# Introduction

## Lao-Zhuang Daoism: An Introduction

This book presents an iconoclastic account of morality and moral discourse from the perspective of Daoist philosophy. Such a project needs to be iconoclastic because the Daoist texts likewise present an incredibly novel philosophical mode of thinking that is unique in how it critiques the political and philosophical discourses of its time. The texts are highly poetic and at times ambiguous with their meaning. Part of that ambiguity, as this book argues, has to do with the iconoclastic character of Daoist philosophy. For the typical moral philosopher, there are claims throughout the Daoist texts that will seem either dubious or inconsistent with other lessons presented. What the Daoist philosopher invites the reader to do more than anything else is to question the efficacy and validity of the moral discourses of their own cultures. What at first might sound like either mere moral skepticism or moral relativism is in fact a far more nuanced critique of how the moral discourses of their contemporaries (and of moral discourse generally) are guilty of the very same practices that these discourses condemn. The moral theorist is often merely helping to normalize and legitimize coercive and oppressive social practices. The Daoist alternative to the morality espoused by their counterparts does not lead to moral chaos. Instead, in radically breaking away from the misguided epistemology of their counterparts, the Daoist framework helps to provide solutions to the same social ills that the Confucians, Mohists, and other philosophers cannot address.

This monograph defends the Daoist understanding of social and political reality. From their perspective, there are no such things as "moral facts," morality does not need to appeal to "principles," and the



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world would be better off without the "question-begging" metaphysical framework of the moral philosopher. What the Daoist proposes is that we cultivate certain dispositions or sensitivities to act and react to situations. In becoming free of the epistemological framework that the Daoist critiques, people can be said to maintain a naturalness that enables them to spontaneously respond to situations in a noncoercive manner. They thereby achieve a greater level of freedom; a freedom that is nonetheless grounded and situated in the precarious natural world of conditioned and conditioning interrelationships. Such cultivated freedom takes them beyond the coercive ideals of the "sages" and "criminals" that the Daoist describes in their works. It is a position that is *beyond* the traditional distinction between objectivism and relativism that philosophers still insist on framing their ideas within. Properly understanding the Daoist texts will involve seeing how the moral philosopher and the "moral attitude" are, in fact, contributing to the very same coercive behaviors they have reason to critique. The Daoist's naturalism promises to bring about a more harmonious and desirable world than the philosopher who insists on clinging to nonnaturalistic metaphysical assumptions.

Philosophical Daoism is one of the three main philosophical and religious traditions in China along with Confucianism and Buddhism and is one of the main schools of philosophy that emerged in what was called the "Hundred Schools of Thought" (*zhuzi baijia*, 諸子百家) during both the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (6th century BC to 221 BC). There is a wealth of scholarship written on Daoism in both the West and China, and there are diverse interpretations of the tradition. With interpretations ranging from mysticism, skepticism, and relativism (and many more), anyone familiar with the scholarship on Daoist philosophy will be familiar with the difficulties that come with studying these texts. Although there are other philosophical and religious treatises that are rightfully labeled "Daoist," this book focuses on the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the traditional commentaries on each of these texts. There are scholars who might take issue with grouping these two texts together as their respective content diverges from each other at times. With any reading of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* that tries to make sense of how these texts present a single philosophical worldview, there will always be passages and chapters of these texts that are harder to present as consistent with the rest.[1] This book follows the traditional grouping in considering the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* to represent a particular strain of thinking that has been called "Lao-Zhuang Daoism."

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In exploring the Daoist texts, this book also highlights the important commonalities between them.

Throughout both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, there are claims that sound like moral relativism and others that sound like "amorality" or the refusal to even use a moral vocabulary when discussing the human condition. There are also numerous passages that discuss how greed and having too many desires is antithetical to Dao or "the way." Recognizing these features of nature and human social life then leads to the capacity to care for and nurture things like a mother or in a way similar to how rainwater tends to nourish life equally and impartially. In other words, the moral relativity and amorality are viewed, by the Daoist, as compatible with frugality, altruism, and an impartial yet motherly care towards all things. These themes, among many others, are prevalent throughout both of these texts. Although it might seem like amorality, moral relativism, the absence of desires and motherly care should be considered distinct and even conflicting positions, there is a logic underlying these ideas that helps to explain their relationship. Ultimately, it is the Lao-Zhuang Daoist's understanding of nature, persons, and their relationship that unite these different positions. What is required is that scholars exhaustively understand the Daoist account of how all things of nature are, at the most fundamental level, interdependent, overlapping, and "indeterminate" or *wu* (無). For the remainder of this book, I refer to this position simply as "Daoism." Although there are other interpretations of both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* (namely, the religious form of Daoism), the naturalistic account of these texts is the one that most adequately accommodates and explains each of these diverging aspects of the Daoist view on morality: its amorality, its recognition of the relativity of all perspectives, greed as being the root source of social ills, and the motherly care of the sage. We can make sense of the Daoist position in light of their naturalistic metaphysics.

