

Taoism and Western Anarchism

Frederic L. Bender

March 1983

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This paper addresses two questions:

1. Is Taoism anarchistic?
2. What might some possible future anarchism usefully learn from Taoism?

Taking as my paradigm of anarchism the intellectual and practical movements spawned by Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Tolstoy and others, and examining the “political” passages of the *Lao Tzu* and the *Chuang Tzu*, I shall argue that Taoism’s politics are not, strictly speaking, anarchistic (question 1), but that Taoism nonetheless offers fundamental insights into some of anarchism’s own shortcomings that may well be conducive toward the construction of a future anarchism more moving and profound than any hitherto (question 2). It is necessary, however, before attempting to answer these questions, to summarize the central concepts of Western anarchism.

I. ANARCHISM AS A NON-AUTHORITARIAN SOCIALISM

The term “anarchism” has two senses: (1) the complete disorganization of existing society consequent upon the destruction of the state, that instrument which is believed by non-anarchists to be necessary to hold existing society together; and (2) the construction of a radically new, harmonious social order based upon individual autonomy and social solidarity. It is important to see that anarchism in the first sense alone is not an insufficient goal of anarchists such as Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Tolstoy. The anarchist revolutionary dialectics of destruction and reconstruction can be thrown into focus by comparing it with that of Marxism:

1. It is important to recognize that anarchism is a current within the wider stream of socialist thought. It is axiomatic for the major socialist theoreticians that differentials in ownership of the means of production generate class differences and class conflicts, hence the “need” for a state, the need of the economically dominant to protect their privileges by means of a special coercive apparatus.
2. The society to be destroyed, for both anarchism and Marxism, is bourgeois society, although anarchists include under this category not only capitalist societies, as did Marx, but also “bureaucratic collectivist” (“Marxist-Leninist”) societies. Both sorts of societies crush the autonomy of individuals, on the one hand by the power of private capital plus that of the state, on the other hand, by the power of state bureaucracy.
3. Along the road to social revolution and reconstruction, the anarchist frees himself, and seeks to have others follow his example, of all that is held sacred in bourgeois society, carrying out “a vast operation of desacralization.”¹ The bourgeois values attacked by anarchism include egoism, acquisitiveness, competitiveness, the quest for respectability, the belief that a life of hard work is an acceptable end in itself, and faith in authorities of all types, especially schoolteachers, priests and government officials. It is worth mentioning in passing that the proletariat, to whom Marx had assigned the world-redemptive mission of

¹ For example, cf. Stirner: *The Ego and His Own* (New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1963), pp. 95–96.

destroying capitalism and creating communism in its place, had, in Bakunin's eyes, already become a pillar of bourgeois society with class interests of its own through its acceptance of bourgeois values. This was sufficient for Bakunin to hold that the proletariat had forfeited any revolutionary potential it might once have had. Typically, anarchists regard as revolutionaries or potential revolutionaries only individuals who have desecralized and destroyed for themselves the bourgeois idols, regardless of their class origins.

4. The state to be destroyed, again for both anarchists and Marxists, is the "machine" by which the bourgeoisie enforces and extends its rule over other classes, both institutionally and psychologically. But whereas Marxists² see the seizure and destruction of the bourgeois state as a prelude to the creation of a new state which would enforce "proletarian" class rule, thereby replacing a state in which a minority rules with one ruled, supposedly, by the majority, the anarchists hold that the existence of the state as such destroys the freedom of those whom it rules. Majority rule, on the anarchist view, deprives the minority of their autonomy just as thoroughly as minority rule does that of the majority. From the anarchist viewpoint, the state must be abolished and all individuals, acting collectively, in voluntarily constituted and freely federated communes, worker-controlled enterprises, etc., must participate directly in, and consent directly to, all public decision-making.
5. Whereas for Marxists the new rational society of the future (communism) is to carry forward and even accelerate certain trends already dominant under the rule of the bourgeoisie, such as political and economic centralization and the technological rationalization of production, for anarchists the society of the future is to be a "natural" order emerging spontaneously with the abolition of the state and elimination of bourgeois economic and cultural hegemony. Proudhon, for example, advocated a federalist or mutualist society in which voluntary agreements among collectives (factories, communes, villages, etc.) would safeguard autonomy at the base of society, rather than restoring power at the pinnacle.

