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Is Political Taoism Anarchism?

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cal view of human society and nature, and on the highest level of generality, the organic and process view of reality, based in part on modern science,”⁴²

Taoist anarchism perhaps more coherently *starts* with a metaphysics which can be confirmed by these developments in modern thought.

A third and final contribution of Taoist anarchism is one that might be expected from a fundamentally pragmatic tradition in which the unity of theory and practice has generally been assumed. In the Taoist anarchist theories and most specifically the *Huai Nan Tzu*, there is a willingness to work within the framework of existing institutions to approximate the ideal: There is an alternative focus of anarchist thought away from the dismantling of the state to the more essential concern of relieving the constraints of coercive authority. This alternative focus is only possible where one can question the assumption that the relation between state and individual must necessarily be characterized by tension and antagonism, and where one can entertain the possibility that political organization is a natural condition that can serve rather than inhibit anarchist ends.

⁴² John P. Clark, *ibid.*, p. 23.

on the possible contributions that classical Taoist anarchism can make to the future development of anarchist theory generally.

First, the Taoist texts develop a metaphysical ground for their political theory. Out of this underlying philosophy of organism, the Taoists give a reasonably clear account of human being, human realization and human freedom. One of the most apparent weaknesses in Western anarchist theory is a failure to develop and articulate a clear understanding of person as a starting point for the elaboration of its political ideas. Much of the ambiguity and vagueness of Western anarchist theory seems to be the consequence of not paying adequate attention to a metaphysically grounded conception of person. An intelligent reading of Taoist anarchism might generate important criticisms of presuppositions individual autonomy and demand clarification of notions such as inalienable rights. It is possible that a preoccupation with the idea of individual sovereignty has been a negative influence on the development of a coherent and compelling anarchist theory.

A second contribution of Taoist anarchism is that it is a doctrine that reaches beyond the economic considerations which seem to be the focus of the anarcho-syndicalist position to embrace all aspects of the human experience-cultural, environmental, social, religious, etc. The comprehensiveness of Taoist anarchism is consistent with what John P. Clark⁴¹ perceives to be the richest vein of modern anarchist theory-the communitarians. In fact, it is really more radical than the communitarians in the sense that it gives even greater prominence to the integration of the human being and his natural environment. Whereas Clark is impressed by the ability of this anarcho-communist position to *incorporate*

such elements in modern thought as the theory of the rise of neotechnic civilization, the ecologi-

⁴¹ John P. Clark, *ibid.*, p. 23.

I. INTRODUCTION

Taoism and anarchism have seldom been associated in the development and expression of Western anarchist theory. Most of the recognized theorists are either unaware of Taoism as a political philosophy, or ignore it. Where Taoism has been alluded to in more recent discussions by advocates of anarchism, the association is most often either trivial or unfortunate. Where it is “trivial”, it is so because although the family resemblance is acknowledge, it is left unexplored. John P. Clark, for example, in attempting to give some definition to anarchism suggests that it “... has roots... as far back in history as the thought of Lao-tzu and Diogenes the Cynic.”¹ Lao Tzu is alluded to as a distant proto-anarchist theory with perhaps some historical relevance. The association between Taoism and anarchism in Western literature is “unfortunate” in that the discussion which surrounds it is often characterized by misunderstanding and misinterpretation. David Wieck, for example, insists that anarchist theory be distinguished from “passive” Taoism: “Choice of powerlessness does not, however, imply passivity or lack of militancy. anarchism and Taoism (sic) have much in common-but anarchism is not a way of merely personal salvation.”² To suggest that Taoism is either “passive” or a doctrine concerned with “merely personal salvation” is misguided.³

In Western anarchist literature, the closest that we come to an appreciation of the contribution of Taoism to the development of a coherent anarchism is perhaps through the work of Paul Goodman. Goodman, throughout his copious

¹ John P. Clark, “What is Anarchism?” in *Nomos XIX* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 17.

² David Wieck, “Negativity of Anarchism” in *Interrogations* (offprint), p. 37.

³ See my “Taoism and the Androgynous Ideal” in *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* Fall 1981 (8 :3).

writings, makes generally sensitive and informed reference to the Taoist classics, and expresses many attitudes that are congruent with Taoist thought. Although the terse, often metaphysical language of the certainly composite *Lao Tzu* might seem incommensurate with the personal, “just human” discussions of Paul Goodman, it should be remembered that the *Lao Tzu* can be interpreted as an edited collection of poetic lecture topics around which specific and detailed explanations would be developed by Taoist advocates. At an individual level, it can be seen as a heuristic device which engages its reader in personal philosophizing that enables him to relate the generalizations of the text to his own life experience. From this perspective, Goodman’s practical discussions would for the most part qualify as 20th century reflections on the *Lao Tzu* lecture topics. Having said this, in the course of this paper, I want to indicate what I perceive to be several aspects of Goodman’s anarchist programatics that might be strengthened by a more profound understanding of Taoist political attitudes.