## The *Daodejing*: An Introduction to Its Complexity

Before moving forward, it will be useful to see exactly what aspects of Daoist philosophy can potentially be viewed as contradictory philosophical positions. What this book aims to do is show how they are all in fact one and the same philosophical position when viewed in light of an embodied account of experience and a processual metaphysics. For

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those unfamiliar with the *Daodejing*, readers might notice these (*seemingly*) diverging themes in the first ten passages. As *Daodejing* passage 2 suggests, the value judgments of the "good" and the "beautiful" are both relative and dependent on their opposites; the "bad" and the "ugly." "When all under heaven knows the 'beautiful' as being beautiful, thus there is already foulness. When all know the 'good' as being good, thus there is already the 'not good.' Thus, the 'determinate' (*you*, 有) and the 'indeterminate' (*wu*, 無) mutually generate each other [*xiang sheng*, 相生]."[2] In this passage, the Daoist suggests that when society can name and determine the "beautiful" and the "good," such a determination was necessarily done through the *exclusion* of that which is "undetermined." The process of determining what is of value, especially after everyone knows this particular way of determining value, can end up being highly coercive. If "all under heaven" knows to value certain features of nature, then they have already become habituated with negative attitudes towards that which is "not good." These attitudes have become ossified and reinforced by cultural institutions. What the Daoist is critical of here is a bivalent, either/or account of values. Because value is always a product of context and perspective, no aspect of experience should be understood as being of value or disvalue in a final or complete sense. That which is individuated out of a context, *you*, is inseparable from its opposite, *wu*. The point is not to simply relativize the distinction between that which is "good" and that which is "not good." The very attitude that clings to values as if they were "fixed" is itself highly problematic. When framed through such a strict dualism, conduct at the extremes reverts and reverses into the opposite extreme. What is implied here (and what will be clarified further in this book), is that conduct that was initially deemed to be of value tends to revert and function like that which was deemed to be "not good" when we become "fixed" on said values. For the Daoist, each distinction is made within the context of the indeterminate (*wu*). Consciousness does not experience a world that is already made of distinct and definite things. All forms of possible experience are contextualized by the indeterminate and immediate (unmediated) field of experience. The experience of any *you* or "being" is always a function of the background, *wu*. The determined (*you*) is *internally related to* and *constituted by* the indeterminate (*wu*). Chapter 4 of this book will cover both the metaphysics and epistemology underlying this naturalistic account of experience more.

What is perhaps most worrying for some philosophers is the idea that the "good" and the "not-good" mutually generate each other (*xiang*

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*sheng*, 相生). Similar claims can be found in *Daodejing* passage 5. "Heaven and Earth are not humane. They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane (*ren*, 仁). He regards all the people as straw dogs. The space between heaven and earth—Does it not resemble a bellows? Empty, but not consumed, the more it is moved, the more comes out. Hearing a lot, investigating much—this is not as good as holding on to the center."[3] The picture of the universe that the Daoist is presenting does not sound like one hospitable to moral concerns. In light of Confucian philosophy, the passage suggests that the natural world or "heaven" (*tian*, 天) does not reward or punish behavior. Nature is impartial towards the affairs and activities of humans and is not "benevolent" (the central Confucian virtue). Following the claim that the cosmos does not necessarily involve a "moral order," the passage continues with a description of the natural world likened to an "empty bellows." The natural world as empty can continuously fill up and animate things. Although "heaven and earth are not humane," the passage ends with a prescription: safeguarding or "holding on to the center" (*zhong*, 中). The Daoist provides a description of nature and a prescription ("holding to the center") that, one can assume, is derived from their understanding of nature. As Hans-Georg Moeller describes it, from the "Daoist perspective, however, to 'hold to the center' is more effective. The sage has to stay calm at the center of society just as the hub stays unmoved at the center of the wheel."[4] Philosophers might view this as inconsistent; a natural world devoid of a "moral order" and yet the Daoist is still prescribing and evaluating different forms of human conduct.

It gets even stranger. *Daodejing* passage 7 suggests that the Daoist sage is altruistic. "Heaven is long lasting and earth is enduring. That which is why heaven and earth are capable of longevity and also enduring, it is by means of their not living for themselves, thus they are capable of long life. Therefore, the Sage puts their own body behind them [i.e., out of sight] yet their body is first; puts their own body outside them [i.e., out of mind] yet the body is sustained. Is it not by means of their being without 'self-interest' (無私)? Thus, they are capable of completing their 'self-interest' " (私).[5] Earlier, the *Daodejing* claimed that "Heaven and earth are not humane." Now, it suggests that the sage is "enduring and long-lasting" because they "do not live for themselves." The people that do not live for themselves, that is, "puts their own body behind them [i.e., out of sight] yet their body is first" end up as the people that can endure. The person that puts "their own body outside them [i.e., out of mind]" is the

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one that can "sustain their own body." As Wang Bi's comments describe it, "To be utterly free of self-interest [*wusi*] means to make no conscious effort for one's own sake. Such a person will always find himself in front and his person preserved."[6] The Daoist sounds like they are describing a kind of altruism, yet how can we arrive at a prescription such as altruism without anything like a "moral order"?