Fundamentally, then, anarchism sees the state as a deadly illusion which has destroyed men through the ages while blinding them to its effects. In Proudhon's words, "government has always presented itself to men's minds as the natural organ of justice and the protector of the weak."³ But government is neither natural (it is an artificial product, as social contract theorists have held), nor is it an organ of justice (it is an instrument of coercion), nor is it the protector of the weak (it is a device by which the powerful tyrannize the weak and force them to accept exploitation). Kropotkin pointed out that we have been brainwashed by Hobbes and other liberal social theorists who would have us believe that human beings are naturally aggressive, acquisitive egoists. Rather, it is the state which makes us act this way because it forces us to accept domination by others and an economic system that reinforces such traits. Stirner holds that "the state has always one purpose: to limit, control and subordinate the individual and subject him to the general purpose"⁴ which is controlled by the ruling class. Proudhon puts it thus: "To be

² Marx's — if not later Marxists' — position on the revolutionary is highly ambiguous. I have argued elsewhere that his stated views encompass two mutually inconsistent possibilities: either (a) the state is in fact controlled by the working masses directly, in which case it is to be destroyed or (b) the state is controlled by politicians, party leaders, bureaucrats, technocrats or the like. Cf. Frederic L. Bender: "The Ambiguities of Marx's Concepts of 'Proletarian Dictatorship' and 'Transition to Communism,'" *History of Political Thought*, forthcoming 1982.

³ Proudhon, cited in Daniel Guerin: *Anarchism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 15.

⁴ Stirner, cited *ibid.*

governed is to be watched over, inspected, spied upon, directed, legislated, regimented, closed in, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, assessed, evaluated, censored, commanded; all by creatures that have neither the right, nor the wisdom, nor the virtue” to do so.⁵ And Bakunin sees the state as an “abstraction devouring the life of the people.”⁶ These indictments are not mitigated by bourgeois democracy, for in Proudhon’s words, representative democracy “is nothing but a constitutional tyrant”⁷ by which the bourgeoisie rules its subjects.

The anarchist alternative, deriving from Godwin and Rousseau, is that the entire people must retain its sovereignty, governing itself without delegating authority to a government. But, as Robert Paul Wolff has recently shown, only in those cases in which all could agree in the making of law could all remain free while subjecting themselves to such a law.⁸ In spite of the obvious difficulties in sustaining unanimous direct democracy, the anarchist cannot accept the majoritarian or representative frameworks with which to make public decisions, for both of these destroy the autonomy of those members of society who vote with the minority or are represented by others. Since no state, not even majority democracy, can preserve the autonomy of all its members, the state must be abolished and society reorganized upon principles whereby power is retained “from below” by the people themselves, rather than centralized according to any conception of rule from above, whether by a single ruler, a group of rulers, or even the majority of society’s members—even if this means the political fragmentation of the nation-state.

II. IS TAOISM ANARCHISTIC?

The notion of *Tao* in the *Lao Tzu* appears to represent -at some level, at least – a natural condition or order in the cosmos and a natural harmony in the affairs of men. *Tao* may further be characterized as the unity of all things, a whole which cannot be dominated by any of its parts. This aspect of *Tao*, although certainly not a complete conception of the full range and depth of Taoist metaphysical insight, is germane to our chief concern; Taoism’s political orientation. Thus, in Chapter 14 of the *Lao Tzu*,⁹ the eternal *Tao* is called the formless, the soundless, the immaterial, and the invisible which cannot be called by any name; in short, “the form of the formless.” It is said to pervade all things, to nurture but not rule them (Chapter 34). Its loss is said to be the cause of disorder and of the need for the arising of virtue. On the other hand, so long as the eternal *Tao* continues to pervade the affairs of men, harmony is assured. This conception of the great rift in the order of things as the *Tao* is lost, especially as it impinges upon the condition of men, is expressed in Chapter 18 of the *Lao Tzu*, where 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 disorder, one which calls forth the existence of virtue and of the State so as to reimpose some semblance of order into human affairs. Under such a disordered state of affairs, egoistic selfhood thrives, – and leads inexorably to misfortune.

⁵ Proudhon, cited *ibid.*

⁶ Bakunin, cited *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷ Proudhon, cited *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ Robert Paul Wolff: *In Defense Of Anarchism* (New York: Harps and Row, 1970).

⁹ All passages cited from the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chiang Tzu* will be given in the translation by Chung-yuan Chang: *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

Under such conditions, the cultivation of virtue and knowledge and the use of state power are powerless to repair the disorder. The Taoist solution is the ruler's cultivation of the self – or, rather, the transformation of his egoistic self into a realized, non-egoistic self which, if successful, will be the necessary and sufficient condition for corresponding transformations of his subject's selves and thereby the restoration of harmonious social order.

The ruler is to become a sage, return order to human affairs and help restore the universe to its natural order. The wisdom required for such a task comes from the transformation of egoistic self to egoless self and the renunciation of knowledge through meditation, which makes possible that non-action (*wu-wei*) which can win over the world:

Without going out of the gate,
One is aware of the world.
Without peering outside.
One sees the way of heaven.

.....

