

Problem of Evil in Taoism

Ghorban Elmi,¹ Mojtaba Zarvani ²

Received: 05-09-2016 / Accepted: 22-11-2016

This paper attempts to present the Taoist understanding of evil. In the Taoist tradition, especially in Tao Te Ching, evil is divided into two categories: causal evil and consequential evil. Causal evils are those evils that are said to be the causes of other evils; consequential evils are those that are said to be the consequences of the causal evils. Causal evils originate from human will, and cause suffering. This means that evil is not equal to suffering. Lao Tzu does not clearly talk about natural suffering. He regards all evil and suffering as resulting from human actions that are not in accordance with Tao, which is the source of all life. Therefore, the way to overcome evil is to follow Tao, to actualize wu-wei in life.

Keywords: The Problem of Evil, Taoism, Lao Tzu, Causal Evil, Consequent Evil.

Introduction

The problem of evil is an old problem that has baffled man since antiquity. The core of the problem is that the existence of evil seems to

-
1. Associate Professor of Religions and Mysticism, University of Tehran, Iran (gelmi@ut.ac.ir), corresponding author.
 2. Associate Professor of Religions and Mysticism, University of Tehran, Iran (zurvani@ut.ac.ir).

contradict the belief in the existence of God with His attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and absolute goodness. Thus, although every worldview has to explain the existence of evil, it is an especially acute problem for theism, because—unlike atheism that affirms the reality of evil but denies the reality of God, and unlike Pantheism that affirms the reality of God but denies the reality of evil—theism affirms the reality of both God and evil.

Religious traditions are important sources for thinking about evil. Among them we can mention Taoism. Taoism is a spiritual, philosophical, and religious tradition of Chinese origin that provides special insights the problem of evil. In this paper, we will attempt to review these insights and present a fuller picture of the Taoist understanding of evil.

Taoism

First, we must have a brief overview of Taoism and the its developmental. Taoism has different meanings for different minds. “It is undoubtedly the most incompletely known and most poorly understood philosophy” (Kirkland, Barret, and Kohn 2000, xi). The confusion, I think, comes from mistranslation of the word “Tao.” Tao is the main theme of Taoism, but since Northeastern Asians have used it in many different cultural contexts, the word has been used differently in everyday life. Therefore, given that there are no clear boundaries in the different practices of Taoism, according to Creel, “the more one studies Taoism, the clearer it becomes that this term does not denote a school, but a whole congeries of doctrines” (1970, 1).

Taoism, which emerged in the 6th century B.C., is one of the two great native Chinese religio-philosophical systems and a major influence in the development of Chinese culture. The goal of Taoism as a philosophy and religious tradition, as expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu, the *Chuang Tzu*, and the *Lieh Tzu* is a profound, joyful, mystical, and practical harmony with the universe. Taoism is regarded as “the philosophy of ‘Lao and Chuang’” (Lin 1976, 7). As Needham, one of the Taoist scholars says, “the Taoists were

deeply interested in Nature but mistrusted reason and logic” (1956, 163).

Taoism is, in general, is a system of thought or philosophy or a form of wisdom to help one learn the way and practice it. According to Blofeld, “Taoism is an ancient method of human development and also a living manifestation of an antique way of life almost vanished from the world” (1978, v).

As a religion, Taoism emphasizes the alchemical relations between macrocosm and microcosm, seeking a formula for immortality by breath control, diet, exercises, sexual continence, or chemical elixirs.

The word Taoism, pronounced like Daoism, comes from a Chinese character Tao, which means the way. The way is usually further defined as the way of the ultimate reality, the way of the universe, the way of human life, and the way of nature. The main idea of Taoism is to live naturally with the flow of life. Living naturally comes about through observing the nature to learn the wisdom of life. The wisdom of life includes not forcing or controlling life, but simply being there. One of the characteristics of Taoism is *Wu wi*. *Wu wi* is the principle that the natural human mind is non-conceptual and not human-oriented. *Wu wi* looks through and beyond the human realm and our conditioned existence to see and hear the nature’s point of view. Blofeld’s view of a dedicated Taoist is one who seeks to live as closely as possible in accord with the nature. From the outset, this involves contemplating the nature’s ways, recognizing their fitness, and the perception that all of them are good in the sense of being essential to the pattern as a whole (1978, 6).