Related to this are claims in the *Daodejing* that condemn extravagant wealth and greed. As *Daodejing* 9 claims, "To pile it up and to fill it is not as good as ending it. By forging and sharpening it you cannot keep it for long. A room full of gold and jade—no one can guard it. To be esteemed, wealthy, and proud, is to draw misfortune to oneself. To withdraw oneself when the work proceeds—this is the Dao of Heaven."[7] If all things, good and bad, are relative and simultaneously generated, and if "heaven and earth are not humane," why does the *Daodejing* describe the "way of heaven" (天之道) as involving the capacity to know moderation? Like *Daodejing* passage 5, the Daoist sage is described as not having overextended. Moving far away from the "center" is one way that nonvirtuous behavior is understood. Other examples of Daoist virtue that also appeal to a "center" metaphor include the capacity to sit in the center hub of the "hinge of Dao" (*Daoshu*, 道樞) and to "reflect all things in an unadulterated way, like a mirror" (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 7).

For some readers, it will not be obvious how the Daoist could be consistent when making these different claims. What *Daodejing* 9 suggests, as is also the case in *Daodejing* 7, is that to be "esteemed, wealthy, and proud" is antithetical to being a Daoist sage. Thus, like *Daodejing* 5 suggests, we can consider these to be antithetical to dwelling in the "empty center." In light of these passages, what the Daoist is describing is how different manifestations of egoism, although subtle in their moralist forms, become self-undermining and are susceptible to reverting to their opposite extreme. Far from being inconsistent positions, the Daoist's process metaphysics helps to elucidate how these distinct features of Daoist philosophy form a coherent position.

Although philosophers informed by Western metaphysical assumptions might not believe these different ideas are consistent with each other, there is a rather simple solution that unites these many different positions. The Daoist account of nature and experience is critical of what can be called a "substance ontology." Such a metaphysics assumes that each "thing" has an underlying essential or substantial core. A substance account of the individuation of things assumes that each particular thing

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is ultimately independent. A substance, like an essence, does not change regardless of the particular relationships that the "thing" possesses, and each "thing," as a substance, takes precedence to their relationships. As Franklin Perkins' essay, "What Is a Thing (wu 物)?," concludes, because the Daoist had a radically different understanding of how things are individuated, "what is perhaps most striking, though, is how individuation becomes an issue not just for metaphysics and epistemology but also for self-cultivation, for ethics in the broad sense. It is not just that the basic metaphysical assumptions in early China differed from those of most Europeans. This difference shifted the very boundary between metaphysics and ethics."[8] The usual divisions that Western philosophy draws between ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology also need to be re-evaluated in light of Daoist metaphysics. The Daoist account of the ethical life (practice and cultivation) is indebted to a processual understanding of nature that collapses the rigid distinction between metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology. As this book illustrates, the *seemingly* divergent ethical positions of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are in fact the same if we can see them as indebted to a critique of a substance individuation of things or what is called a "substance ontology."

## Daoism as beyond Objectivism and Relativism

There is a tendency in contemporary moral philosophy to frame the problems of morality and human flourishing within a particular metaphysical framework. Making sense of the Daoist's account of morality will require we understand how Daoism diverges from Western notions of individualism and a substance ontology. As this book aims to clarify, the Daoist understanding of the self is a relational self. All things of nature are interdependent and conditioned by their world. With the Daoist's naturalism, there is no sui generis, "in-itself," capacity or power that people can tap into that allows them to transcend their conditioned and embodied existence. Philosophers operating within the usual metaphysical framework, after hearing such claims, generally find them to be problematic and even morally suspect. For the philosopher operating in such a question-begging framework, a relational self and an account of nature as involving "internal relationships" (that is, that the relationships between different aspects of nature are *internal* to each other and things *constitute* each other to various degrees[9]) spells nothing but "anything-goes

