



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Realizing the desires as rulers in *Tao Te Ching*

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1. Introduction

Most people think that the idea of desire is considered as something ameliorative, but whether in Confucianism, Buddhism, or Daoism it can be seen as a pejorative concept, something that we need to release and keep away. The notion of desire *yu* 欲 is raised in several chapters of *Tao Te Ching*. Laozi teaches us to release our desires and to give up selfishness to help others and restore peace in the world.

Firstly, the Cambridge dictionary defines a desire as a strong feeling that you want something. Want something and desire something are two similar concepts, thus Hans-Georg Moeller says that ‘the rule of the state is nothing that the sage literally “wants”’¹. Desires is also a feeling which is concerning our emotions and our psychology. Indeed ‘to desire is to be in a particular state of mind’² and this state of mind connects to a theory which is ‘having a desire is a matter of having disposition to act’³. Therefore, desire is an aspect of struggling against ourselves and sometimes goes further than we think. Then, difficulties will appear because desire has no limit, Laozi said in chapter 44 ‘knowledge of the limit brings no danger’⁴.

Through *Tao Te Ching* why do we need to release our desires? What consequences does it have? How does it affect others or the world? Knowing the origins and the reasons for our desires is a fundamental step to resolving them, and in this way, we can learn the methods from Laozi’s wisdom.

¹ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 87.

² Tim Schroeder, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/desire/>> [accessed 22 July 2022].

³ Tim Schroeder, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [accessed 22 July 2022].

⁴ Yuanchong Xu, *The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2013), p. 98.

2. The reasons for realizing desires

Our environment changes as far as our thought and we are never sure about what we think permanently. Our desires are an excellent example to illustrate this situation, so we will first analyze the causes described by Laozi and give an important consequence that they can lead to.

2.1. Causes of desires

According to the definition of the term mentioned previously, desire can be classified into two categories: physical and nonphysical desires. Physical desires tend to be a desire for possession of a material thing that can be seen and touched such as books, electronic devices, clothes, etc. And when it comes to nonphysical desires, the varieties are wider, it can be for knowledge, entertainment, power, competition, emotion (such as excitement, love), and so on. We can observe that in human minds there is a very large number of desires, and they are infinite, Epicurus argued that ‘desires are difficult to satisfy, in part because they have no natural limit’⁵.

As an illustration, ability, and knowledge are one of the most important sources of desire, because it constructs people’s thought and brings people to their aims. That’s why Laozi suggest keeping people away from it, ‘sages constantly (tries to) keep them without knowledge and without desire’,⁶ otherwise he will propose for ‘those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act (on it)’⁷. Laozi thinks that emptiness and being unknown is the strategy for society to bring peace and to be in order, so he ensures that if wanted to avoid rivalries it is necessary to have equality between people by not valuating and employing men of superior ability⁸. Similarly, there is a famous idea that is discussed by people in our society that there will be no harm without comparison among people.

Consequently, skills and knowledge lead people to reputation which is one of the dangerous desires that they pursue the most in their life, especially the rulers. They

⁵ Tim O’Keefe, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://iep.utm.edu/epicur/#SH5c>> [accessed 23 July 2022].

⁶ James Legge, *Chinese Text Project* (1891) <<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>> [accessed 22 July 2022].

⁷ Legge, *Chinese Text Project*, [accessed 22 July 2022].

⁸ Legge, *Chinese Text Project*, [accessed 22 July 2022].

believe that “reputation” can give them everything they want, and they can control their surroundings and populations. By expanding reputation desires, monetary preferences will also rise simultaneously. That is why we have said that desires have no limits because one follows directly another one. Laozi asks, in chapter 44, three questions in which we have to choose between two elements. We can admit that it makes us think before deciding and knowing what is beneficial for us. He is trying to awaken our wisdom to avoid suffering and ‘know when to stop’⁹, then danger will not follow. He said ‘which is closer (to you) in comparison with one another, reputation or life? Which is more valuable [...] life or possessions? Which is more harmful, getting reputation and profit or losing one’s life?’¹⁰ Are reputation and power more important than one’s life? Because most people while they are pursuing their fame, they are forgetting and lose themselves. People in these conditions cannot pay attention to their environment as if they were alone in the world, and they will become selfish and produce a lot of trouble. So, ‘Laozi thereby reminds ordinary people to treat their lives as precious, and not to struggle with little concern for their bodies (and lives) for reputation and profit’¹¹. Chen Guying argued that ‘looking around, we can see people everywhere in society playing tricks and being shift in the arena of acquisition and competition, what they obtain and miss, preserve and lose is actually quite obvious’¹². As a result, we can observe that investment in reputation and desires lead to one’s downfall.