In the world, Taoism is known through the books *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang-Tzu*. The authorship and the year these books were published is still debatable, but the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao-Tzu is typically dated around the 4th century B.C., whereas Chang-Tzu is thought to have been written in the third century B.C. These two books are collections of Taoist writings and stories, though Taoism was practiced long before these books were written.

The Tao is the source of all things. It is the fundamental truth of the universe, and as such, it is a non-conceptual and inexpressible experience. It is important to realize that if you conceptualize and think about the Tao, you only move farther away from what it actually is. The Tao is realized by being it. These expressions are esoteric and leave us wondering.

As Lao Tzu comments in *Tao Te Ching* (1980, ch. 40), “Ten thousand things under heaven are born of being (*yu*). Being is born of non-being (*wu*).” For Lao Tzu, non-being is the ontological basis of being, and non-action is the ethical basis of action. Non-being in Taoism is not a negation of being, but rather the possibility of being. As the ground of being, non-being has the returning movement. Here, returning or reversal movement is identified with the unity of all beings in Tao.

Metaphysically, in Taoism, non-being, as the ground, is the ontological expression of *wu-wei*. Thus, the undifferentiated or unlimited non-being is called the supreme good in Taoist metaphysics. Also *wu-wei*, as Tao’s action, has the spontaneity. From this understanding of *wu-wei*, one knows that there are two outstanding attributes of the Tao—that is, the source of being or life and the principle of spontaneity (*tzu-jan*).

Wu-wei is the Tao’s way of returning or unity. In its movement, the Tao has procreated all beings through its creative process. Every growth and multiplicity comes from its creativity. But the completion of the Tao’s procreation is done in the Tao’s returning movement, receptivity. *Wu-wei* is a negative way or a passive way. But by taking a negative *nay* (*wu-wei*), the Tao comes to have the positive action, “spontaneity.” Just as the reality has two elements: *yin* and *yang*, the Tao’s movement has two directions: creativity and receptivity. Lao Tzu saw the evolutionary process of creation in the Tao’s creative process, and its completion in the Tao’s receptive process.

Meaning of Evil

As a definition that can help us identify the evils discussed in the *Tao Te Ching*, we can say that evils are those things, events, or actions that

are either condemned by Lao Tzu, or have to be avoided according to him. This is based on the assumption that only evils are to be condemned or avoided. It does not mean, however, that, in Lao Tzu's view, things are evil simply because they are to be condemned or avoided (Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 301).

For Lao Tzu, good means any action that is not caused by the artificial actions of the human beings. Non-artificial actions are spontaneous actions (*wu-wei*). On the contrary, "evil" means any action that is caused by the purposeful action of the human being. Willful or purposeful actions are unspontaneous actions (*yu-wei*).

What is the origin of evil? How and why does evil occur? What is the Taoist concept of evil? Lao Tzu does not articulate his answers to these questions clearly or directly, but his metaphysics of the Tao provides the theoretical ground with which to deal with those questions.

Origin of Evil

Where does evil come from? Cosmologically or cosmogonically, evil comes from the process of differentiation or separation. As examined in part I, the Tao has the bipolarity in its metaphysical structure: *yin* and *yang*. In *Tao Te Ching* (1988, ch. 42), Lao Tzu says,

Tao gives birth to one,
one gives birth to two,
two gives birth to three,
three gives birth to ten thousand beings.

Ten thousand beings carry *yin* on their backs and
embrace *yang* in their front.

Blending these two vital breaths (*ch' i*) to attain harmony.

Here, *yin* and *yang* represent two directions or two movements of the Tao: creativity and receptivity. All things come from the blending of these two movements. In the process of differentiation or procreation, the harmonious blending is called good, and the

disharmonious is called evil. Here, good and evil are relative, just as *yin* and *yang* are relative. Just as *yin* and *yang* are inevitable constituents of the reality, good and evil are also inevitable on the cosmological level.

