.  
Nevertheless their people say that they simply follow Nature.

The people think there is no ruler, there is no order imposed from above, but this feeling of theirs is because the ruler uses *wuwei* in governing and does not interfere with people’s natural and simplistic character. As can also be seen from Chapter 28, there is a need of a leading official in the system imagined by the *Laozi*, that is, there is a need of an institution of leadership. This kind of structure of the society is not an anarchist ideal.

At the end, I will add that there are two important differences between the political philosophy of the *Laozi* and anarchism. First, the philosophy of the *Laozi* works out a metaphysical thought, especially ontology, whereas anarchism lacks discussion on ontology. This is the main *theoretical* difference and can be a starting point in opposing the anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi*. Metaphysics is the basis to the political philosophy of the *Laozi*, while anarchism, apart from its discussion on human nature, cannot ground its political theory on a deeper metaphysical or ontological basis. In other words, anarchism starts directly from its conception of the person and grounds its political theory on the right of individual freedom, thus not being able to find out deeper metaphysical or ontological grounds to this right of freedom.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maybe an exception is the so-called organicist anarchism, because it finds the grounds of individual freedom in a system of interrelatedness, which would seem to go beyond the atomistic view on the person, and believes that the world is a harmony in diversity so that the person can only be understood through this harmony. Anyhow, in the above I have already showed the differences of this kind of anarchism with the political philosophy of the *Laozi*,



Due to this important difference, the political philosophy of the *Laozi* and anarchism developed differing views on the ruler and individual freedom, which is already discussed above.

Second, as is known, the main concept of the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is *wuwei*, and just because *wuwei* can be mistakenly understood as ‘no action’ at all, the political philosophy of the *Laozi* can also be seen as an anarchist theory. But, I have argued above that *wuwei* has a positive role which does not entirely satisfy the principles of anarchism. This is because *wuwei* is also a kind of action, that is, the governing through *wuwei* (*wuwei er zhi*) does not demand from the ruler to do nothing, but to govern in accordance to the natural law that comes from the Dao. Thus, the governing through *wuwei* means governing according to the standard of the Dao. Furthermore, *wuwei* is deeply rooted in the metaphysical thought of the *Laozi*, so although we say it is a political concept it also has metaphysical implications, that is, it is an implementation into life and politics of the self-so (*ziran*) of the Dao. Therefore, to emphasize again, the main characteristic of *wuwei* is opposition to *youwei*, hence the governing through *wuwei* opposes the governing through *youwei*. *Wuwei* is a unique and peculiar concept of the philosophy of the *Laozi* and Daoism in general whereas the other schools of thought lack this kind of understanding of *wuwei*. To get to the point, Western political philosophy completely lacks the concept of *wuwei* and anarchism is no exception.<sup>6</sup> This is the main *principal* difference between the political philosophy of the *Laozi*, including Daoism in general, and Western anarchism. A Daoist familiar with the views of the anarchists might agree that in some aspects they probably approach Daoist political philosophy, but the Daoist will immediately comment that they still float in the *youwei* consciousness. Hence, to say that the *Laozi* expounds a thoroughgoing anarchism, similar to Western anarchism, would mean to accuse the author of the book of accepting the very thing he tries to reject—the governing through *youwei*.

## Conclusion

In the above, I have discussed and tried to refute the anarchist interpretation of the political philosophy of the *Laozi* and have offered an acceptable non-anarchist interpretation of it. Things are not simple from the very beginning because anarchism itself manifests in many forms so that we have to construct a broader idea of it, that is, we have to consider it in a broader context. Actually, this situation gives the possibility of anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi*.

The *Laozi* can undergo multiple readings so if the anarchist reading is possible the non-anarchist reading is equally possible and this is not only because the text allows these possibilities but also because anarchism itself allows them. Things are really delicate and if the interpretations are consistent with the text, then we can say that both anarchist and non-anarchist interpretations are right, or at least, acceptable. I believe that the non-anarchist interpretation I have argued for above conforms to the context of the book. We saw that others also believe in the acceptable non-anarchist interpretation, and among them Feldt sets the limits to how far can the anarchist interpretation go and claims that if the *Laozi* propounds an anarchist theory, the most we can say is that it is a form of diluted anarchism. We do not know

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and moreover, the organicist view is not a representative of the anarchist view of the person, so there is no ground to claim that, in general, the metaphysical thought of the *Laozi* approaches the anarchist metaphysical thought.

<sup>6</sup> That Western political philosophies lack the concept of *wuwei* is a point also stressed by others, such as, Huang Yong. (Feldt, 2010, p. 336, f).

what the future development of anarchism will be, but due to the appearance of the recent organicist anarchism we can only anticipate that some future types of anarchism can very easily remind us on the political philosophy of the *Laozi*. However, we live in a world in which we can fast and easily exchange information and knowledge, so if such a type of anarchism appears it would seem almost impossible that it is not widely informed by Eastern, Chinese, or Daoist philosophy in particular. If there is a strong insistence to accept the anarchist interpretation, the most we can say is that the political philosophy of the *Laozi* is a peculiar anarchist theory that does not entirely conform to the principles of Western anarchism, but the least we can say is that there are theoretical and principal differences between the political philosophy of the *Laozi* and Western anarchism.

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