Therefore, the wise is aware of all things
Without moving a step.
He identifies all things
Without looking at them.
He completes all things
Without action. (Chapter 47)

Chapter 48 continues the theme of meditation and non-action:

To learn,
One accumulates day by day.
To study Tao.
One reduces day by day.
Through reduction and further reduction
One reaches nonaction,
And everything is acted upon.
Therefore, one often wins over the world
Through nonaction.
Through action, one may not win over the world. (Chapter 48)

In short, Taoism points out two opposed concepts of self. In one sense, self is that which connotes individual assertion and striving through action, understood as haughtiness, pride, violence, rage and competition. (Chapter 68) It is self in this sense (egoistic selfhood) from which one must free oneself to attain selfhood in the second sense: selfhood as identical with realized selflessness, whereby one becomes at one with the universe, egoistic self-assertion ceases, and one learns compassion, renunciation and humility (the “three treasures”). Thus the *Lao Tzu* asks: “Is it not through selflessness that one achieves selfhood?” (Chapter 7)

Because we do not strive,
We are free from fault. (Chapter 8)

and

... we have great trouble simply because we have a self.
If we are selfless, then where is the trouble?
If we identify our [realized] self with the world,
Then within our self there is the world. (Chapter 13)

Thus the starting point of Taoist political theory is the transformation of self, at least at the level of the ruler. It is only as an extension and correlate of transformed self that the Taoists speculate on the natural ordering of the human community. This is not the case with Western anarchist theories, which significantly seem to lack a clearly worked out and articulated conception of self, as will be argued below.

Let us turn now to Taoism's conception of natural community. Perhaps the "basic model" of society favored by Taoism is expressed best in Chapter 80 of the *Lao Tzu*, where we have a glimpse of the archaic past, when kingdoms were small, isolated and sparsely populated. This appears to be the prototype of an ideal society in which the great *Tao* prevails. The chapter reads:

There is a kingdom which is small and sparsely populated.
There are numerous implements, but no one uses them.
The people love their lives and no one wants to move afar.
Boats and carriages are available, but no one rides them.
Fine weapons are in their possession, but no one uses them.
The people are back in the times when knotted cords were used to record things.
They enjoy fine delicacies and are handsome in their dress.
They are happy with their residences and am pleased with their traditions.
Although the next state is within sight, and the sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking are heard.
The people live their whole lives without traveling to and fro.

The existence of material goods, including luxury articles such as carriages and fine delicacies, did not corrupt the people and cause them to strive to acquire them. They dressed well and enjoyed delicacies, but with a non-egoistic attitude toward these; they had a simple lifestyle and material goods adequate to their needs. The concept of need here refers to the need of egoless individuals who have transcended the desire to expand the sphere of their influence and the longing to be first in the world (Chapter 67). People were well satisfied with life and dwelled together harmoniously because they had never lost their original nature. As the *Chuang Tzu* comments,

In the days when natural instincts prevailed, men moved quietly and gazed steadily. At that time, there were no roads over mountains, nor boats, nor bridges over water. All things were produced, each for its own proper sphere ...Man dwelt with birds and beasts, and all creation was one. There were no distinctions of good and bad men. Being all equally without evil desires, they were in a state of natural integrity, the perfection of human existence.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 208.

These two passages taken together suggest the Taoist concept of community, harmony of man and nature, harmony among men under conditions of simplicity, whether material goods are in abundance or not. The harmony of the Way is recreated in the realm of social life as in the selves of the individuals comprising such a society. In the *Chuang Tzu's* words, "Things in their original nature ... are joined together without glue and hold together without cords."¹¹ Now, the "glue" here obviously is coercive authority of any kind, especially the external binding force of the state, of rule over egoists by one who is himself egoistic. It is tempting to regard this as "anarchistic"; but since the Taoist ideal is inconceivable without a sage ruler whose example restores and maintains the natural order, Taoism is in another sense non-anarchistic .

The community is said to come about naturally, from the harmonious interaction of society's constituent members:

Thirty spokes are joined at the hub.
From their non-being [as individual] arises the function of the wheel.
Lumps of clay are shaped into a vessel.
From their non-being arises the function of the vessel. (Chapter 11)

What is being suggested here is that the spokes and lumps of clay lack independent identity as individual things :

...as individual beings, these beings are useful materials constructed together in their non-being, they give rise to function. (Chapter 11)

The natural emergence of a human community follows analogously if its members can transcend their egoism; only nonegoists can form a true community and this can occur only spontaneously not coercively, e.g., by order of the ruler:

Without being ordered to do so, people become harmonious by themselves. (Chapter 32)

This is not to imply that in community individuals lose their diversity or individuality. What they lose—indeed must lose if there is to be community at all—is their egoistic selfhood. What is acquired in community is spontaneously harmonious social interaction (at many levels) among realized, diverse selves.

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. (Of course, it must be noted that the text is addressed to the ruler in power and could hardly have called for the abolition of ruler, rule and the state.)