Specialists in Chinese political philosophy, although generally capable of a more informed comparison between Taoism and anarchism than their Western counterparts, are divided as to the appropriateness of this association. In most of the contemporary works on Chinese political philosophy such as Liang Ch’i-ch’iao, Ch’en Anjen, T’ao Hsi-sheng, Yang Yuchung and Hsieh Fu-ya in Chinese and E. D. Thomas in English, the Taoists are identified as anarchists, and are even compared to prominent European theorists such as Stirner and Bakunin. Others such as Ts’ai Ming-t’ien and Wang Taha dismiss any comparison at all on the perhaps too simple grounds that the Taoist vision of state has a ruler. Hsiao Kungch’ian is more complex. With respect to the *Lao Tzu*, he argues: “... while *Lao Tzu*’s political philosophy of inaction bears some resemblance to the most thoroughgoing of European *laissez faire* doctrines, in the best analysis it differs from anarchism ... For, in theoret-

free to make his uniquely valuable and necessary contribution to the whole.”⁴⁰

To recapitulate: while the *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tzu* espouse definite anarchistic sentiments, these sentiments for the most part take the form of a protest against constraints imposed on the people by authoritarian government and a discussion of human being such that these constraints are an obstacle to human realization. And while these texts discuss political theory, they lack an apparatus for achieving widespread practical implementation under the conditions which prevailed at the dawn of the Chinese empire. It appears, therefore, that the main contribution of *Huai Nan Tzu*’s “The Art of Rulership” is a realistic assessment of its own political content, and the formulation of a concrete political theory with a structure such that the anarchistic spirit of Taoism could be nurtured and applied at a practical social anarchistic spirit of Taoism could be nurtured and applied at a practical social and political level. Therefore, as long as we are willing to include the *Huai Nan Tzu* in the corpus of Taoist literature, it can be claimed that Taoist political theory evolved toward a practicable anarchism which was willing to establish concrete measures in its attempt to move from the deal to the real.

IV. POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS OF TAOISM TO WESTERN ANARCHIST THEORY

Having assessed Taoist political theory on the basis of the four conditions for an anarchism outlined above, I conclude that properly and fully understood, Taoist political philosophy is essentially anarchism. I dial1 close with some speculations

⁴⁰ See D. Novak’s distinction between liberalism and anarchism in “The Place of Anarchism in the History of Political Thought”, *The Review of Politics* 20, No. 3

and the system of laws are all retained, but altered in such a way as to accommodate the Taoistic spirit of anarchism. The purpose of “The Art of Rulership” is to provide a theoretical framework for rooting out all vestiges of constraint and compulsion from the prevailing Legalist-orientated program of government. This spirit is apparent in the organizational function of the ruler, who orchestrates the natural development of his citizenry and who determines the configuration of his administration out of their collective contributions. While retaining the traditional conviction in the efficacy of concrete political institutions, it attempts to eliminate the coercive element by insisting that the character of these institutions be determined from the bottom up. While retaining the traditional conception of ruler, for example, it attempts to eliminate the coercive element by insisting that his interests coincide with those of his people and are best served by a devotion to their general welfare. While retaining the existing bureaucratic system, it attempts to eliminate the coercive element by encouraging utilization of broad human talents (*jung-chung*) in accordance with particular and individual aptitudes (*ke te ch'iyi*). While retaining the existing concept of penal law, it attempts to eliminate the coercive element by grounding these laws in what is congenial to the people (*chung shih*) The spirit of this political theory goes beyond Jeffersonian liberalism in which “that government is best which governs least” to the anarchist position of “that government is best which governs not at all”. This is expressed metaphorically in the treatise where it describes the court as being “overgrown with wild grass”.³⁹ What really tips “The Art of Rulership” chapter away from liberalism in the direction of anarchist theory is the firm conviction that social and political realization is a function of each participant’s being

³⁹ *Huai Nan Tzu* 9/6a.

ical terms, what Lao Tzu attacked was not government in and of itself, but was any kind of governing which did not conform to “Taoistic” standards.”⁴

The *Chuang Tzu*, according to Hsiao Kungch’ian, however, is a different case. If we overlook the fact that Chuang Tzu

