

How to Overcome Without Fighting: An Introduction to the Taoist Approach to Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

This article discusses the pertinence of philosophical Taoism to psychological research by examining the Taoist ideas about conflict resolution in human interaction. According to Taoism, the ultimate goals of people consist of realizing harmony with one another and achieving consonance with nature. People can attain interpersonal harmony by understanding the significance of Tao and how human behavior is regulated by the interaction of three systems at the universal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels.

The significance of the issue

Taoism, along with Confucianism, is one of the two major native philosophical traditions that have shaped and permeated Chinese culture, and all Asian cultures affected by China (e.g., Japan, Korea, and Vietnam) for more than 2,000 years. In addition to its profound impact on the Eastern sciences, medicine, literature, and arts, philosophical Taoism has immensely influenced people's understanding about interpersonal actions and perceptions.

Some scholars in the West have explored the implications of Taoism for psychological research. For example, Taoism has been construed as a work of metaphysical psychology, delineating how the fundamental forces of the cosmos itself are mirrored in our own individual inner structure (Needleman, 1989). There have been some attempts to apply Taoist thought to psychotherapy (Ehrlich, 1986), holistic therapy (Kelly & McFarlane, 1991), and discussion of the self-actualization theories of Rogers and Maslow (Chang & Page, 1991).

The psychological (in particular the social psychological) research in the West, however, has paid little attention to Taoist thought concerning social interactions and perceptions, which postulates that one of the two paramount goals for human beings involves achieving harmony with one another (in addition to achieving consonance with

nature) by following Taoist axioms. The quintessential ideas of Taoism can be regarded as guidelines for conflict resolution in the two types of relationships.

This paper intends to explore the pertinence of Taoist ideas to social behavior by examining three issues: (1) the meanings of Tao and Te and the three systems that regulate interpersonal actions and perceptions, (2) the causes of interpersonal conflicts, and (3) how to employ Taoist nonaction to change a target person's actions or perceptions in an interpersonal conflict situation.

The Taoist texts¹

The primary Taoist ideas discussed in this article are derived from two main Taoist texts: *Tao Te Ching* and *The Art of War*. *Tao Te Ching* is taken as the accumulated wisdom through three centuries (6th-4th centuries B.C.) rather than the work of Lao Tzu alone (Xu, 1991). Although *The Art of War* was written about 2,400 years ago by a Chinese military philosopher, Sun Tzu, it has become one of the most highly appreciated strategic texts in today's business world. The two books are linked in that *Tao Te Ching* can be viewed as a manuscript addressing human behavior at the metaphysical level, whereas *the Art of War* may be perceived as a practical guidebook dealing with human interaction (Li, 1985). It should be noted, however, only these two philosophers' ideas about conflict resolution are examined in this article and it does not intend to give a comprehensive review of all related Taoist thoughts. For example, although Chuang Tzu's (369 B.C.-268 B.C.) teaching was traditionally treated as a significant part of Taoist literature (Mair, 1983), the current discussion includes no elaborations on Chuang Tzu, because some scholars believe that his rumination primarily dwells on absolute spiritual freedom and his visions about human interaction seem to digress from those of Lao Tzu (see Xu, 1991). The debate about the similarities and differences between the two Taoists is too complicated to address in this essay.

The three systems that regulate social interaction

Taoism views social actions and perceptions as regulated by the interaction of three systems at the universal, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. Each of the systems consists of an opposite *and* corresponding pair.

First, the operation of the highest system involves the antithesis and harmony between "Tao" and "Te." Traditionally, most scholars view the term "Tao" as synonymous with the "path" or the "way," and define the term "Te" as "virtue" or "integrity." This author, however, argues that the more appropriate meaning of Tao is the "alternatives," which refer to the eternal, ultimate reality (Lao Tzu, Chap. 16 & 25),

or all alternative relations or patterns governing the operation of the universe and people's interaction with nature and with one another.

This novel interpretation of Tao is preferred by this author for three reasons. It is consonant with the term's original meanings in Chinese language. In addition to the "path" or the "way," the term Tao also connotes "choice(s)," "connection(s)," "method(s)," among others. The new translation can embrace, rather than reject, the meanings of the other interpretations. In addition, like other classificatory nouns of Chinese, "Tao" is both a plural and a singular noun (Henson, 1983). Furthermore, this translation can better epitomize the profuse Taoist notions, which include two intrinsically related themes. The first one is "Reversal is the movement of Tao" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 40). For example, the development and transformation of the universe can be characterized as the two complementary, interdependent phases of Yin and Yang, alternating in space and time. The other Taoist central idea maintains that "Weakness is the usage of Tao" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 40). The best embodiment of this axiom is water. People may obtain the cognizance of Tao by contemplating water. The highest good is like water, not only because water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures, but also because water, which is nurturing, soft, weak and flexible, can vanquish hard and strong obstacles by selecting alternatives to reach its goals. As water does not compete, nobody can compete with it (Lao Tzu, Chap. 8 & 78).