Now, here we come to the heart of the issue of Taoist political thought *vis-a-vis* that of anarchism. The *Lao Tzu* frames the problem of rule as the ruler's choice, depending upon the state of his self, of correct or incorrect action more precisely, of the correct or incorrect grounds for action. For anarchism, on the other hand, there can be no correct or legitimate authority, except that specifically authorized by the sovereign people. Now, while the *Lao Tzu* recognizes the wrong of imposing illegitimate authority, it also recognizes as legitimate the authority of action, or better, "non-action," in accordance with the Way:

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Aiding in governing the kingdom through *Tao* means not depending on the superiority of arms.
Depending on the superiority of arms creates consequences.
Wherever there are armies, disorder occurs. (Chapter 30)

That is, the exercise of illegitimate, coercive authority, dependent ultimately if not directly upon force of arms, creates civil disorder or strife. Governing through *Tao*, on the other hand, means there will be no need for arms, for natural order exists or can be called into being only through the non-action of a realized ruler. In other words, if rulers abide by *Tao*, all things will yield to them naturally:

Too is real. yet unnameable.
It is original nondifferentiation and invisible.
Nevertheless, nothing in the universe can dominate it.
If rulers and lords were able to abide with it, all things in the universe would yield to them naturally.
Heaven and earth [would be] unified and rain the dew of peace. (Chapter 32)

Unlike kings and lords, the all-pervading *Tao* nurtures all things rather than rules them. (Chapter 34) To the extent that rulers imitate *Tao*, the natural order of community would be encouraged:

... the wise [ruler] does not endeavor to be great.
Hence, his attainment is great. (Chapter 34)

Indeed, if the ruler abides with *Tao*, all will support him:

When one maintains the great image in dealing with the world,
One deals with the world without harming it.
Instead, one makes the world serene, tranquil and peaceful. (Chapter 35)

This is an image of a ruler who can deal with the world without harming it, without forcing it to deviate from its natural path. According to Kung Ho-shang, “the great image” here means *Tao*. “If the wise [ruler] abides with the great *Tao*, then the hearts of the millions of people in the world will be moved to support him.”¹² If the ruler is open to *Tao*, good and nongood will not be differentiated. The sage ruler will thus be tolerant of his people and allow them to be themselves. On the one hand, the more restrictions the ruler places upon the people, the more criminals and disorder he creates; on the other, *wu-wei* would transform men spontaneously (Chapter 57).

Proper governing is said to be the simplest thing of all: it is the art of the sage-ruler’s returning to his original nature and fostering that of his people :

In guiding people and working according to nature,
It is best to follow renunciation.

.....

Therefore, governing a large nation is as simple as preparing a dish of food. (Chapter 59)

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Indeed, the imposition of a system of criminal justice injures the state itself:

If we take on the great lumberjack's work of cutting,
We can hardly help but hurt our hands. (Chapter 74)

Criminal law can be eliminated if there is an underlying harmony between the ruler and his subjects. Authoritarian rule leads to the violation of this harmony between the governor and the governed and in turn to various social evils. At this point Taoism approaches anarchism's abhorrence of the state and its call for its dissolution:

When men are deprived of food,
It is because their kings tax them too heavily.

.....

When men are hard to govern,
It is because their kings interfere with their lives.

.....

When men give up their lives lightly,
It is because their kings are anxious to live extravagantly. (Chapter 75)

In as far as Taoism holds, as this passage suggests, that the illegitimate exercise of authority is counter to *Tao* as well as harmful to the people, it approaches anarchism; but since it does not regard rulership as such as evil, it is not strictly anarchistic.

III. ANARCHISM IN THE LIGHT OF TAOISM

Let us ask now whether, and to what extent, anarchism might be strengthened, or its implications further developed, in light of Taoism's conception of sagely rule. I shall address four questions to anarchism.

(1) What are anarchism's reasons for holding that man is naturally good (or social, or altruistic), and are they adequately grounded?

There appear to be three answers to this question in the writings of the major anarchist theorists. Taoism, on the other hand, has a fourth, more profound response.

First, individuals are said by some anarchists to be moral agents, which is to say (by definition) that they are able to identify with a community of free agents, assuming that such a community is in existence. This is another way of saying that an anarchistic society of free moral agents would spring up spontaneously once the state were abolished. Now, individuals' morality, and the degree of their personal and collective freedom and commitment, are said to depend upon what they have learned through social experience, especially through the experience of struggle for liberation. Thus, Bakunin says that each man becomes "humanized," i.e., becomes a moral agent, only "in the measure that all men comprising [society] become, individually and collectively, free to an ever greater extent."¹³ Individual freedom is defined by Bakunin as the condition of never

¹³ Bakunin, in Irving Louis Horowitz (ad.): *The Anarchists* (New York: Dell, 1964), p. 136.