...did not explicitly call for the abolition of the ruler... it would *not* be inaccurate to call Chuang Tzu’s thought the most radical of all anarchisms. European anarchisms have inclined toward the abolition of political sanctions but the retention of social restrictions. Therefore they are not as thoroughgoing in theory as Chuang Tzu’s concept of letting people alone (*tsai yu*)⁵

Joseph Needham in his protracted discussion of Taoist political thought chooses to avoid the term “anarchism” altogether, calling it rather a doctrine of “primitive collectivism”.⁶

Given the sometimes asserted and equally often challenged relationship between anarchism and Taoist political theory, it would seem to be a worthwhile enterprise to explore this association and determine to what degree, if any, it is valid. More important, however, this comparison might have significance for Western anarchist theory. I think that many of the weaknesses and vagaries of this tradition can be overcome by reference to Taoist political thought. It is hoped that this project of isolating and articulating the essential characteristics of anarchism and Taoist political philosophy will generate a contrast that will both register their similarities and give clear relief to important differences.

⁴ Hsiao Kungch’uan (tran. F. W. Mote), *A History of Chinese Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 298–9.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 318.

⁶ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 86ff.

My first step in this paper is to identify those conditions which are generally deemed necessary to characterize a political theory as anarchistic. To this end, I have identified four essential characteristics which I regard as being necessary conditions for a comprehensive anarchism. In so doing, I have tried to consider the fact that notions such as system, a “new order”, dogma, gospel, platform, party and gurus are anathema to anarchism as an ideological posture. Anarchism as a political doctrine, if it is to avoid self-contradiction, must embrace variety, novelty, tolerance and diversity. In fact, it must be an attitude and a “doing” rather than a doctrine in any formal sense. As Goodman suggests, “it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life”.⁷

The four very general characteristics of anarchism that I have identified have been precipitated out of an extensive body of literature, ranging from Eltzbacher’s veritable denial of any common ground among anarchism’s most prominent spokespersons⁸ to the carefully constructed analyses of anarchism in the work of George Woodcock and John P. Clark, and have been formulated and arranged on the basis of my own understanding of this political philosophy.

The second part of my paper explores the Taoist literature and determines to what extent it satisfies these four necessary conditions for an anarchistic theory.

Finally, having arrived at what I consider to be an appropriate response to the question: “Is political Taoism anarchism?”, I attempt to focus on those features of political Taoism that might be of interest to contemporary anarchist theorists in the development and promotion of their political ideas.

⁷ Paul Goodman, “May Pamphlet” in *Drawing the Line*, ed. Taylor Stoehr (New York: Free Life Editions, 1988), p. 2.

⁸ Paul Eltzbachu (trans. S. Byington, ed. J. Martin), *Anarchism* (New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1960).

time, will enable him to contribute to the evolution of a natural political and social order. The *Chuang Tzu*’s focus is decidedly personal, and there is little evidence to suggest that its authors contemplated universal realization as a likely possibility. Rather, the attitude of this text can be adequately described with the language of Goodman’s biographer, Taylor Stoehr, who states that “the libertarian program of free action is to live in present society as though it were a natural society,” and “to bypass conventional institutions by going back to primary nature.”³⁷

Given the abstract and summary nature of the *Lao Tzu*’s political theory and the personal focus of the *Chuang Tzu*’s program, it is little wonder that these texts failed to attract the attention of the principals in the political turmoil of the pre-Ch’in period. But this relative failure of Taoist political theory to gain a foothold did not go entirely unnoticed by its advocates. The author of “The Art of Rulership” chapter of the *Huai Nan Tzu* was committed to the principles and attitude of Taoism and yet was painfully aware that its impracticability was an obstacle to widespread acceptance and adoption. His was the question: Given the present conditions, how does one go about evolving a system of political organization conducive to the gradual development of Taoist freedom? And he responded to this question with a political treatise that strives for the optimum degree of person freedom with the minimum degree of political constraint. Firstly, in a Kropotkin-like way,³⁸ he suggested that existing institutions be modified and adapted to achieve these ends. This would presumably provide the central court, having already been conditioned to the attractiveness of Taoist precepts, with a framework that would enable it to move towards their realization under a guarantee of continuing political stability. The state, the ruler, the bureaucracy

³⁷ See Paul Goodman, *Drawing the Line*, ed. Taylor Stoehr, p. xix.

³⁸ See Kropotkin’s *The State* (London: Free Press, rep. 1946).

The primacy of personal realization that is developed in “The Art of Rulership” chapter’s particular model of Taoist political organization is the defining feature of its entire political program. It is personal realization which is organismic in nature, extending out from the person to constitute the political organization as a whole.