The term "Te," on the other hand, may be best viewed as the awareness of Tao or the alternative relations and as the manners that are congruous with the knowledge. The greatest Te is to follow Tao (Lao Tzu, Chap. 21) both in the process of perception and in the course of interaction. When people perceive the world and others, they should discern all alternatives concerning an entity, "Know the white, but keep the black," "know honor, yet keep disgrace" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 28). The conduct in human interaction listed by Lao Tzu as exemplifying Te include bearing yet not possessing, working yet not taking credit, leading yet not dominating, creating without claiming, and guiding without interfering (Lao Tzu, Chap. 10 & 51). In particular, the supreme Te involves the comprehension of how "the soft and weak surmount the hard and strong" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 36) and how impediments can be overcome through yielding (Lao Tzu, Chap. 22).

In other words, Tao and Te represent the objective and the subjective dimensions of the universe, respectively. People who understand and conform to Tao possess Te.

Understanding the universal system has three implications for comprehending social actions: (1) Everything in the universe, including people's cognition and actions, is constantly involved in changing and developmental processes, interacting with one another. (2) Different actions result from the actor's different amounts of Te, or the under-

standing of the alternatives in the situation, because people's choices of actions or perceptions in the world are fettered by their knowledge of Tao that regulates the nature and people. (3) An individual can learn and develop Te only when he or she is exposed to Tao, because only Tao, which manifests as more inclusive and alternative ways of perceiving the self, others, and situations, can teach the person the meanings of Te. An individual who intends to change others' actions or perceptions must understand Tao, or comprehend how Tao operates in the universe, including all alternative factors (social, natural, external, psychological, etc.) that interact with the others, to obtain real freedom and consonance in the interaction.

Second, an individual's actions and perceptions in an interpersonal situation are also governed by the interpersonal system, which consists of the self and the other(s) who are similar or dissimilar in following or defying the Taoist principles during an interaction, "Knowing the others is wisdom, knowing the self is enlightenment"(Lao Tzu, Chap. 33).

The variable "similarity" is certainly not a new concept in the Western psychological research. For example, studies have shown that similarities in demographics, personality, attitudes, values, or beliefs are associated with interpersonal attraction (e.g., Barry, 1970; Byrne, 1971). Perceiving that a person in need is similar to us (e.g., similar in dress, attitudes, nationality, ethnicity) can also increase our willingness to help (Dovidio, 1984). Equity theory (e.g., Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978) maintains that people are most satisfied with a relationship when the ratio between the benefits derived and contributions made is similar for both partners (similar inputs and outcomes).

The Taoist concept of similarity, however, suggests that the extent to which people are similar or dissimilar in complying with or spurning the Taoist precepts will affect the types of relationship they may have. Because one side's interpersonal behavior that is carried out toward the other depends upon the target's reactions to be realized, the continuation of interpersonal interactions or conflicts relies on the participants' validation of each other's actions or perceptions. According to Taoism, a person in a conflict situation may minimize the dissension by using alternatives that can transcend or invalidate the perceptions or expectations of the opponent who exacerbates the situation. For example, people should apply calm to subdue the obstreperous (Sun Tzu, Chap. 7) and utilize stillness to overcome heat (Lao Tzu, Chap. 45).

The Taoist thoughts suggest that there are three possible relations between two interacting people. (1) When both sides understand and follow Tao in their interactions, they will engender a harmonious relationship, with mutual attraction and reward, because both validate each other's Tao-following actions. (2) When both sides deviate from

Tao and use similar methods in their perception and interaction (i.e., both lack alternatives; both view power, force, or violence as most effective in solving conflicts), they also validate each other's violations. Interpersonal tensions and mutual animosity will stem from this type of confirmation. (3) When the self tries to reach harmony with the other while the other attempts to intensify a confrontation, the self may diminish the interpersonal friction by following the Taoist principles, because the person who understands Tao is the one who has more alternatives or choices in perception and interaction than the person who disobeys Tao. According to Lao Tzu, "Approach the universe with Tao, and evil will have no power; not that evil is not puissant, but its power will be harmless to people" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 60).

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* gives a very insightful discussion of this type of system and its effects on interpersonal behavior. According to Sun Tzu, people or groups who want to solve their conflicts with others should make a move that invalidates the aggressors' expectations (Sun Tzu, Chap. 1). To win without fighting and invalidate the other's expectation, a person must know others and know the self (Sun Tzu, Chap. 3). The victory of a military force is determined by the opponent (Sun Tzu, Chap. 6).