The cosmological view is an aesthetic view. Thus, good and evil, in a cosmological sense, are neutral in value judgment. In the Taoist metaphysics, *yin* and *yang* are relative, reliable, dependable, and complementary to each other. Thus, good and evil are relative, reliable, dependable, and complementary to each other and to the Tao as a whole. In this aesthetic view, which is neutral in value, it is difficult to say that Lao Tzu was concerned with the natural evils. In the same manner, whether there are natural sufferings in Lao Tzu's thought is not an easy question to answer, partly because he does not explicitly and directly deal with this question.

Two Kinds of Evil

There are two kinds of evil. Evils that are caused by free human acts (moral evil) and those that are part of the nature (natural or physical evil).

Man-Made Evil or Moral Evil

Lao Tzu recognizes two kinds of man-made evils. The first kind is that which causes human sufferings in the world (*causal evils*). They supposedly originate in the use of the human will. The second kind of evil is the human sufferings caused by the first kind (*consequential evils*). It will be shown that Lao Tzu's philosophy of Tao is deeply concerned with eliminating these evils from the world.

The relationship between a causal evil and its consequential evil(s) can be a complex one, but Lao Tzu generally sees a simple and clear causal connection between them. I shall argue that all the causal evils that concern Lao Tzu originate in the use of the human will and that all the consequential evils are said to be sufferings of some kind. This means that not all evils are sufferings, because there are evils that are not sufferings in themselves but are the causes of sufferings (Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 302).

Moreover, unlike causal evils, sufferings are not to be condemned or denounced. Lao Tzu may have taught that we should forgive people for their causal evils or to treat them in the all-embracing spirit of the Tao, but there is no doubt that causal evils are more evil than consequential evils (Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 302).

As stated before, the causal evils supposedly originate in the use of the human will. On the assumption that all things produced by Tao are good, there is no good reason to say that the human will itself, presumably produced by Tao, is evil. But it is possible to say that the use of the will is the source of causal evils. Whether the distinction between the will itself and its use can be properly made will be left unanswered here. The important question we must ask is whether every use of the will is evil. This is not an easy question to answer. Generally speaking, we can say that the use of the will is evil if and only if it is used against one's true nature, the other people, or the natural world. In Lao Tzu's language, the use of the will is evil if and only if it is used against the nature of the Tao and its operations in the universe.¹ We may call this use of the will the *assertive* use of the will. On the other hand, the use of the will is not evil if and only if it is used to resist asserting something in the way described above, or, more positively, if it is used to follow the Tao and its operations in the universe. We may call this the *non-assertive* use of the will (Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 302).

Natural Sufferings

Whether there are natural sufferings in Lao Tzu's thought is not an easy question to answer, but it seems that In Lao Tzu's view, there are no natural sufferings. In other words, there cannot be any physical or mental pains in the universe where the assertive will is not operative. It means that all the sufferings in the world are supposedly man-made (Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 307).

Lao Tzu repeatedly says that if we would only give up our assertive will, the cause of man-made sufferings, there would be no dangers,

1. For a general discussion on the nature of the Tao and its function, see Yu-Ian (1952, 1:170-91).

disasters, and so forth. It is likely that the dangers or disasters referred to are limited only to man-made sufferings. Moreover, he maintains that if we follow Tao, “all things will take their proper places spontaneously” (*Tao Te Ching* 1963, ch. 32), and they will “transform themselves of their own accord” (ch. 37). “Heaven and earth will unite to drip sweet dew, and the dew will drip evenly of its own accord without the command of man” (ch. 32). This is because Tao is the source and principle of purity, tranquility, spiritual power, life, and peace in the world (ch. 39). In examining the *Tao Te Ching*, we cannot identify any suffering that is not explained as man-made. The fact that he does not deal with natural sufferings is evidently not because he is not concerned with them, but because no such thing can exist in his world-conception. Chuang Tzu, however, differs from him on this point. Chuang Tzu, the other major Taoist philosopher, definitely recognizes the existence of natural sufferings, which he explains as the effects of the wonderful transformation of all things in Tao (ch. 6). He advises people that the pains should be accepted as they are, and should not be regarded as evil (See Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 306-7).