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relativism" and "moral subjectivism." With "anything-goes relativism," no "meta" value or unconditioned reality exists that persons can appeal to when deliberating about the nature or accuracy of the values that are held by different persons or communities. In "moral subjectivism," values are the mere choices of each individual, and any set of values is just as good as any other. Both of these positions imply that there is no real force or "reason" to act in ways that are usually considered moral or contrary to arbitrary force, selfish desire, or what we would generally call "unethical" behavior. The framework for both models assumes that persons are most fundamentally independent (i.e., they are "substances"). They are bodies filled with desires and perhaps other morally suspect features of a thing called "human nature." If there are not things like "moral facts," a transcendent god, or other unconditional realities that human beings can appeal to, these independent subjects are not bound to each other politically or morally. Humans have no obligations towards each other; therefore, all the worse crimes that humans have committed are not condemnable. This model presents us with an "either/or" situation. Either such realities exist, or "anything goes." The problem is that both sides of the "either/or" are grounded in question-begging assumptions that no critical human being should take seriously in the modern world. That this discipline of philosophy, a discipline that prides itself on being the most rigorous and "scientific" of the humanities, has continued to frame their problems along these lines, testifies to an intellectual laziness that serves to defend a backward status quo (or an example of *disciplinary decadence*).[10] With a relational understanding of the self, where selves are *internally related* to their world, where selves are both *constituted by* and *constituting* their environments, the independent self of the "anything goes" relativist and the "moral subjectivist" is literally made into an unreality. There is no such thing as "anything-goes relativism" because the kinds of *beings* that such a relativism relies on do not exist. Within a processual framework, like the one we find in Chinese philosophy, most forms of Buddhism, and in some Western philosophy (such as the American pragmatists), both sides of the "either/or" are shown to be illusory. Philosophers operating in the traditional objectivism versus relativism framework are operating in an inaccurate account of social and political reality.

The above situation in modern moral philosophy highlights another problem that scholars encounter when doing work on Daoist philosophy, another problem this book endeavors to address. This book illuminates how the Daoist position involves a transition *beyond objectivism and*

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*relativism*. Within a processual framework, neither of these positions (as they are traditionally understood) presents philosophers with an accurate framework for understanding their world. Comparative philosophers and American pragmatists have previously made similar arguments. For example, Ma Lin and Jaap Van der Braak have provided an account of the *Zhuangzi* that they believe helps us to get beyond the traditional framework outlined above. As they argue in *Beyond the Troubled Waters of Shi/Fei*, they critique the idea that there must be one single "ideal language" that all other languages can be translated into. "While arguing for these preconditions and constraints, we emphatically deny the need for the ideal language assumption, the requirement of a common language, or the presupposition of a large number of universals shared by all humanity. Dropping these assumptions allows us to dissolve the 'either universalism or relativism' issue, and to replace it by the family-resemblance-principle and the construction of quasi-universals."[11] In their study, they draw on philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hilary Putnam to outline their own solution to this dilemma. Ma and Van der Braak's position beyond objectivism and relativism involves embodying certain dispositions or epistemological attitudes they refer to as "stances."[12] In *Natural Moralities*, David Wong likewise suggests that we need to reject the traditional, "either/or dualism" between moral objectivism and radical moral subjectivism. Wong states that "the entirely justifiable desire to refute radical subjectivism should not move us toward the traditional view [i.e., "objectivism"]. What we need are plausible alternatives to these equally untenable views."[13] What Wong suggests, an insight that is shared by the Daoists of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, is that the framework itself and the arguments shaped by such a framework might be undermining the aims and goals of the moral theorists. After suggesting that we do not need to ground "rights" with the traditional notion of *autonomy*, Wong states:

> It is presumptuous to assume that others can make moral progress only if they adopt Western liberal values. It also is mistaken from a strategic viewpoint if one is truly interested in promoting some of the same protections and opportunities for individuals that are required by those same Western values. A plurality of adequate moralities prohibits cruelty and self-interested domination. On the other side, many institutionalized rights-centered moralities rightly receive criticism for their lack

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> of community, but one need not be a Confucian to recognize the force of such criticism.[14]

As this project outlines, the Daoist provides reasons for prohibiting cruelty and self-interested domination. They just provide a further, more critical account of the cruelty that can be justified and normalized through a rarefied moral discourse, the "moral attitude," and nonnaturalistic metaphysical assumptions. Richard Bernstein, in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, and Mark Johnson, in *Morality for Humans*, have also presented theoretical alternatives to the traditional framework of moral philosophers.[15] Building on how these philosophers have analyzed this key issue, there is another, more important way of stating their case. If a philosopher insists that they are providing a philosophical framework that can get us *beyond* objectivism and relativism, then they are also claiming that the framework can outline particular constraints on values, forms of life, and human conduct that are not desirable, valuable and/or based on ignorance. Within the framework beyond objectivism and relativism, we can outline how and why certain forms of life are either ignorant or of no real value or desirability. As this book aims to show, a processual framework both entails a radically different understanding of values and provides a new way of thinking about the constraints on values.

From the Daoist perspective, there is a difference between two distinct forms of life that, on the one hand, involve achieving and understanding value and the nature of value and, on the other hand, forms of life that we can call ignorant or of disvalue and are inherently undesirable. The forms of life that form greater coherence with the world are forms of life that can be said to involve a degree of *attunement* to situations.[16] As this book outlines, we should see attunement as a cultivated sensitivity towards the novelty and particularity of nature and change. It is an attunement to the concrete relationships that constitute human experience. The critical features of Daoism then come to the foreground when we try to understand why the Daoist is critical of the forms of experience that involve a lack of attunement. Whether it be the accumulation of "desires" (*yu*, 欲) or "knowledge" (*zhi*, 知), people maintain a form of ignorance when they cannot perceive nature as fundamentally indeterminate. This book refers to these forms of life as involving *alienation*. Due to how human society enculturates its population with problematic "desires" or "knowledge," the population learns to view the world through an epistemological framework that inhibits them from being attuned to their world where attunement