Third, the effects of the universal and interpersonal systems on an individual's actions and perceptions are also mediated by the intrapersonal system, which consists of two opposite mental forces within the person (e.g., the cognition that enhances an accurate social perception and the cognition that distorts the perception; the force that justifies an action and the force that condemns the action). Because Taoism views people as a microcosm or small universe that is a part of, and the correspondence of, the large universe (macrocosm), the antithesis and unity of Yin and Yang and their alternation in the universe also operate within a person. According to Lao Tzu, all the pairs of opposites, such as shrink and expand, weak and strong, fall and raise, and receiving and giving, can be seen as the two possible aspects of each object. The intrapersonal system, which consists of the tendency toward Tao and the tendency to deviate from Tao, regulates social interaction in the following two ways: (1) Any attempt to change social behavior and perceptions depends upon not only various external forces and variables, but also the internal forces of the target person, who actively interprets and responds to the situation. (2) Within the person exist two internal forces. It is possible to alter social actions and perceptions because each entity must internally contain the possibilities for it to develop in the two directions before external forces can have any influences on the entity. A change in the direction congruous with Tao depends upon the individuals' awareness of the discrepancy between their actions or perceptions and the Taoist standards they accept.

The causes of interpersonal conflicts

Although conflicts among people and between people and nature generally result from people's deviation from Tao, Lao Tzu also identifies several tangible reasons for interpersonal discord.

First, the disharmony may originate from the ignorance of the precept "Reversal is the movement of Tao" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 40), which maintains that when things develop to extremes, they will evolve in the opposite directions. Those who do not know when to stop or who attempt to alter the movement of Tao will encounter troubles (Lao Tzu, Chap. 44).

Second, people who believe that they can subdue others by being belligerent, violent, angry, and supercilious may temporarily repress conflicts, but they cannot create interpersonal harmonies, because violence and intimidation, which are contradictory to Tao, can only perpetuate conflicts and tensions (Lao Tzu, Chap. 30 & 68).

Third, individuals who are hard, stiff, unbending, and are unaware of alternatives will inevitably put themselves in predicaments of conflict (Lao Tzu, Chap. 76).

The concept of nonaction and the meanings of changes in people's actions or perceptions

In the following discussion, I'd like to use the Taoist concept "nonaction" to illustrate how the operations of the three systems (e.g., the Tao and Te, the similarities and differences between two interacting people, and the two intrapersonal opposite forces) govern the processes of conflict resolution.

As a key connotation of Te, the nonaction (wu-wei) elucidated in various Taoist literature does not imply passiveness or acquiescence. According to Lao Tzu, Tao abides in nonaction, yet nothing is left undone (Chap. 37). When nothing is done, nothing is left undone (Chap. 48). In contrast with the concept of action, which refers to goal-directed initiatives by an actor, nonaction refers to the intentional lack of action in the natural and social worlds. Nonaction differs from omission, which refers to the failure to do or neglect of something that is required.

According to Taoism, changes in people's perceptions or behavior are necessary and possible only when they are aberrant from Tao. If they do not deviate from Tao but someone (e.g., a researcher or psychologist) tries to alter them, then it is the someone whose thinking or actions should be rectified.

Traditional Western research on social actions and perceptions usually involves the study of how the presence of a stimulus (e.g., sex, race) affects people's actions or perceptions, but it neglects the fact

that both the presence or absence of a stimulus can produce particular changes in people's conducts or cognition.

How an actor can use nonaction to change the other's actions that exacerbate interpersonal contentions

Taoism assumes that nonaction can lead to the reduction of conflicts and changing behavior in the desired direction only when the actor understands how to use nonaction according to the operations of the three systems, each of which specifies a situation related to the other that the actor must be aware of in order to unravel conflicts.

First, an actor can use nonaction to change the other's conduct and perceptions when the actor is aware of the operation of Tao, understanding all alternative factors that can lead to the end and how things will develop without interference in the natural course of the events. Taoism indicates that an actor's actions toward the target person are only one of myriad forces (various natural or psychological forces) that influence the person. Everything in the world develops and transforms according to some laws or patterns. High winds do not last all morning. Heavy rain does not last all day (Lao Tzu, Chap. 23). The world is ruled by letting things take their course, not by interfering (Lao Tzu, Chap. 48). The Yin and Yang of Entities alternate in time and space even without interference. For example, long and short contrast each other; high and low rest upon each other; voice and sound harmonize each other; front and back follow one another. Therefore, the sage goes about nonaction, teaching through non-talking (Lao Tzu, Chap. 2).

The Taoist idea about no interference in people's actions or perceptions is also supported by the studies based on the theory of psychological reactance. They have suggested that an action may have the opposite effects desired by the actor, people may be motivated to do something antithetical to the actor's intention if they feel their freedom of doing that thing is deprived (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). When people's freedoms to hold some attitudes are threatened by others' persuasions, they often exhibit negative attitude changes or "boomerang effect," by moving in a direction contrary to the one advocated (Heller, Pallak & Picek, 1973).