being forced to surrender one's will, reason or understanding to another, nor ever being forced to submit to any law or rule other than those one has freely chosen to accept. Collective freedom is defined as living among such free individuals and interacting on the basis of mutual respect for one another's freedom. This is sometimes labelled as interacting according to the feeling of solidarity: "Social solidarity is the first human law; freedom is the second law."¹⁴ That is, to the extent that man and society are free, men will actualize their potentiality for rationality, hence morality, and will recognize the interdependence of everyone's freedom:

The primitive, natural man becomes a free man, becomes humanized, a free and moral agent; in other words, he becomes aware of his humanity and realizes within himself and for himself his own human aspect and the rights of his fellow beings. Consequently man should wish the freedom, morality, and humanity of all men in the interest of his own humanity, his own morality, and his personal freedom.¹⁵

Now, the moral imperative of solidarity places each person under obligation to respect the freedom of all others. As such, it derives obligation ontologically, from our being social beings. Here there is a *formal* parallel with a view which Taoism specifically rejects: the Confucian theory of obligation which, in a way very different from Bakunin's anarchism, nonetheless assigns obligations on the basis of our being social beings. Taoism, in rejecting the Confucian doctrine of virtue, rejects the very conception of obligation. Taoist "ethics," if I may use the term, is grounded not upon any conception of duties or virtues, but upon the self actualization or transcendence of the egoistic self. Thus, Taoism claims that the Confucian view that the virtues must be taught itself signifies that the Way, or natural order, irk human affairs has been destroyed:

... When Tao is lost, we have attainment.
When attainment is lost, we have benevolence (jen).
When benevolence is lost, we have righteousness (yi).
When righteousness is lost, we have propriety (Zi).
Propriety is due to a lack of trustworthiness and is the beginning of disorder. (Chapter 38)

Instead of teaching a doctrine of virtue or obligation, Taoism teaches an "ethics" of self-activation. The highest attainment (re) is "the attainment of the self-cultivation of non-discrimination, non-differentiation. and, above all, non-willing."¹⁶ Taoism's criticism of Confucianism (wrongly) accuses Confucian ethics of generating unnatural guidelines for human conduct, and suggests that if or when these unnatural impositions on human conduct are dissolved, a human being's natural virtues will take over and lead to social harmony and order.

Now, Bakunin's anarchist ethics presupposes egoism-and, consequently, the loss of *Tao*-since it requires that a continual struggle against egoism be waged by the individual who would become "humanized." The Taoist goal of the attainment of integration (nonegolessness), on the other hand, presupposes that this struggle can be successfully terminated and the egoistic self can actually be transcended. Indeed, the two conceptions move in opposite directions. Bakunin's moralistic

¹⁴ Bakunin, *ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Bakunin, *ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁶ Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

individual, on the one hand, strives to maximize freedom (or virtue) as a condition of rational self-assertion. The Taoist sage, on the other, is self-actualized “through reduction and further reduction,” (Chapter 48) by “staying within the gates,” meditating, and the like.

I should like to suggest against conceptions such as Bakunin’s that the modes of interaction most appropriate to a society based upon autonomy and solidarity would be difficult if not impossible to achieve on the basis of a continual struggle against a still undefeated egoism on the part of its members. It would be highly improbable that the face-to-face consensual participation required for autonomous communes and worker-controlled enterprises to function, the kind of group interaction Wolff calls direct democracy,¹⁷ could succeed among egoists, no matter how much more moral they strived to become. So long as egoism survived at all, the basic consensus upon which a freely communal and federated society might be built would be in constant jeopardy. Rather, something very much like self-transcendence in the Taoist sense of serenity and freedom from fear and vulnerability, would seem to be necessary for such individuals’ undertaking a life of selfless service, responsible exercise of their autonomy, and actually motivating feelings of solidarity with their fellows. To the extent that it remains moralistic, anarchism does not possess any detailed understanding of self-transcendence and lacks insight into the psychological or characterological conditions necessary for realizing its lofty social goals. Like Marxism, anarchism is in this respect psychologically naive.

The second anarchist conception of nonegoistic selfhood holds that man possesses certain biologically-selected instincts for mutual aid. This idea is especially prominent in the works of Kropotkin. On this view, man is seen as neither exclusively egoistic nor exclusively altruistic. As in the case of other species, Kropotkin argues, the natural selection process which has formed mankind has proceeded by two complementary mechanisms.¹⁸ The first is the well-known struggle of individuals against one another for the means of existence. The second emphasized by Kropotkin because it was neglected by the mainstream of Darwin’s followers—is the selection for patterns of socialization through which the instinct for mutual aid has enhanced the possibilities of group survival. Mutual aid “is only one aspect of human relations,” alongside

the self-assertion of the individual, not only in its efforts to attain personal or caste superiority, economical, political and spiritual, but also in its much more important although less evident function of breaking through the bonds, always prone to becoming crystallized, which the tribe, the village community, the city and the State, impose upon the individual.¹⁹

Interestingly, Taoism has a conception of society analogous to that of Kropotkin’s notion of mutual aid, albeit framed within a quite different philosophy of history.²⁰

But there is a serious difficulty in Kropotkin’s position. Attempting to derive morality from a morally dualistic human nature, Kropotkin cannot legitimately subordinate those behaviors based upon egoism to those based upon mutual aid. He might just as well do the reverse and assume the exclusive existence of egoism, as the classical liberals did. Ignoring the tendencies toward egoism altogether would, I submit, result only in the egoistic instinct continuing to exist as

¹⁷ Wolff, op. cit., pp. 22–27.