Insofar as these Taoist texts provide us with some description of their projected non-coercive, non-authoritarian society, they satisfy the third necessary condition for a comprehensive anarchist theory.

The fourth and final condition concerns a prescribed method or program for moving from the present authoritarian reality to the non-authoritarian ideal. When it comes to practical, concrete measures that can be implemented and will be conducive to the achievement of the ideal state, the Taoist texts make their contributions in different ways. The *Lao Tzu* divides its attention between protesting against and attempting to discredit authoritarian government on the one hand, and establishing broad principles on the other. These principles are generally so vague and metaphorical that they seem to make little contact with practical conditions. How does one go about instituting a “government by non-government”? What does it mean for the ruler to adopt an attitude of “non-action (*wu-wei*)”? Here, however, as I have mentioned above, one must consider that the *Lao Tzu* is a collection of rhymed lecture topics to be given flesh in the discussion that they might inspire. A second point worth noting is that the *Lao Tzu* is specifically addressed to the ruler in power, and the message is that non-coercive, natural activity in the circulatory system of the social organism will be conducive to the natural growth and the health of each cell.

The *Chuang Tzu* has a position similar to the “millennialism” of Paul Goodman. This text concerns itself primarily with developing a metaphysically grounded conception of person. It assumes that the realization of this person will enable him to cope with the political disorder around him, and at the same

II. FOUR NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF ANARCHISM⁹

It would seem that most anarchist theorizing begins from metaphysical preconceptions with respect to human nature such that “freedom” is necessary to approach consummation. I say “preconception” because, more often than not, the operative notion of human nature is assumed rather than expressed. It would seem obvious that a conception of personhood and a clear idea as to how it is realized is a necessary starting point for the coherent articulation of an anarchist theory, and I suggest that the ambiguity, opacity and even inconsistency that characterizes so much of this political theory is due in good measure to a failure on the part of its advocates to analyze and to define clearly their preconceived notions of human nature, human realization and human freedom.

A second characteristic which is generally perceived to be the first principle of anarchism is the rejection of coercive authority, coercive authority being regarded as inimical to human realization. Anarchist theories tend to be negative in orientation, criticizing the “unnatural” authoritarian elements of existing society and its various hierarchical institutions rather than describing the positive unfolding of the “natural” order and speculating on its ultimate disposition. Anarchist theories are generally critical of all social, political and religious institutions that accept the subordination of the individual to another person, to a principle, to a law or regulation, or to a god.

A third characteristic of anarchist theory which follows directly from the first two is some notion of a noncoercive, non-authoritarian society realizable in the future, i.e., a working out of the anarchist’s rejection of coercive authority and his specu-

⁹ In preparing these conditions, I have benefited particularly from John P. Clark’s paper, “What is Anarchism?” cited above.

lations on its consequences. Anarchist theories usually assume the principle of natural order as an implicit feature of human nature, and regard a rejection of artificial and coercive order as a precondition for the expression of what is natural. It is with respect to this speculation on what happens when the coercive “stops” are removed that anarchist theorists seem to vary the most, ranging from the almost anti-social attitudes of Stirner grounded in his adoration of the individual to Proudhon and Bakunin’s acceptance and development of the principle of federalism as the best response to the necessity of organizational unity. Goodman’s observations that theories of “abstract society” are inconsistent with a coherent anarchist attitude are well taken, but even his “just human” society still presupposes the emergence of an always unique, desirable social order. Significantly, he quotes Chuang-Tzu to describe his conception of natural society: ‘To have an environment and not take it as object, is Tao.’¹⁰

The fourth and final characteristic of a comprehensive anarchist theory involves some attempt to authenticate theory in practice, i.e., a method or program of moving from the present authoritarian reality to the non-authoritarian ideal. These concrete measures involve both the dismantling of the authoritarian institutions and the implementation of workable alternatives. This methodology for translating ideal into real is frequently lacking in anarchist theory, and has left it vulnerable to the charge of utopianism and impracticability.

III. IS POLITICAL TAOISM ANARCHISM?

In this section, I shall attempt to determine the extent to which political Taoism satisfies the necessary conditions for a comprehensive anarchist theory. I shall rely upon three

¹⁰ Paul Goodman, *Little Prayers and Finite Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 39.