Explanation of the Existence of Evil in the Universe

An important issue in Western discussions of philosophy of religion is the problem of explaining the existence of evils in a universe supposedly created by an all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing God (Hick 1963, 40-47). A similar question can be raised with regard to Lao Tzu's philosophy. If the universe is spontaneously produced from Tao, the *summum bonum*, how can there be evil in the world? On the basis of our discussion so far, we can formulate the following form of argument to express Lao Tzu's position:

1. The Tao is the *summum bonum*.
2. The Tao is the ultimate source of all things and events.
3. All things and events are good if they are not the results of some interference with the spontaneous evolution of the Tao.
4. The assertive use of the human will is an interference with the spontaneous evolution of the Tao.

Therefore, every thing or event that is caused by the assertive use of the will is evil.

Premise 4 can be revised to say that *only* the assertive use of the will is an interference with the spontaneous evolution of the Tao. In that case, all evils are either some assertive uses of the will or their consequences. Our discussion points to this stronger position.

Premises 1, 2, and 3 are the basic beliefs or assumptions of Lao Tzu's philosophy, which we shall not question here. The problem is whether premise 4 is consistent with them. It seems reasonable to say that the will itself is good, because it is clearly not a product of the assertive use of the will. Here we come to two important questions. The first is why man, who is supposedly good by nature, uses the will to assert something against the Tao. Would it not be possible to always use the will in accordance with the Tao? The second question is whether the will is "free" to interfere with the Tao's evolution.

With regard to the first question, no ready answer can be found in the *Tao Te Ching*. The question probably had not occurred to Lao Tzu. We can safely rule out any Satan figure responsible for causing man to assert something against the Tao. The answer can probably be found in Lao Tzu's idea of the Tao's decline. Even though the will itself is good insofar as it is produced by the Tao, it is probably a product at the Tao's decline, thus not an ideal product. It may have the inherent tendency to deviate from the Tao. The idea of the decline of the Tao is found in *Tao Te Ching* (1963, ch. 38), just quoted, where it is said that when the Tao is lost, *te* appears. The appearance of *te* is apparently not caused by something other than the Tao itself. A similar idea appears where Lao Tzu says, "When the great Tao declines, there appear *jen* and *i*." (*Tao Te Ching* 1963, ch. 18). Though the appearance of *jen* and *i* can be explained as the result of the assertive use of the will, the idea that the Tao declines cannot be ignored. This seems to mean that the Tao, though believed to be inexhaustible in its power, is limited in power after all. This is undoubtedly a critical issue in Lao Tzu's philosophy.

It may be argued that if *te* represents a fall from the Tao, the natural world, which is *te*, cannot be as perfect as the Tao itself. This is true, but we have argued that even though it is, in a sense, a fall from the Tao, the natural world is so full of the power of the Tao that Lao Tzu cannot see any suffering in it. All evils, according to our interpretation, come from our assertive use of the will.

The second question, whether the will is free to interfere with the Tao's evolution, is in a way related to the first question. When the Tao is full of power, it is almost impossible for the will to interfere with its operations. "If one tries to hew wood for the master carpenter, how can one avoid hurting one's own hands?" (*Tao Te Ching* 1963, ch. 74). But when the Tao is in decline, the will will be in a better position to do so. There is, however, another reason why, in Lao Tzu's philosophy, the will is in principle free to interfere with the Tao. In his conception of the universe, there are no external or eternal "laws" of nature, to which all things must conform. The principles of change are internal laws that are supposed to emerge spontaneously when the relevant conditions exist. Some kind of causality certainly exists in Lao Tzu's thought, but it is something akin to the Humean, not the Newtonian, conception of causality (Sung-Peng Hsu 1976, 313-14). It is important to note that Lao Tzu has no doubt that the will is free to interfere with the Tao. He is afraid, however, that the use of the will causes suffering in the world and turn the spontaneous universe into a mechanistic one bound by laws and virtues.