¹⁸ Kropotkin: *Mutual Aid* (Boston: Extending Horizons, n.d.), pp. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁰ Chang, op. cit., 105.

the shadow side of anarchist “morality,” remaining free to break out and destroy the harmonious functioning of a society supposedly based upon cooperation and solidarity.

A possible solution to this dilemma is suggested by Taoism’s relativization of the opposites, in this case the anti-social and social instincts.

To be aware of. the positive, yet to abide in the negative is to not deviate from real attainment and to remain like an innocent child. (Chapter 28).

That is, Taoist selflessness is not altruistic selflessness triumphing over egoism, but is the product of remaining in, or better, returning to, one’s “original nature,” the state of original non-differentiation which liberates one from attachment to either of the opposites in this case, liberation from both egoism and altruism. I would suggest that such a notion of self-realization, if it could be actualized among its members, might enable a Taoist-inspired egoism and altruism. I would suggest that such a notion of self-realization, if it could be actualized among its members, might enable a Taoist-inspired anarchist society to avoid becoming the mere opposite of egoistic society, a fanaticism of community.

In the third anarchist conception of egolessness, found especially in Tolstoy, man is called upon to conquer the egoistic self through Christian love. Tolstoy grounds his concept of the realized self in an ultimate spiritual principle. He writes:

A man has only to understand his life as authority teaches him to understand it—that is, he need only understand that his life does not belong to himself or his family or the State but to Him who sent him into the world, and that he must therefore fulfill not the law of his personality or family or State but the infinite law of Him from Whom he has -me- and he will feel himself absolutely free from all human authorities and will even cease to regard them as able to trammel anyone.

Let a man but realize that the purpose of his life is to fulfill the law of God, and that law will dominate him and supplant all other laws, and by its supreme dominion will in his eyes deprive all human laws of their right to command or restrict him.²¹

But, of course, in a political movement which was almost entirely atheistic, and militantly so, Tolstoy’s attempt to ground the needed transformation to non-egoistic selfhood through Christianity was of only marginal importance. While his Christianity differs from the major traditions, it relies ultimately upon faith in the supreme authority of God. It is thus an inconsistent basis for anarchism, placing religious faith in God’s authority above rational autonomy, and thereby creating what might be called a “religious egoism” among those whose souls are freed with the Spirit. This is simply inconsistent with the principle of autonomy. In contrast, the Taoist path to non-egoism depends upon “unlearning” and renouncing knowledge, presumably including all that one might “know” through faith.

To conclude: anarchistic conceptions of egolessness lack the convincing metaphysical grounds of the Taoist view. To the extent that the radical anarchist alteration of social institutions depends upon individuals’ becoming convinced of anarchism’s desirability, the absence of any ultimate metaphysical grounds for egolessness and a path towards its realization (beyond moral obligation or altruistic instinct) is a severe handicap which has contributed in no small measure to

²¹ Chang, op. cit ., 105.

anarchism's "utopian" appearance and weakened it as a practical movement for social transformation.

(2) *Can anarchism explain why most of us, in present society, want to give up autonomy?*

Anarchism, like Marxism, lacks a "psychological model" with which to explain existing social attitudes and desires. The closest classical anarchism comes to such a psychology is perhaps Stirner's view that all values are "religious" in the sense that they postulate value outside the individual. The individual who chooses to actualize himself as free and unique must destroy these values in their value for him. But such vehement assertion of the ego against these values is itself egoistic. Stirner's liberated ego, as Marx and Engels pointed out long ago,²² is an ego asserting itself, desperately trying to escape the real domination of the bourgeois state and bourgeois social values without engaging in world-transforming. While Taoism lacks an explicitly elaborated psychological model of the self, both before and after liberation, its conception of the self is closer than anarchism's to what would be needed for explaining the "escape from freedom" which is so pervasive in our time. That is, Taoism's conception of the realized self might well prove significant for the development of an adequate model of those personal attitudes and motivations needed if individuals are actually to function autonomously in a free society.