Nan Tzu’s political treatise, “The Art of Rulership”.³⁵ This concept of *yung-chung*, like most of the central themes in political treatise, was originally developed in the pre-Ch’in Legalist tradition. In *Han Fei Tzu*, *yung-chung* is a technique of rulership that regards the exploitation of the collective strength and intelligence of the people as a *means* that can be used to the specific end of controlling them and channeling their energies toward the advancement of the ruler’s interests. While this Han Fei Tzu conception of *yung-chung* must limit the extent of its utilization of the people to those talents and abilities that will further the ruler’s ends, “The Art of Rulership” treatise, giving primacy to universal personal realization, withdraws the interests of the ruler as a restriction on the extent to which individual talents can be encouraged. This radical departure from its Legalist antecedents is initiated and articulated by the introduction of the ancillary concept, *ke te ch’i yi* “each particular achieving what is appropriate to it”. The effective ruler is able to recognize the potentials of persons in his political sphere and to assign administrative responsibilities which are commensurate with these propensities.³⁶ Rather than the political administration’s determining the role of the person in its service, it is the unique capacities, interests and proclivities of the agglomerate of persons that determines the character and disposition of the state. The ruler functions in an organizational rather than authoritarian capacity, simply orchestrating the natural expression of the people and facilitating their collective realization. As it states in *Lao Tzu* 49:

The Sage is without a fixed mind,
And takes the mind of his people as his own.

³⁵ For a fuller discussion of *yung-chung*, see my paper “‘The Art of Rulership’ chapter of *Huai Nan Tzu: A Racticable Taoism*” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 8:2, June, 1981.

³⁶ See for example, *Huai Nan Tzu* 9/5b-6a. 9/8a.

If you nurture (the tao) in your person,
Your particular arising (*te*) will be genuine;
If you nurture it in your household.
Its particular arising will be more than enough;
If you nurture it in your neighborhood,
Its particular arising will be long enduring;
If you nurture it in your ate,
Its particular arising will be replete;
If you nurture it in the empire,
Its particular arising will be all-pervasive.

It is important to realize that there is no distinction in Taoist theory between “means” and “end”: the process of freely arising is itself the ideal societal disposition.

Political organization must begin from the bottom in the project of personal realization. This point is underscored in the *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tzu*'s insistence that only when a person cares more for his own person than he does for the empire can he be entrusted with the throne:

Therefore, only when one can govern the empire
with the same attitude as he esteems his own person
Can he be entrusted with the empire;
Only when one can govern the empire with the
same attitude as he loves his own person
Can he be commissioned with the empire.³⁴

While a sense of the primacy of personal realization can be gleaned from the *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tzu*, the notion is developed in a clear and very explicit way with the concept of *yung-chung* (“utilizing the people” that is developed in the *Huai*

³⁴ *Lao Tzu* 13, *Chuang Tzu* 26/11/13/ff.

sources to represent the Taoist philosophical tradition: the *Lao Tzu* (*Tao Te Ching*), *Chuang Tzu* and *Huai Nan Tzu*. While the first two works are generally familiar as composite texts probably dating from the fourth century B.C., the third work is a less familiar anthology that was presented to the Han court of Wu Ti probably circa 140 B.C.

Underlying most, if not all, Western anarchist theories is a conception of individual freedom. Gerald Runkle opens his book, *Anarchism Old and New* with the statement: “The essence of anarchism is individual liberty.”¹¹ Robert Paul Wolff takes human autonomy as the primary obligation of man: “The defining mark of the state is authority, the right to rule. The primary obligation of man is autonomy, the refusal to be ruled.”¹²

There are varying degrees of commitment to individual liberty, from a radical individualist such as Max Stirner who disavows any kind of a communal obligation: “We do not aspire to communal life but to life apart ...The people’s good fortune is my misfortune.”¹³ to the social anarchists such as Proudhon who reacted against Stirner. Daniel Guerin describes Proudhon’s work as: “...a search for a synthesis, or rather an “equilibrium” between concern for the individual and the interests of society, between individual power and collective power.”¹⁴

Common to both individualist and social anarchists alike, however, is a perceived tension between individual liberty and the collective will. In Taoism and in Chinese political thought generally, this tension does not exist.¹⁵ The metaphysics of organism provides a different basis on which to understand hu-

¹¹ Gerald Runkle, *Anarchism Old and New* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972), p. 3.

¹² Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 18.

¹³ Cited in Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 31.