Second, an actor in a conflict situation can also use nonaction to thwart the other's offense by employing the knowledge of the interpersonal system based on the consideration of both the self and the other's alternatives in perception and interaction. The self should use the alternatives that transcend those of the other, rather than confirming the anticipations of the other who intends to escalate the conflict.

An actor's nonaction can curtail an offender's pugnacity by invalidating the assailant's expectations about the effects of an assault on the actor or by creating uncertainty that demands reduction. For example,

people who engage in behaviors of rancorous nature always assume that the effects of their deeds are perceived as similar by the victims of the conducts. If a person remains untouched after being vilified, the calm actually invalidates the effectiveness of the offender's denigration. Obviously, because people's actions are regulated by how they interpret and understand situations and interaction (Harre & Gillett, 1994; Kelly, 1955; Heider, 1958; Karniol, 1990), when the offenders realize what they believed to be valid is ineffective on the victim, they are likely to change their actions and the related cognition.

Third, the Taoist nonaction may minimize interpersonal conflicts by affecting the aggressors' intrapersonal system, making them aware that they have breached some internal standards to which they adhere. In other words, achieving real interpersonal harmonies and solving interpersonal conflicts are based on the perpetrators' realization that their actions or perceptions have strayed from Tao.

It can be argued that Lao Tzu emphasizes that people should repay resentment with *Te* (Chap. 63), because *Te*, which is exemplified by nonaction, can impede the others' offenses by augmenting their awareness that their indignation is unjust. The studies based on equity theory, for example, corroborate the Taoist precept by manifesting that people are concerned with whether the outcomes they receive are congruent with what they input. Inequity is a distressing state and motivates people to restore and maintain equity by changing their behaviors (e.g., Adams, 1965; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

However, the nonaction of an individual who is unfairly treated may not create the perceived inequity for the assailant without at least the following three conditions: (1) The aggressor must be aware of the effects of his/her actions. For example, I cannot educate an egocentric roommate who plays loud music with nonaction if he or she is unaware of the disturbing effect. (2) The antagonist has imposed his/her expectations on the victim, not someone else. (3) The victim's nonaction serves only as a response to the offender's encroachment. That is, the nonaction must be justified.

In short, nonaction that can lead to conflict resolution is based on the actor's understanding of how things will develop without active interference in their natural courses, how nonaction can invalidate the offender's expectations, and how nonaction can influence the forces within the person that enhance the accurate perceptions of reality or the development of a justice principle.

The conclusions

The above discussions indicate that although the Taoist approach was formulated more than two millennia ago, it still can provide a unique perspective for examining and understanding human behavior and conflict resolution. Because conflicts, their escalations, and resolu-

tions characterize various types of human interaction, the Taoist model has a great potential to be applied to such diverse domains as business management, the prevention of violence, counseling and intervention, and the diminution of intergroup conflicts. In particular, I believe that the following Taoist precepts merit attention in Western psychological research:

First, Taoism assumes that there are two antithetical forces in the universal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal systems that contribute to the development of an interpersonal or intergroup conflict: the force that exacerbates the conflict and the force that diminishes it. In contrast, psychological research in the West tends to focus on the variables that intensify a conflict but is inclined to ignore the factors that reduce it. For example, most Western psychological studies of the causes of prejudice have examined the variables (e.g., social categorization, authoritarianism, realistic conflict) that, if present, will increase prejudice, but the investigations have overlooked social, cognitive, motivational, and other variables that, if present, will lessen prejudice (Sun, 1993).

Second, the Taoist ideas about interpersonal dynamics suggest that a conflict between two opponents persists often because the person who tries to attain harmony with the other does not know more alternatives (e.g., alternative ways to categorize, evaluate, explain, and act in, the situation) than the other who attempts to intensify the confrontation. This principle may also be applied to understand the issue of international conflicts. For example, a powerful nation that tries to use an economic sanction to compel a weak nation to give in on some issues often feels disappointed, because the powerful nation fails to consider and evaluate options other than the economic sanctions and the other's alternatives in dealing with it. I believe that this principle has not been absorbed into Western research on the maintenance mechanisms of both interpersonal and international frictions.

Third, as previously indicated, under some conditions, a nonaction is more effective in solving a conflict than an action. The concept of nonaction appears to deserve more appreciation in the Western psychology.

Fourth, according to Taoism, the best way to weaken a behavior is to first strengthen it. That which shrinks, must first expand. That which fails, must first be strong. That which is cast down, must first be raised (Lao Tzu, Chap. 36). This proposition is sustained by a body of studies (see Hunsley, 1988; Wegner, 1989), and it merits further investigation.

Psychological research in the West can benefit from assimilating the Taoist ideas about human interaction.

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Footnotes

¹The quotations in this article are based on both the English translations and the Chinese versions of the original manuscripts listed in the references.