Finally, a materialistic person is described as a belief that purchasing and having possessions is not only important but a key to happiness in life¹³. A lot of people, especially women (for instance for clothes), seek material desires to unwind. Although they think that possession can bring comfort and happiness, it honestly can only fulfill a short term of pleasure. And this short term of happiness betrayed them, arousing the endless pursuit of that little instantaneous happiness. It returns to the philosophy of limitless desires. Laozi also firmly tells people to abandon material desires because they can cause disorders and consequences. In chapter 12, Laozi mentioned the drawbacks of the five senses. Chen Guying thinks that ‘hunting frantically serves (only) to unhinge the

⁹ D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p.51.

¹⁰ Paul J. D’Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 269.

¹¹ D’Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 270.

¹² D’Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 270.

¹³ IXL Learning, *Vocabulary.com* <<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/materialism>> [accessed 23 July 2022].

mind'¹⁴ and 'rare goods cause people's behavior to deviate from the norm'¹⁵ explaining the reasons why sages 'rid themselves of the temptations of material desires and abide in a life of peaceful contentment'¹⁶. In addition, Chen Guying criticized people in civilized life, he argued that desire 'witnesses how the upper classes live, desperate for whatever stimulates the senses, set adrift in pursuit after wealth and fame, and engaging in debauchery and lewdness, all of which causes their heart-minds to be disturbed and restless'¹⁷. And all these desires increase repeatedly and lead to civil or world war. So, everything commences from a small thing.

2.2. War as a consequence of desires

Desire is a dangerous state of mind, it can cause a lot of trouble in the world, Hans-Georg Moeller thought that 'human desires are identified as a main cause of war and social disorder in the Laozi. They are at the core of the "human problem"'¹⁸. The Great Learning explains the same idea:

From the loving example of one family a whole state becomes loving, and from its courtesies the whole state becomes courteous while, from the ambition and perverseness of the One man, the whole state may be led to rebellious disorder; -such is the nature of the influence.¹⁹

Perhaps we will not believe that one's behavior can influence such a level but honestly, it does. Influence is something that has a wide power, even on the negative and positive side, for instance, if a family realizes that it is necessary to recycle waste to reduce global warming, they will commence to do it. And we believe that they will progressively influence their neighborhoods up to a country and the whole world. The theory of influencing gradually doesn't only appear in this aspect, it also develops on a lot of sides (such as learning, belief, habit, etc.).

In the same case, during the Shang dynasty, a relative of king Zhou named Ji Zi 箕子 saw action from the king and immediately judge that the country will not prosper. The reason for his perception is that king Zhou began to use chopsticks made of ivory. As a

¹⁴ D'Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 107.

¹⁵ D'Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 107.

¹⁶ D'Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 107.

¹⁷ D'Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 107.

¹⁸ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 87.

¹⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics Vol. I* (Taipei: SMC Publishing INC., 2016), pp. 370-371.

consequence, Ji Zi believes that it is impossible to only use an ivory chopstick without a jade glass, and so on. So, the palace and the carriages will gradually become luxurious too.²⁰ We can see that ‘the ambition and perverseness of the One man, the whole state may be led to rebellious disorder’, hence the leader of the state should be cautious in his every single behavior. Because ‘a government that is mainly focused on fulfilling its desires tend to neglect its administrative duties and be more concerned with increasing its wealth and power’²¹, and the rulers will tend to exploit their state and take from their people. And then it will ‘produce a society in which people have to become robbers themselves to survive’²², and this is the beginning of the war.

3. Methods of realizing the desires

Desires create so much disaster in our life, what and how does Laozi bring us solutions? Everything is relative, even for desire, knowing it helps us to keep away from selfishness and lead to a non-action world.

