

Care ethics is a traditionally feminine system of thought that has only recently undergone investigation and explanation by women who wish to justify their historically misunderstood take on morality. It cherishes contextual judgment and a world view of individuals connected into a great web by relationships. By caring for those to whom we are connected, forever with an eye toward preserving the relationships that define us, we may conduct our lives in a way that ensures the inclusion of all and safety for everyone. The philosophy of the *Tao Te Ching*, an ancient Chinese text that founded the Taoist school, explicitly values the feminine and seems to relate very closely in its language to the modern feminist care ethics. Looking closely at this philosophy, we find it holds many of the same values as care ethics, and yet justifies them in primarily masculine terms. Care ethics, then, may find support in the *Tao Te Ching* for the lifestyle it recommends, while also discovering a very different way of explaining it.

In her 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan describes what she sees as a masculine bias in moral theory. Males, she explains, tend to think about themselves and their world in terms of independence and strength. This perspective carries over into a moral attitude that values justice utmost: the masculine method of resolving moral conflicts involves objectively balancing the independent rights of the affected parties, seeking a compromise that minimizes interference with each participant's individual goals. Because these rights and each participant's self-interest are assumed to be uniform across all participants and constant over time and circumstance, the proper resolution of any conflict of rights can be resolved logically. So long as the conflict is described as thoroughly as the variation in rights and interests necessitates, a fixed solution can be determined from an objective standpoint that serves everyone as best as possible.

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\* This paper mainly relies on D.C. Lau's 1963 translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. Page numbers are used where citing Lau's notes and commentary, but passages from the translation itself are referenced by chapter and section number, e.g., Lao Tzu, XXXVIII, 83.

There exists, however, a characteristically feminine outlook on morality, dubbed care ethics, that, rather than ultimately valuing justice, upholds the sanctity of relationships. Individuals are not conceptualized as having independent rights, but instead responsibilities to each other and themselves that must be respected and evaluated in the process of moral judgment. Hence judgments are highly contextual, and a decision is moral to the extent that it obeys the imperative to care for others, to preserve the bonds of relationship.

These differences are not dictated by biology, but clearly “arise in a social context” and, though there are statistical associations of each view to its respective sex, do not by any means fall cleanly along gender lines.<sup>1</sup> The division can be traced to the typical formative relationship of infancy, that between mother and child. Women see their daughters as similar to themselves, and hence form a close emotional connection that is naturally preserved. Sons, however, are perceived as an opposite, and despite the mother's love for her baby boy, she will not connect with him in a truly continuous way; there is near-unavoidable and subconscious separation between mother and son. Even during infancy, the son will define himself in contrast to his mother, and as he develops further, he will increasingly rely on a separation from his mother to identify himself as masculine. The daughter, however, needs not even question what makes her feminine, as she stays connected to her mother.<sup>2</sup> During early childhood we can already see the masculine world view founded on a principle of separation and independence, while the feminine is one of connection and relationship.

In the accepted framework of Western philosophy, the masculine ideals of rights, logic, and non-interference, though perhaps a bit sterile, do not seem strange: we see them manifested in some guise or another in Kantianism, Utilitarianism, Existentialism, and any number of other moral doctrines. Gilligan asserts, as many others have also pointed out, that this is the case

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1 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) p. 2.

2 Gilligan, pp. 7-8.

because men have historically driven the development of philosophy. As outsiders to the development of such fields as philosophy and psychology, women's substantially different mode of thinking has been marginalized. Consequently, women are evaluated with respect to masculine ideals, and are cast as improperly developed, unable to reach an “adult” understanding of moral decision making.<sup>3</sup> With the perspective that women are indeed very different from men in the way they consider the world around them, though, this inconsistency between Western morality and the female mind may instead indicate that it is Western morality that is improperly developed.<sup>4</sup>

Reaching out to other perspectives on morality, feminists have been successful in finding other, established philosophies that support some of the values of the care ethics. Chenyang Li, with a fair bit of interpretation, sees the Confucian ideal of *ren*—commonly translated as “benevolence”—as explicitly relying on care. “[*Ren*] is to *ai* others” (XVII.22), she quotes from the *Analects*; while *ai* is often translated as “love”, Li picks apart its connotations and concludes that “‘caring’ is more appropriate in expressing this tender feeling.”<sup>5</sup> Confucianism, however, was a distinctively patriarchal system that, while not treating it of central importance, assumed the inferiority of women.<sup>6</sup>

The philosophy laid out in the *Tao Te Ching*, on the other hand, explicitly values the feminine. Might it, then, have even more to say that supports or can be compared to the tenets of care ethics? While there are significant points of divergence between the two philosophies, it appears that they do indeed share many values in common.