Anarchism is of course, in the socialist tradition and, like other socialism, tends to see economic and political problems as resulting from mal-distribution of political and economic power. Thus anarchists typically focus a great deal of attention upon schemes for worker control of a functioning economy, the responsible exercise of political power by everyone, and the like. Anarchism, in my view, shares with Marxism an inability to see that there are psychological needs which necessarily go unmet in bourgeois societies but which cannot in the nature of the case be met by any conceivable set of institutional rearrangements of the mode of production or the distribution of wealth or power. The kinds of needs I am thinking of here include our needs for love, for self-esteem, for esteem in the eyes of others, for self-actualization and for self-transcendence. No mere rearrangement of social or economic institutions, no increase of participatory freedom, no increased availability of material goods alone or in tandem could satisfy these needs. Institutional change could at best create some of the objective preconditions for these needs being met, by eliminating those social institutions (including the state) which currently repress these needs and allow them to remain frustrated. Further, I suggest that it is contemporary society's failure to provide the preconditions for meeting the "higher order" needs—indeed, society's repression of the very awareness of these needs in most individuals—which makes most of us who seek improvement believe (wrongly) that these higher order needs (if they are recognized at all) could be satisfied by simply rearranging social institutions, abolishing the state, having all participate in political decision, and so forth.

I would also like to suggest that anarchism (like Marxism and even liberal reformism) cannot conceive of the "higher-order" needs and of how these might be met until they replace their metaphysical materialism (Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, *et al*) or spiritualism (Tolstoy) with a metaphysical stance capable of recognizing the inherent shortcomings of both. Taoism, however, is one such metaphysical stance offering prospects of avoiding both materialism and (transcend-

²² Marx and Engels: *The German Ideology*. Part 3.

dental) spiritualism. It would be interesting to see Taoist metaphysics and the Taoist conception of the self interact critically with Western depth and existential psychologies at the same time as with political anarchism. From these interactions I suspect that an understanding would emerge of why so many of us desire to abandon our autonomy; why we do not regard autonomy as the central issue in our personal lives while all the time so many of our needs are not being met in contemporary “bourgeois” society.

(3) Are existing society and the state really the unnatural principles of “dis-orders” that anarchism says they are, and, if they were abolished, would reorganization of society in accordance with the principle of autonomy spontaneously replace them?

Proudhon writes that those who arbitrarily constructed society according to the principle of authority “constructed an artificial system ... which has been regarded [subsequently] as the natural order and necessary for humanity.”²³ The classical anarchists shared the belief that civilization is an impediment preventing the natural man. from realizing himself. More recently, Paul Goodman has made a similar point in commenting upon the actions of capitalists and bombardiers, for example, who although they willingly deal death and destruction to others, are lauded by existing society:

there is an important class of acts that are really crimes and yet are judged indifferent; with approval by law and morals both. Acts that lead to unconcerned behavior are crimes. The separation of natural concern and institutional behavior is not only a sip of coercion, but it is positively destructive of natural society.²⁴

What, then, are we to make of the claim that bourgeois society, the state, and some of the actions these encourage, are “unnatural”?

The anarchist conception of “unnatural” society rests on the belief that coercive social systems are by definition artificial. Implicitly, the “state of nature” or so-called “primitive” societies are assumed to lack coercion. We must however, question whether there are, have ever been, or could ever be, societies lacking entirely institutionalized authority. Even “primitive” societies develop systems of authority, for example, the authority of elders, chiefs, shamans and the like. It is doubtful whether any social organism could exist without someone exercising authority. As for the future, even Engels pointed out :

In [Bakunin’s future anarchist society] these will above all be no authority, for authority = state = absolute evil. (How these people propose to run a factory, operate a railway or steer a ship without a will that decides in the last resort, without a single management, they of course do not tell us.) The authority of the majority over the minority also ceases. Every individual and every community is autonomous; but as to how a society of even only two people is possible unless each gives up some of his autonomy, Bakunin again maintains silence.²⁵

²³ Proudhon, in Woodcock, op. cit., p. 290.

²⁴ Goodman, in Horowitz, op. cit., p. 547.

²⁵ Engels in T. Cuno, January 24.1872.

The crucial question here, I believe, is whether authority is exercised legitimately. And here Taoism's stress upon the distinction between the ruler's legitimate and illegitimate exercise of authority is more cogent than the anarchists' insistence upon the legitimacy of only unanimous self-rule. I would submit that the view expressed by Bakunin in the following passage seriously compromises his own anarchism.

I bow before the authority of [specialists] because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my ability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, only a very small portion of human science. The greatest intelligence would not be sufficient to grasp the entirety. From this results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn. So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.²⁶

If I am conscious that I am unable to grasp the specialized knowledge which another possesses in his sphere, then, it would seem, I must defer to his judgment. Bakunin tries to make it appear that this deferral could be based upon my having consulted a number of specialists and weighed their opinions carefully beforehand. Indeed, all this is possible and desirable—but in the final analysis I must surrender my judgment to the other to the extent that I rely upon his expertise: my autonomy is limited by my ignorance. This, however, greatly compromises the principle of autonomy in even a workers'-controlled economy, except to the extent that education and training in many specialized functions could be made available to all.