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would otherwise have been their naturally endowed spontaneity. The Daoists' critique of their philosophical and cultural contemporaries can be understood best as a critique of how particular cultural beliefs (like the reification of values and human relationships) inhibit the community from developing the ability to understand the reasons behind social ills. This further inhibits them from achieving and sustaining forms of life that are actually valuable and desirable. In other words, a substance metaphysics and the reification of "things" and "values" contributes to the formation of an epistemological framework that occludes aspects of experience important for understanding our world. The amorality of the Daoist can then be better understood as a critique of how the two extreme moral positions (moral objectivism and moral subjectivism) end up behaving like each other (as I clarify in chapters 5 and 6). Both moral philosophers and those they criticize are, from the Daoist perspective, equally alienated from nature and their fellow human beings. The Daoist critique of the "moral attitude" is indebted to their understanding of nature as being constituted by overlapping, interdependent processes. From a processual framework, we can outline why moral objectivism and morality indebted to nonnaturalistic metaphysics is as equally problematic as the egoist's attitude. To borrow the terminology from the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 8, both the sages (i.e., moral fundamentalist) and the thieves (i.e., moral subjectivist) are operating within a problematic epistemological framework. Their framework only helps to perpetuate the same coercive social and political practices. Both extreme positions suffer from alienation from nature and their fellow human beings because they both reduce complex systems of relationships to things like substances.

## "Those Who Act Ruin It": The Daoist Alternative to Moral Fundamentalism

The Daoist sage is frequently described in unconventional ways throughout the Daoist texts. These descriptions of the Daoist sage present philosophers with a radically different account of ethics and moral philosophy; so much so that, from the Daoist perspective, the typical practices of the moral philosopher should be viewed with suspicion. As this book further clarifies, the Daoist is highly critical of the idea that rule following or being purposive in one's conduct is a good idea. Karyn Lai's analysis of Daoism has previously argued this point as well. She states that the

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"[Daoist] ethic is not presented in terms of norms, rules, or principles. It is an other-regarding attitude and in that sense we may say that it is *more fundamental* than these other manifestations of ethical commitment" (my italics).[17] The Daoist sage is frequently described as possessing the capacity to perceive the world with greater sensitivity and their capacity to do so is because they are cultivating habits that are *more fundamental* to human perception than those associated with thinking and the formation of concepts. Lai elaborates on this point elsewhere: "The application of predefined absolute norms, indiscriminately and without consideration for the numerous morally significant particulars in each situation is rejected in Daoist thought. [. . .] The methodology suggested here recommends a fundamental way of seeing things and understanding situations and individuals that is not primarily goal-, rule- or outcome-driven. It is an ethically sensitive response that focuses on the fragility and spontaneity of interdependent individuals."[18]

The fragility that Lai references is that of the Daoist's responsiveness to situations that the term *rouruo* (柔弱) denotes in the *Daodejing*. The Daoist, as embodying a kind of "fragility," presents us with an alternative to the rule- and goal-oriented moral philosophers and the core assumptions of their metaphysical framework. Building on Lai's arguments, this book argues that conduct that is primarily goal, rule, or outcome driven is morally and epistemologically suspect. Such ways of being predisposed to situations are contrary to the Daoist sage's ability to perceive the world with greater sensitivity and receptiveness. It is not just that goal- and rule-oriented conduct is problematic. What is really being critiqued is conduct where the habits of thinking and concept formation within experience function as obstructions to perception. This leads to the inability to respond to and understand situations.

This is not at all to suggest that rationality and "reason" are intrinsically bad, leading then to a further argument that other, alternative human capacities are *solely* what we need for human flourishing. This book outlines, from the Daoist perspective, how certain instrumentalities (i.e., "language" and "concepts") *can* end up inhibiting and obstructing attention. That is *not* a claim that we should no longer think, use concepts or language. Indeed, if a scholar wanted to make that argument, they would just call Daoism a kind of "mysticism" or "Gnosticism" (which this book's thesis explicitly rejects). As instrumentalities, concepts can potentially be used poorly. When we lack the proper cultivation of *other* human potentials, being led merely by "reason" becomes highly coercive and alienating.

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The human capacities to reason, perceive, and feel emotion all form a continuum where none can be said to inherently stand opposed to the others. It is only because of our *miseducation* and lack of cultivation that the different human capacities no longer function together in a harmonious way. In this sense, "reason" is suspect when it is no longer grounded in the somatic, perceptual, and emotional aspects of experience. When we look at the cultivation practices of Daoism, this is precisely the issue Daoists are trying to address; how and why is perception of situations obstructed and *what* is obstructing it? When persons interpret their world through problematic metaphysical assumptions, we can consider them to be operating within an epistemological framework that inhibits their sensitivity to situations. This is the logic underlying who and what the Daoist critiques. From the Daoist perspective, certain cultural and political institutions help to reproduce the same ignorant dispositions in people. As chapter 5 of this monograph further elaborates, we can consider this ignorance to be a form of *perceptual alienation* as it involves an inability to perceive that nature forms a continuous whole. Alienation involves an inability to recognize our interdependence and continuity with nature and the wider human community.