Care ethics obviously concerns itself with morality; its non-traditional approach to problem solving still has as its goal the execution of the right action in any given situation. Virtue, defined in terms of preserving relationships, is a desirable trait for the adherent to care

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3 Gilligan, pp. 30, 31.

4 Gilligan, pp. 1-2.

5 Chenyang Li, *The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study in The Sage and the Second Sex*, ed. Chenyang Li (Open Court Press, 2000), p. 26.

6 Li, p. 26.

ethics. After a cursory glance through the *Tao Te Ching*, it would seem Taoism is irreparably in conflict with these basic beliefs of the care ethic; there are several surprising passages in which the Laoist (as followers of the beliefs in the *Tao Te Ching*, also known as the *Lao Tzu*, are more compactly named) appears to cast aside morality, loyalty, relationship, and virtue wholesale. We are told that “when the state is benighted there are loyal ministers”; that “... when the way was lost there was virtue; when virtue was lost there was benevolence...”; that we ought to “exterminate the sage, discard the wise, and the people will benefit a hundredfold; exterminate benevolence, discard rectitude, and the people will again be filial.”<sup>7</sup> These last two passages are notable, furthermore, because we saw above that benevolence (*ren*) has a strong connotation of care: the *Tao Te Ching* seemingly abandons the very basis of the care ethics.

Upon more thorough examination, however, these passages in fact provide the closest connection between the two philosophies. The full context of each of the quotations above involves a smorgasbord of Confucian language: “benevolence”, “rectitude”, “virtue”, “filial”, “loyal”, “the sage”, “the rites”. The *Tao Te Ching* uses these traditionally Confucian concepts almost as buzzwords for the older philosophy; we are not truly encouraged to eliminate morality itself, but instead to turn sharply away from the Confucian conception of morality. Not all sages should we exterminate, but rather the condescending ideal of the sage as understood by the Confucians. Similarly, Gilligan describes care ethics in contrast to the masculine approach that believes in absolutes and strict rules of moral judgment. Care ethics instead emphasizes that good judgment is context-dependent, the context including both the specifics of a given situation as well as the relationships among all the people involved.<sup>8</sup> The voices of the Laoist and the care ethicist are revolutionary ones, calling attention to an entirely different mode of thinking by contrasting it with established morality. Whereas Confucius values *li*, the rites, as the ultimate

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7 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1963), XVIII, 42; XXXVIII, 83; XIX, 43.

8 Gilligan, pp. 28, 29.

guide of moral behavior, the Taoist sees the rites as a symptom of the fall from the tao; we need the rites to dictate our actions only because we've ceased using real human judgment in our moral lives. Likewise, the feminist follower of care ethics sees rules and logic not as preserving morality but restricting it; we must resort to logic to resolve conflicts because we have chosen to ignore the fundamental importance of relationships and care.

Seeing now the unity of Laoism and care ethics, we may extend our comparison of the context-dependent judgment we see in both philosophies. The feminist imperative for judgment, a relationship-aware evaluation of each situation in its own unique context, seems like the intuitive, natural approach to deciding right and wrong. Likewise, the *Tao Te Ching* repeatedly encourages us to “return to being the uncarved block”, a symbol for integrated, natural, simple, and contextual human morality.<sup>9</sup> By artificially dividing this intuitive and holistic view of morality, we overly specialize our ethical judgments; we pigeonhole our consideration of situations and limit our ability to fully consider a moral dilemma's context. Hence the *Tao Te Ching* says that “only when [the uncarved block] is cut are there names. As soon as there are names, one ought to know that it is time to stop”.<sup>10</sup>

This theme of the danger of pigeonholing our definitions of the world carries throughout the work; in fact the traditional first line drives the point home: “the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name”.<sup>11</sup> While many other schools of Chinese philosophy took up the task of naming ethical concepts, the *Tao Te Ching* warns that some of the most important ideas in morality cannot be named. By naming the *tao*, the way, we would restrict its description and necessarily reject some possible characteristics it might have. The *tao* is, however, all-inclusive by its very nature, so it must never be limited to

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9 Lao Tzu, XXVIII, 63.