There is also a major metaphysical question lurking in the background here: namely, whether human creations in general, including social and political institutions, are properly speaking "natural" or "artificial." From the Taoist perspective, as I understand it, everything is natural: everything is part of the cosmos and the *Tao* penetrates all things. Nevertheless, some things may be said to be more, others less, in keeping with the Way. The political problem as Taoism conceives it is that of bringing the elements of the social world more closely into harmony with the Way, eliminating those imbalances due to egoism, achieving simplicity in social life, etc. The anarchist emphasis upon the artificiality of present society reflects, it seems, the influence of Romanticism's notion of the alienation of Western man from his natural state (or from feudal life, which to Romantics appeared "natural" at the time) as he began undergoing the process of industrialization. As one observer puts it,

Intrinsic to anarchism is an asceticism... One finds the anarchist as a historical figure to be a person very close to 'natural' values and "fundamental" living conditions. Their attitudes are simply that all needs can be satisfied once the "natural laws of society" shed the impediments of civilization. This sublime faith in the natural in contrast to the social accounts to a considerable degree for the central peculiarity of anarchism — the absence of a well worked out commitment to economic development.²⁷

²⁶ Bakunin, in Woodcock, op. cit., p. 315.

²⁷ Horowitz, op. cit., pp. 17–18.

Now, although Taoism does incorporate a notion of a return to the natural and rejection of the artificial, this is grounded upon the dialectical contrast between one's actual (egoistic) "nature" and one's real (realized, nonegoistic) "nature." The Western anarchists' Romantic longing for the simplicity of rural life is only superficially akin to this because it lacks Taoism's grounds for appreciating the deeper contrast between realized and unrealized selves. Now, for Taoism, the contrast is between "civilization" and one's original nature, not between civilization and pre-industrial nature. One's "original nature" is not the lost nature of anarchism's Romantic roots but the omnipresent great *Tao* itself. Thus, the *Lao Tzu* advocates more than a return to nature — a spiritual transformation:

Discernment and intellection, benevolence and justice, cleverness and profit are nothing but outward refinements.

Hence we must seek something other than these.

Reveal simplicity,

Hold to one's original nature.

Rid one's self of selfishness

Cast away covetousness

Eliminate artificial learning and one will be free from anxieties. (Chapter 19)

In sum, any future anarchism needs to reexamine the entire problematic of "the nature," and especially classical anarchism's belief, with Proudhon as the significant exception, in man's "natural" goodness.

(4) Are the revolutionary aspects of the abolition of the state and the destruction of bourgeois society the appropriate means to create a non-coercive society?

Anarchism wants to get rid of the ruling class and its chief coercive apparatus, the state, and start over by constructing a society according to the principle of autonomy. Taoism, with its stress on the transformation of the self or the ruler, seeks to reconstruct existing society through the example of the ruler-become-sage. If we take the liberty of saying that a possible future politics "in the Taoist spirit" would seek the psychic transformation of many, not merely of the ruler, it would be fair to say that such a politics would try to restore health to the social organism rather than to decapitate it and replace all its other organs with new ones. From such a perspective, revolution can be seen not as a harmonizing, but as a further unbalancing of society. The Taoist insight that great affairs begin with minute changes (Chapters 63, 64) is relevant here. While the anarchist seeks "great changes" and, as is well known, has never achieved them, a "Taoist politics" must beware of the temptation to acquiesce in a purely private self-cultivation, which it might appear to the "activist" to imply. Thus, a passage such as the following would need to be interpreted very carefully:

The wise deals with this through non-interference and teaches through no words.

(Chapter 2)

Since such non-interfering dealings with things relies, according to Taoism, upon direct identification with the *Tao*, such "non-action" is said to have the most profound effect :

All things flourish without interruption.
They grow by themselves, and no one possesses them.
Work is done, and no one depends upon it.
Achievements are made, but no one claims credit.
Because no one claims credit, achievements are always there. (Chapter 2)

This, I suggest, is the description of a non-violent and evolutionary path toward change, not one which is violent and revolutionary, nor one whose quietism would make change impossible or condemn it to be of only token proportions.

In summary, I would like to suggest that although Taoism is not strictly anarchistic, its potential contributions to future anarchist theory and praxis lie in two areas:

1. its conception of self as the metaphysical ground of social change;
2. its concept of legitimate noncoercive rule, which anarchists may have to accept if they are to cope with the practical problems of carrying out social decisions arrived at through the voluntary agreement of all-so as to reduce the utopian appearance of much Western anarchist thought.

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Frederic L. Bender
Taoism and Western Anarchism
March 1983

Retrieved on 27th April 2021 from doi.org
Published in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* Volume 10, Issue 1 (March 1983), pages 5–26.

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