¹⁵ This is true of Taoism and Confucianism, but the Legalist tradition is a very important exception.

man being such that the expression “individual” might well be ruled altogether inappropriate in describing a person. That is to say, the conception of person that is central to Taoist political thought is not the autonomous, discrete and discontinuous “atomistic” individual characteristic of the Western liberal tradition. In fact, it is precisely this limited, egocentric understanding of self that is rejected as the source and ground of human ignorance.¹⁶ In Taoism, a person, like any other particular, is understood as a matrix of relationships which can only be fully expressed by reference to the organismic whole :

...while we distinguish between a stalk and a beam, a leper and the classic beauty Hsi Shih, the *tao* unifies every weird and wonderful, strange and extraordinary thing as one. The discrimination of a thing is its actualization, and its actualization is its destruction. Now where things (in their suchness) are free of actualization and destruction, they are reunified as one. Only the enlightened person understands (this principle of) unifying as one... the cosmos — born simultaneously with me and the myriad things are one with me.¹⁷

Since all particulars are mutually defining and mutually determining, the liberal concept of person as a locus of inalienable rights is, on this understanding, inappropriate. Further, the organismic conception of existence permits a mutually determining relationship between the part and the whole (i.e., the individual and his society) which is not necessarily coercive. Person, community and nature are regarded as coextensive and correlative. And personal realization can

¹⁶ The rejection of ego-self is an important step in the project of self-realization. See *Chuang Tzu* 3/2/3 (*wu sang wo*), 2/1/21 (*chih jen wu chi*), etc. (*Harvard Yen-ching index*).

¹⁷ *Chuang Tzu* 4/2/35ff., 52.

structure and content of the ideal Taoist organization? In Western anarchist literature, much is made of the idea that society if organized at all must be organized from the bottom up rather than from the top down, organization that administers rather than governs.³³ Most commentators on Taoist political thought take the description of village society in *Lao Tzu* 80 and its elaboration in *Chuang Tzu* 25/10/30ff. as the *locus classicus* for an idealized Taoist political organization. From these passages, the following features can be listed:

1. The age in which these ideal “states (*kuo*)” existed had a series of political leaders (*Chuang Tzu* elaboration)
2. The empire was a collection of small states resembling small agrarian communes in size and occupation
3. These states were self-sufficient and their people were content
4. There was little or no intercourse between these states
5. They are characterized as having achieved “perfect order (*chih chih*)”

From *Lao Tzu* 54 it appears that the *tao* (i.e., the process of freely becoming) is cultivated in the person and extended to his household, neighborhood, state and to the empire at large:

³³ See a discurdan of this in Guerin, *ibid.* pp. 60–1 (Bakunin) and pp. 63–66 (Proudhon and Bakunin’s federalism).

has its own *conatus*, and as such, is self-construing. However, inasmuch as particulars are interdependent, this self-construal also contributes to the emergence and definition of other particulars, and ultimately, to the whole. That is, just as the cell in defining itself helps to define the organism, so the organism gives context and meaning (ie., organization) to the particular cell.

Now, although Taoist political theory does accept the notion of ruler and some political organization as a natural condition, it also carries on the same sustained opposition to authoritarian rule that is so familiar in Western anarchist literature. Much of the *Lao Tzu* reveals the contradiction implicit in the notion of “enforcing” order:

The more restrictions and prohibitions in the empire,
The deeper will the people sink into destitution;
The more sharp weapons owned by the court,
The deeper will the nation sink into disorder..
The more overt the laws and decrees,
The more prevalent will be the thieves and brigands..
When the government is dull and sluggish,
The people will be simple and sincere;
But when the government is alert and vigilant,
The people will be cunning and designing.³²

Given that a considerable proportion of Taoist literature is devoted to a criticism of coercive authority, it can be said to satisfy our second condition.

The third characteristic of a comprehensive anarchist theory is some notion of a non-coercive, non-authoritarian societal disposition approachable in the future as the direct result of the uninhibited development of human nature. What is the

³² *Lao Tzu* 57 and 58.

only be achieved through fit an awareness of one’s cell-like relationship to the organic whole, and then an authentication of this awareness in the way one lives. The *Chuang Tzu*’s central concept of awareness in the way one lives. The *Chuang Tzu*’s central concept of “making things equal (*ch’i wu*)”¹⁸ expresses the idea that all existents have their function and their value in the process of reality, and that all are necessary for existence to be what it is. The notion that any one of these things, devoid of its historical and immediate relationships with everything else, has individual sovereignty and can labor singly towards its own fulfillment is inconsistent with Taoist metaphysics.

Given that the starting point of person in Taoism is so very different from its Western counterpart, it follows that the notion of personal freedom is also different. Whereas personal freedom and ideal action in Western anarchist theory have to do with unmediated self-determination and the uninhibited expression of one’s own intrinsic character, in Taoism freedom (variously referred to as *wu-wei*, *hsiao-yao-yu*) is the unconditioned freedom won in recognizing the arbitrary and relative nature of all distinctions, in understanding the ultimate absence of self-nature (i.e., “one’s own intrinsic character”),¹⁹ and in being able to comprehend the notion that the full consequence of any one thing is the whole (ie., the tao). With the freedom from the perspectivity and conditionality of the relative self comes the recognition that all conventional values are also a function of perspective, and, as such, have no absolute authority. This freedom enables the particular person to develop spontaneously in accordance with his unique relationship to everybody and everything else.