10 Lao Tzu, XXXII, 72.

11 Lao Tzu, I, 1.

description by a single name.<sup>12</sup> In the same way that dividing the *tao*—naming it, pinning down its definition—robs it of its very essence, so care ethics insists that making rules for ethical judgment restricts the strength of a contextual and caring consideration of relationships.

A particular facet of the Laoist idealization of the feminine is the virtue of weakness, of submissiveness, of non-competition. “[The sage] does not brag, and so has merit; he does not boast, and so endures. It is because he does not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with him”.<sup>13</sup> In the same way that the sage shuns competition and generally tries to keep a low profile, Gilligan finds that women tend not to pursue personal achievement in public roles, such as climbing the ladders of the political and business worlds, and expect “danger to result from competitive success.”<sup>14</sup> Thus both the *Tao Te Ching* and care ethics tell us that one can find private success by being non-competitive.

However, the inspiration behind this non-competitive spirit is particularly divergent between the two philosophies. Women choose to avoid competition “when one person's success [is] at the expense of another's failure”, so as to not alienate others.<sup>15</sup> They see that the climb up many traditional ladders of success involves stepping on others as you pass; this strains your relationship with them and harms individuals that you care about, so they forgo success to avoid putting others down.

The Laoist, on the other hand, sees the negative consequences of success not in harming others on the way up, but the likely retribution that could bring about. “The centuries in which the *Lao tzu* was produced were certainly turbulent times,” D.C. Lau writes; the divided states of China constantly fought “wars of increasing scope and ferocity with one another”, and so the meekness and non-contention found everywhere in the *Tao Te Ching* are “the aspirations of men

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12 D.C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin, 1963), p. 19.

13 Lao Tzu, XXII, 50b-c.

14 Gilligan, p. 42.

15 Gilligan, p. 15.

who could never be sure from one day to another whether they would manage to stay alive”.<sup>16</sup> It was self-preservation, not relationship preservation, that drove the Laoists to pursue a feminine behavior. Anyone who you put down in order to improve your station could very well attack you for their injuries, and make you fall even harder from the top. This paranoia reflects a masculine outlook on the world, in which threats are perceived in “close personal affiliation”, where the danger of connecting with others is one “of entrapment or betrayal, being... humiliated by rejection and deceit.”<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Tao Te Ching*, we can identify this fear of others as a motivating factor for “keeping the role of the female”.<sup>18</sup> Though there are times when we are encouraged to care for each other—“the sage always excels in saving people, and so abandons no one”—the Laoist life is generally one of isolation and self-preservation through obscurity. The *tao* itself is referred to in maternal terms—“the way gives [the myriad creatures] life and rears them, brings them up and nurses them”—but its followers are encouraged to keep to themselves.<sup>19</sup> “Now,” we are told, “to forsake compassion for courage, to forsake frugality for expansion, to forsake the rear for the lead, is sure to end in death.”<sup>20</sup> It is not out of care for others that the Taoist chooses to lead his life submissively, but because sticking his neck out, standing out from the background, is a dangerous and potentially fatal indulgence.

All together, the *Tao Te Ching* shares several values in common with care ethics, particularly contextual judgment and a drive to avoid highly public success. The world views that motivate these values in each philosophy are very different, however. While the feminine practitioner of care ethics views the world primarily as a safe structure of relationships, a web of interconnected carers, the Laoist holds the masculine view of independent agents all striving, by

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16 Lau, p. 30.

17 Gilligan, p. 42.

18 Lao Tzu, X, 24.

19 Lao Tzu, LI, 115.

20 Lao Tzu, LXVII, 164a.

default, to reach the top of the social hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> In the extremely dangerous environment of the Chinese Warring States period, however, the *Tao Te Ching* turns traditional masculine ideals on their head and encourages feminine behavior as a way to avoid personal harm; the Laoist strives not for success at the top of the hierarchy but to be overlooked in the middle of it. Thus the care ethic can find support for its lifestyle recommendations in the *Tao Te Ching*, and perhaps even an alternate argument for leading a life guided by feminine ideals. While the modern world is nowhere so dangerous as life in ancient China was, the theme of physical self-preservation through submissive behavior that runs so strongly through the *Lao Tzu* may be translated into an encouragement for modern people to live peaceful lives that protect their own and others' emotional well-beings.

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21 Gilligan, p. 62.