From the Daoist perspective, their philosophical counterparts are operating within a misguided epistemological framework. They are thus ignorantly perpetuating the same patterns of behavior they had hoped to ameliorate. Another way of putting this, as the *Daodejing* states perfectly, is that "those who act ruin it" (*wei zhe bai zhi*, 為者敗之). If scholars were tasked with presenting one single line of text that encapsulated the Daoist account of moral life and their critique of their philosophical contemporaries, this should be it. The Daoist ideal of *wuwei* or of being "without action" is not the literal absence of *all* action by the Daoist sage. In the Daoist texts, *wei* (為), or being "with purposive conduct," is used to specifically denote *coercive* forms of conduct. Conduct becomes coercive because persons embody dispositions that are indebted to an epistemological framework that reduces complex systems of interdependence to substances or independent things. Such a perspective fails to be sensitive to experience in all of its other qualities. Alternatively, we could say that "those who act" (為者) or those persons who act with "conduct" (為) are "imposing" in their conduct because they possess self-referential "standards" or "principles" that function like substances. For example, they may believe themselves to be like an entity that has the privilege of exerting a one-way causal influence on the natural world (i.e., a metaphysical way of

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describing egoism). Consciousness then can be understood as projecting a metaphysical framework onto experience that inhibits the perception of situations. Contrary to the Daoist sage, who can respond to situations with insight and understanding, the moralists of society are in fact behaving in ways that are contrary to their own intentions and desires. The moralist as "imposing" is in reality only justifying and normalizing oppression. Their interpretation of situations is self-undermining and thus leads to hypocrisy. *Their action ruins it*. Daoist exemplars, in being "nonpurposive" in their conduct, thus do not "ruin things."

## Daoism as a Solution to Moral Fundamentalism

From the Daoist perspective, human culture can develop such that ideals and beliefs that were once held for pragmatic and naturalistic reasons become disjoined and disconnected from the concrete lives and needs of human beings. As chapter 4 aims to illustrate, values emerge from the immediate ways human beings make sense of their world and fulfill their basic needs. The Daoist exemplar is perceptually sensitive to the immediate way valuing occurs; that is, values are not an "order" external to nature and change but are constantly emerging from our embodied interaction with the natural world. Any moral ideology that departs from its naturalistic roots simply helps to perpetuate the same social ills such a discourse was meant to remedy. In other words, the belief that there is a kind of judgment that is sui generis "moral" or the belief that there exist "moral facts" that are independent of the human existence are likewise beliefs that are indebted to an ignorant and misguided epistemological framework (*those who* "act" *ruin it*). This question-begging epistemology, espoused by many modern philosophers, only obfuscates the ability to live morally and alleviate the ills of human life. Another way of expressing this is that the possession of a fixed or thick "final vocabulary" of moral terms obstructs one's ability to understand social ills. It is for this reason that the practices prescribed in the Daoist texts involve the cultivation of habits such that we no longer cling to an understanding of things as independent or what the Daoist ironically names as "knowledge" (*zhi*, 知). "Knowledge" obstructs the ability to perceive situations because such habits involve the failure to perceive the larger context of experience (i.e., the context that "knowledge" is related to and situated in). Becoming a perceptually sensitive and responsive human being requires that we main-

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tain a wider "horizon of relevance" where no single "final vocabulary" can dominate human conduct. The Daoist solution to social problems is that we need a proper understanding of the nature of things and that involves adjusting how we perceive and understand the world. The solution is not merely "moral" but is, instead, a blending of morality, metaphysics, and epistemology.

Strictly speaking, Daoism espouses a form of amorality or the rejection that there exist sui generis moral judgments or "moral facts" about the world. Some philosophers believe that there are propositional statements or *truths* about morality that exist independent of the human mind. A (modern) Daoist would deem such ideas to be highly intellectually and scientifically dubious. From the Daoist understanding, such reified, metaphysical beliefs are inherently self-undermining and corrupting. Such things do not exist, and they are promoting the opposite of their intended effects (that is, they are legitimizing oppression). Following Mark Johnson's *Morality for Humans*, we can consider most nonnaturalistic accounts of values to be espousing "moral fundamentalism," that is, "the positing of absolute moral values, principles, or facts—[and it] is cognitively indefensible, because it is dramatically out of touch with contemporary mind science."[19] Not only is the philosopher that preaches that there are sui generis "moral facts" doing work that is highly intellectually and scientifically suspect, from the Daoist perspective, we never needed these question-begging beliefs to begin with. The Daoist understood that the source of social ills is the tendency of human consciousness to reify conceptual distinctions in experience to the point where such abstractions (which where only ever *instrumentalities* used to guide conduct and the process of growth) become ossified and are no longer grounded in the context of empirical experience.