Although Western anarchist theories and Taoist political thought have radically different conceptions of the nature of

¹⁸ See *Chuang Tzu* Chapter 2 passim.

¹⁹ See *Chuang Tzu* 2/1/21, 43/17/28.

human being, human realization and the meaning of freedom, both share in the conviction that the realization of human being lies in the achievement of freedom. The Taoist correlation between human consummation and its notion of freedom is clearly expressed in the terms that it has selected to re-resent its free person: the *chen jen* or True/Real Person and the *chih jen* or Realizing Person. With respect to this first characteristic of a comprehensive anarchism, Taoist theory would seem to go beyond its Western counterparts in several important ways. First, the Taoist conception of person is derived from a clearly articulated metaphysical position. Second, in the *Chuang Tzu* there is a very real attempt to make the conception of person explicit. Much of the *Chuang Tzu* is devoted to a discussion of what it means to cultivate human possibilities and the articulation of a method for pursuing this cultivation. And finally, the concept of human freedom is a central theme in the text. Inasmuch as political Taoism starts from a conception of human being such that his consummation is approached via freedom, it satisfies the first condition for an anarchist theory.

The second condition, a rejection of coercive authority, is also satisfied by reference to the Taoist notion of *wu-wei*. The philological similarities between “anarchism” and “*wu-wei*” as terms used to characterize these political doctrines are striking:

avapxia: lack of a leader (archon), the state of a people without government; apxia refers to rule or authority.

wu-wei: lack of *wei*, where *wei* refers to artificial, contrived activity that interferes with natural and spontaneous development. In a practical sense, *wei* refers to the imposition of authority.

A fuller explanation of *wu-wei* is given in the *Huai Nan Tzu* with its important political connotations:

Or do they alternate in being ruler and subject?
Is there some True Ruler existing in all of them?
Whether we come to terms with its conditions or
not, it neither add to nor detracts from its reality.²⁹

The points being made in this passage are:

1. the heart is conventionally regarded as the “ruler”
2. the heart has a specific function as do the other organs and parts of the body
3. interdependent, the various parts of the body are symbiotically interdependent such that, although convention identifies a “ruler”, the only true ruler is the organism itself in its entirety.

It seems to me that Western anarchist theories are weakened by their frequently unconscious commitment to the idea of atomic individuality. This preconceived and assumed interpretation of person is manifest in the choice between either radical individual autonomy or the sacrifice of this individuality in communal consciousness. Paul Goodman, for example, is an advocate of personal autonomy: “For me, the chief principle of anarchism is not freedom but autonomy, the ability to initiate a task and do it in one’s own way.”³⁰ This commitment to autonomy derives from his expressed belief that any movement towards central organization is necessarily an abstraction, and that “the best of young dissidents disown abstract society.”³¹ If one assumes an organismic paradigm, however, the part relates to the whole not in an abstract but in a concrete way. Some form of non-coercive central organization as found in Taoist theory is possible. Certainly, each “particular”

²⁹ Chuang Tzu 4/2/16ff.

³⁰ Paul Goodman, *Little Prayers and Finite Experience*, p. 47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

And the *Chuang Tzu* also makes mention of enlightened rulership where *wu-wei* is accepted as the fundamental political principle:

Thus, if the consummate person has no choice but to manage the empire, it is best for him to follow a policy of *wu-wei*. Where there is *wu-wei*, then there will be contentment in natural and spontaneous development. Therefore, when a person values his own person more than governing the empire, he can be entrusted with the empire. Where a person loves his own person more than governing the empire, he can be given the empire... [The consummate person's] spirit following the lead of nature, he is unhurried and relaxed in *wu-wei*. and the myriad things are just motes of dust in the sunlight. And he will say, "What time do I have for governing the empire!"²⁷

While the notion of "giving up the throne" occurs frequently in the Taoist literature,²⁸ there is never any talk of "doing away with the throne". There is a passage in the *Chuang Tzu* which, using the body as a metaphor, is particularly effective in understanding the perceived role of a ruler in the society:

Now, I am equipped with and maintain the various bones, nine orifices and six internal organs of my body. Which of these should I feel a particular intimacy with? Should one take pleasure in all of them? Or does one have a favorite among them? If this is the case, does it have the rest of them as subjects? Can its subjects not govern other properly?

²⁷ *Chuang Tzu* 26/11/13ff.