Overcoming Evil

The way of *wu-wei*, as the action of the Tao, suggests how one can confront the problem of evil and suffering in this present human life. The way of overcoming evil is to read "evil" backwards. In other words, the way of overcoming evil is a way of living. In a Taoist theology, the Tao is the source of all life. As the origin of life, the Tao originates, nurtures, and fulfills life in the world. Therefore, In Taoism, the way of overcoming evil is to follow the Tao, to actualize *wu-wei* in human life. To follow the Tao's will is the way to live everlastingly.

Then, what is the task of human beings in the midst of evil and suffering? In the Taoist tradition, human beings are the mediators between Heaven and the earth. The function of a mediator is to embrace others and live with them through self-emptying and self-sacrificing, which is the vision of *wu-wei*. The task of a mediator is to actualize *wu-wei*; that is, to recognize the interconnectedness, interrelatedness, and interdependence with the others and with the Tao or God. Thus, the vision of the Taoist theology opens its eyes not only to human cultural world and God, but also to the ecological world.

In sum, the way of overcoming evil in the Taoist theology is to engage with *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* has the ontological basis to embrace being in non-being, as well as the ethical practicality to do something in non-doing. In the metaphysics of the Tao, *wu-wei* is the ultimate ground to embrace being. Likewise, *wu-wei* as non-action ethically embraces action. *Wu-wei* in the narrow path represents the *yin* of the Tao, and yet it embraces *yang* in itself as a whole. This receptive characteristic of the Tao provides humankind the vision to resolve the evil in this present world.

Finally, since any aspect of the world is a manifestation of the Tao, corresponding to a different participation of the Yin and Yang principles, nothing can be considered to be essentially evil in the world. Even if Yin is termed as a negative principle, it never manifests itself alone. In the *Tao Te Ching*, it is stated:

When beauty is abstracted,
then ugliness has been implied;
when good is abstracted,
then evil has been implied. (*Tao Te Ching* 1988, ch. 2)

Every positive factor involves its negative or opposing counterpart. What is usually called evil, as physical and mental manifestation, is the result of a lack of balance between the two opposing principles and corresponds to a bigger participation of the Yin principle. Evil belongs

to the nature of the world, so humans have to subscribe to the universal harmony and respect the equilibrium of the two polarities. The Tao is eternal and so are the two principles Yang and Yin. Therefore, good and evil must be eternal as necessary elements of our world.

Conclusion

Lao Tzu regards all evil and suffering as resulting from human actions and from getting out of the natural way. From this perspective, evil refers to any action that is not in accordance with the Tao. The way to overcome evil is to accept it as part of the reality and follow the Tao—to actualize *wu-wei* in human life. The Taoist metaphysics does not leave the solution for the problem of evil to the future or to the other world, but rather embraces it in this life. In the Taoist metaphysics, evil and good are two parts of the reality, as one sees it in the Yin-Yang relation. The bipolarity of the Tao, thus, provides not only the theoretical basis but also the ethical practicality to deal with the problem of evil.

References

- Blofeld, John. 1978. *Taoism: The Road to Immortality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Chuang Tzu. 1968. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Translated by Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Creel, Herrlee Glessner. 1970. *What is Taoism? And other studies in Chinese cultural history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hick, John. 1963. *Philosophy of Religion*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- . 1978. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Tao Te Ching*. 1963. Translated by Wing-tsit Chan. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill.
- . Translated by Stephen Mitchell. New York Harper & Row Publishers.
- Lin, Yutang, ed. and trans. 1976. *The Wisdom of Laotse*. New York: The Modern Library.

- MacGregor, Geddes. 1973. *Philosophical Issues in Religious Thought*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Mackie, J. L. 1973. "Evil and Omnipotence." In *Philosophy of Religion*, edited by W. Rowe and W. Wainwright. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Needham, Joseph. 1956. *Science and Civilization in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pojman, L., 1991. *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co.
- Kirkland, Russel, Timothy Barrett, and Livia Kohn. 2000. "Introduction." In *Daoism Handbook*, edited by Livia Kohn. Brill: Leiden.
- Yu-Lan, Fung. 1952. *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. Translated by Deck Bodde. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.