The Daoist understanding of both nature and human perception shares much with different schools of Western philosophy. In light of philosophers like John Dewey and the processual metaphysics I outline in this book, Daoist philosophy can be understood as presenting a unique form of "ethical naturalism." As opposed to nonnaturalistic theories, "Naturalistic theories [in ethics], in contrast, see moral values and standards as arising out of our experience in the natural world, which involves biological, interpersonal (social), and cultural dimensions. There is no 'pure' a priori grounding for moral norms, so they have to emerge from our fundamental needs for survival, individual and group harmony, personal and communal flourishing, and consummation of human meaning and

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purpose."[20] The Daoist account of moral life, although naturalistic, is unique because it presents a critical account of the *source* of social ills. Because of particular habits of reflection and abstraction (that is, the reification of the process that individuates "things" in experience), humans ignore the qualitative particularity of nature. For the Daoist, nature is described using a multitude of terms and phrases. In the *Daodejing*, events and "things" are described as both "self-so" (*ziran*, 自然) and as being like an "uncarved block of wood" (*pu*, 樸), which is meant to signify their indeterminate, interdependent, and fluctuating character. As Robin Wang states, *ziran* "can be translated [as] 'spontaneity' or 'naturalness.' It refers to what is so of itself, without any external force or coercion."[21] In the *Zhuangzi*, it is that which is "genuine" (*zhen*, 真) or the "true person" (*zhenren*, 真人) that best expresses the natural world in its simplicity and the person that is capable of perceiving it as such. Because humans possess ossified habits of conceptualization (*zhi*,) and ungrounded, nonnaturalistic desires (*yu*, 欲), we are unable to recognize the novelty of things (*ziran*) and spontaneously respond to situations with greater levels of sensitivity and attunement (*wuwei*, 無為). When persons operate within such a problematic epistemological framework, this predisposes them such that they create extraneous suffering in the world and do not understand the nature or source of that suffering. As Wang continues, "*Ziran* is not only an element of the world but also the most potent mode of action for human beings. [. . .] This is the highest stage of human action, where there are no external forces or power compelling things to happen. [. . .] *Ziran* lets things be, in their own natural or raw state, just as heaven and earth have their own state (that is, *ziran*)."[22] This capacity to enable things to exist through noncoercion is, first and foremost, epistemological as it involves the absence of particular metaphysical beliefs that obstruct perception. To address these problems of perception, the Daoist prescribes the cultivation of habits that are more fundamental to perception. Such cultivation enables people to become more sensitive to situations because they no longer ignore the qualitative dimensions of experience underlying cognitive habits. Although "knowledge" (*zhi*) inhibits how experience of the world is disclosed, dealing with this requires us to cultivate habits such that we *ground* abstract "knowledge" and properly recognize it as a provisional and secondary aspect of experience. By no means does this book argue that persons should completely abandon all conceptualization and language. The goal of Daoist cultivation practices is to ground cognitive habits in noncognitive and embodied experience. When this happens

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then language, “names,” and “knowledge” no longer play an obfuscating role in shaping how persons perceive situations.

The Daoist account of nature and of social and political relationships is rather different than what one typically finds in Western philosophy. They not only depart from the metaphysical assumptions of many Western philosophers, but they can also be understood as critiquing these assumptions as highly problematic. What the Daoist offers is a *metaethical* critique of the idea that the usual moral philosopher is providing us with an accurate interpretive framework. From the Daoist perspective, the “moral” philosopher is often helping to create and legitimize more suffering than they had promised to alleviate. The Daoist alternative to “moral fundamentalism” is that we must cultivate the capacity to properly perceive and understand nature. The cultivation of certain dispositions, as described by the Daoist, are the dispositions best capable of dealing with life in all of its change and indeterminacy. These dispositions are such that “knowledge” and the “names” (*ming*) of things no longer obstruct attention to situations. “Ethics,” when informed by a substance metaphysics, is an endeavor that relies on an inaccurate account of reality, the nature of human experience, and the motivations of human conduct. As Jean Grondin claims, “all ethics presupposes metaphysics or ontology—that is, some understanding of who we are.”[23] Part of the problem is that modern philosophy suffers from an ethnocentrism and provincialism that enables an ignorance of its metaphysical assumptions to exist unchallenged. Western philosophy has claimed universality for a long time while simultaneously maintaining an ignorance of other cultures and worldviews. Comparative philosophers are not helping themselves by insisting on the same narrow subdivisions in their field of study that Anglophone philosophers have set up.[24] Western ethicists make metaphysical assumptions. Their metaphysical assumptions further help to produce and sustain a highly dubious epistemological framework. What is problematic is the belief that things exist as ontologically distinct and independent, whether they be “persons” or “things.” In Daoist metaphysics, the belief that things exist as distinct or self-contained, that is, as substances,[25] is just another instance of “reason” and the “will” imposing an external “form” on the particularity of nature and change. If philosophical traditions diverge with respect to their most fundamental assumptions, then we should not expect that all the theory and practice built on those foundations will end up looking the same. The Daoist provides an alternative account of human experience and action that is based on a processual metaphysics. An accurate understanding