²⁸ For example, *Chuang Tzu* 2/1/22, 27/11/33, 75/26/46, 76/28/1, *Huai Nan Tzu* 20/7a. See also Hsiao Kung-ch'uaa, *ibid.*, pp. 308ff. for a discussion of this.

Quiescently, he (the sage-ruler) does not do, yet all is done; impressively he does not impose order, yet all is properly ordered. "Does not do" means not taking precedence over other things in what one does; "all is done" means accommodating what other things do; "does not impose order" means not changing what is so-of-itself; "all is properly ordered" means accommodating the natural integration of things.²⁰

The expression *wu-wei* cannot be used to describe the ideal for individual action inasmuch as it refers to a relationship obtaining between things. It is the negation of the authoritarian determination of one thing by another. Metaphysically, it is the negation of teleological purpose, divine design, Providence; on the political level, it is the negation of impositional, dictatorial authority. It describes the attitude of personal freedom in the Taoist political scheme. significantly, *wu-wei* is an alternative way of saying *tzu-jan*, commonly translated as "natural" or "spontaneous", but perhaps more adequately rendered "self-soing" or "spontaneous natural arising". That is to say, it is a term that expresses both the repudiation of any artificially imposed order and a compliance with the natural order. As it states in the *Chuang Tzu*, "To do something in accordance with *wu-wei* is called natural."²¹ *Wu-wei* is used to characterize the action of the realizing person in his relationship to both the human and the natural environments: "The sage is attentive to the beauty of the world around him and comprehends the principles of the myriad things. Thus, the Realizing Person is *wu-wei*, the Great Sage does not do. This is what is meant by "observing the world around you."²² The "natural" and "spontaneous" connotations of *wu-wei* enable us to align Taoism with Western

²⁰ *Huai Nan Tzu* (Ssu-pu tsung-k'an) 1/9a.

²¹ *Chuang Tzu* 29/12/7.

²² *Ibid.*, 58/22/18.

anarchist theorists such as Proudhon²³ and Colin Ward²⁴ who argue explicitly 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.

An important difference between Taoist political thought and Western anarchist theory is that Taoism, with its conception of the correlativity between person and state, does not reject the state as an *artificial* structure, but rather sees the state as a *natural* institution, analogous perhaps to the family.²⁵ The *Lao Tzu* certainly rejects coercive rule and authoritarian government, but importantly, devotes considerable attention to non-coercive and non-authoritarian organization under the aegis of the *Sage-king*. This conception of state as a natural institution is implicit in *Lao Tzu* 17:

The most excellent ruler-the people do not know
that he exists;
The second most excellent-they love and praise
him;
The next-they fear him;
And the worst-they look on him with contempt.
When the integrity (of the ruler) is inadequate,
There will be those who do not trust him.
Relaxed, he (the ideal ruler) prizes his words.
When his accomplishments are complete and the
affairs of state are in order,
The common people all say, 'We are naturally like
this.'

²³ See Guerin, *ibid.*, pp. 42ff. for a discussion of Proudhon, Malatesta and Voline.

²⁴ Colin Ward, "The Organization of Anarchy" in *Patterns of Anarchy*, ed. L. Krimmerman and L. Perry, New York: Anchor Books, 1966, p. 387.

²⁵ Hsiao Kung-ch'uan, *ibid.*, also makes this point in his discussion of the political philosophies of *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tzu*.

This idea that the state naturally exists is also assumed in *Lao Tzu* 29:

It cannot be deliberately governed and cannot be grasped;
Those who deliberately govern it spoil it, and those who grasp it lose it.
Therefore, the Sage does not govern deliberately (ie., is *wu-wei*) and consequently does not spoil it.
He does not grasp it and consequently does not lose it.²⁶

Natural action on the part of the ruler is possible with a conception of state where he has a specific organizational and administrative function rather than a controlling, authoritarian role. The *Huai Nan Tzu* 1/15a describes rulership, making this contrast between natural order and the wielding of authority :

The empire is something which I possess, and I also am something which the empire possesses. How could there exist some gap between the empire and me! Why must "possessing the empire" mean collecting authority, grasping onto political advantage and manipulating the lever of life and death to effect one's edicts and commands? This is not what I mean by "possessing the empire". Quite simply what I mean is self-realization. If I realize myself then the empire also realizes me. If the empire and I realize each other, then we will always possess each other. Again, how could there possibly be any distance between us?

²⁶ I have rearranged this chapter on the basis of Hsi T'ung's commentary (*Lao-tzu chi-chieh*) . For a discussion of this chapter, see *Lao Tzu : Text, Notes and Comments* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, Inc., 1977), trans. R. Young, R. Ames, pp. 159ff.