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of nature and experience is what is most needed for mitigating human suffering. Perkins is correct when he argues that the Daoist understanding of things "shifted the very boundary between metaphysics and ethics." The Daoist exemplar does not need ethical principles or a sui generis "moral order" because Daoists provide a different understanding of the relationship between theory (*zhi*) and practice. They provide a radically different understanding of nature that functionally does the same job that the moral philosopher was supposed to do. There is no reason to believe that the possession of "moral facts" directly and immediately adjusts human conduct. What is most important is to abandon the "metaphysics" of the "sages" and moral philosophers.

## Those Who Act Ruin It: Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the Lao-Zhuang Daoist's naturalistic account of embodied experience and noncognitive meaning. It is important to understand what noncognitive meaning is because some scholars will not accept that conduct can be guided "intelligently" and "reasonably" without rational principles and propositional statements. For the Daoist, humans are meaningfully related to their world prior to the meaning we attribute to the world through language and intentional conduct. We fail to recognize this because the concepts we form in experience, by their very nature, are projected on to the field of experience and can end up obscuring experience of situations. Furthermore, the Daoist account of experience involves seeing how the cognitive/noncognitive, rational/irrational ontological dualisms mischaracterize the nature of human experience.

Chapter 2 begins with a clarification of what "nonegoistic conduct" (*wuwei*, 無為) would look like for the Daoist. If certain habits of thinking and cultural beliefs (*zhi*, 知) dominate experience, then this obstructs how we perceive the meaning of situations. I then briefly juxtapose Richard Rorty's "ironist" with Daoism. Although some scholars find similarities between the two works, it is important to recognize that Rorty abandons many of Dewey's major insights. Rorty, in this sense, is more similar to Quine. Rorty's project does not work, I argue, because he abandons the pragmatist's account of noncognitive meaning.

Chapter 3 clarifies how and why Daoist philosophers critique desires. For the Daoists, desires obstruct the capacity for persons to understand and interpret situations. In particular, desires also obstruct the ability

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to understand that all things, including the self, are interdependent and relational. As Daoists argue, to be "without self-interest" (*wusi*, 無私) is (ironically) the form of life that promotes communal (and individual) well-being.

Chapter 4 then provides a naturalistic account of values. Values are always immediately felt and not actually abstract or conceptual objects. Rationality is also not the only faculty that can intelligently guide conduct. If we properly understand the nature of values, this simultaneously helps to guide human behavior. The Daoist account of nature also provides what can be called (anachronistically) the "nonnaturalistic fallacy." "Qualities" are the product of interaction. No such thing as a "value/good-in-itself" exists. This account of the nonnaturalistic fallacy will help to introduce the idea that, for the Daoist, committing the nonnaturalistic fallacy helps to legitimize coercive and oppressive hierarchical relationships.

Chapter 5 clarifies and defends the critique of the "sages" and "robbers" that is found in the *Zhuangzi*. As detailed in chapter 8 of the *Zhuangzi*, both the (non-Daoist) sages and robbers are equally responsible for society's ills. This is because both the sages and robbers are perceptually alienated from nature. This perceptual alienation involves the inability to perceive nature as fundamentally indeterminate (*wu*, 無). The Daoist alternative to the sages and robbers is to cultivate awareness of our interdependence with nature. This book calls this process an "attunement to nature" or, as chapter 8 describes it, to not depart from "the actuality of their endowed circumstances" (其性命之情) and to "see oneself when you see others/things" (自見而見彼). Attunement involves an awareness of how nature primordially forms an indeterminate continuum (*wu*).

Chapter 6 provides an account of impartial, compassionate, and nurturing behavior from the Daoist perspective. As *Daodejing* 49 states, the Daoist sage cultivates a capacity to see the world as one "chaotic muddle" through being "without heart/mind" (*wuxin*, 無心). When we are "with a constant heart/mind" and perceive the world through "knowledge," persons interpret situations through a "Moral Manicheanism." It is this Moral Manicheanism that the Daoist criticizes as sage behavior.

In abandoning the assumptions of a substance metaphysics, the Daoist sage can see all things of nature as parts of the same, underlying continuum. It is specifically this capacity to become empty of an independent sense of self that serves as the Daoist's alternative to the moralist philosopher's dogma. In emptying one's experience of the belief in independent things, persons become oriented in such a way that, not only can they

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behave in ways that help to mitigate suffering and social disharmony, but they can also do this in such a way where their attitudes do not become self-corrupting. It is specifically being "without egoistic conduct" (*wuwei*), "without self-interest" (*wusi*), and "without heart/mind" (*wuxin*) that the Daoist is capable of realizing everything the philosophical moralists were not able to achieve. The Daoist is thus *wuwei* and does not "ruin things."

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