3.1. Relation between desire and satisfaction

Since desires cause so many drawbacks, we surely have solutions to solve them. Hans-Georg Moeller said that ‘the elimination of desire is the result of the “mastery of satisfaction”’²³. He explained very clearly the term “satisfaction” as a method of liberating desires, he argued that:

The Daoist sages are ‘masters of satisfaction’ because they know when to stop. Not knowing when to stop means, quite logically, never to be satisfied. The very emergence of desire is thus a symptom of failure in the mastery of satisfaction. Only those who are not satisfied desire.

Chapter 46 of *Tao Te Ching* also mentioned that ‘the sufficiency of contentment is an enduring and unchanging sufficiency’²⁴. To be satisfied with everything means that one

²⁰ Han Zhaoqi, *Xinshi Shiji* (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2008), p. 1850.

Original Text: 「紂始為象箸，箕子歎曰：『彼為象箸，必為玉栴；為栴，則必思遠方珍怪之物而御之矣。與馬宮室之漸自此始，不可振也。』」

²¹ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 91.

²² Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 90.

²³ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 92.

²⁴ Legge, *Chinese Text Project*, [accessed 24 July 2022].

does not want anything more than what one already obtains, which means that one has not any desires at all, even has not the idea of desire in one's mind.

Chen Guying defined an appropriate side of satisfaction which is 'the type of satisfaction that understand how to know satisfaction is everlasting satisfaction'²⁵. Why did he have this perception? He believes that one can understand the concept of "satisfaction of understanding" and is even more fulfilled with the term "satisfaction", how could he still be unsatisfied? One already gets the lowest level of satisfaction he will never again need any desires or even the notion of "desire". Laozi directly judges that 'there is no crime greater than having too many desires; there is no disaster greater than not being content; there is no misfortune greater than being covetous'²⁶. Laozi confirms that having a great desire to possess something is the greatest pessimism. He used the characters *dayu* 大於 twice which means "greater than" to emphasize the disadvantages of the desires and to explain that there is nothing superior to that.

3.2. Rulers need to lack selfishness and practice non-action

In addition, keeping people away from their desires is also a method of unselfishness. In chapter 3, Laozi thinks that emptying the mind and refraining from actions is the way to keep people at rest. Thus, he considers that 'not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder'²⁷. On the contrary, people need to reduce selfish desires to govern the world. Laozi used, in chapter 7, a metaphor of the sages' lack of selfish intentions with the heaven and earth in which they do not operate on their behalf. Because 'when the opportunity presents itself, most people in his position would be unable to keep themselves from giving free rein to their desire to possess things'²⁸. An ideal ruler has a spirit of modesty, they will not put their desires first and will avoid prioritizing their interests, because 'if the seductions of power take hold of a leader, and if he develops desires along with his superior position, he will ultimately lose it'²⁹. Therefore, rulers should break through self-centeredness in which they will be able to realize the needs of the people and open mutual communication to resolve

²⁵ D'Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 275.

²⁶ Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, p.53.

²⁷ Legge, *Chinese Text Project*, [accessed 25 July 2022].

²⁸ D'Ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 83.

²⁹ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 90.

misunderstandings.

Lastly, the sages' solution to every movement that surrounds us is the non-action. In chapter 57, Laozi mentioned that a sage 'will do nothing (of purpose)'³⁰ and people will solve their problems by themselves, which means that sages 'will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct, [...] sages will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity'³¹. "Actions" is the causes of everything, and these actions come from people's desires, thus 'the "peacefulness" of the Daoist sage-ruler is an effect of a total eradication of personal ambitions'³².

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we understand that the need to release the desires is to approach the Dao mentioned by Laozi which he spends his whole life to pursue it. "Desires" are something that we should keep a distance from it, because 'pleasure results from getting what you want (desire-satisfaction) and pain from not getting what you want (desire-frustration)'³³. So even if we get the pleasure of what we want, are we really satisfied? As previously stated, desire has no limit, so it is very difficult to satisfy, and even satisfied it is only for a short term of happiness.

'Knowledge and emotions do not make people happier, because they cause trouble and make things more difficult to deal with'³⁴. And knowledge can lead rulers and people to the pursuit of a reputation in which they will become selfish, and this dangerous state of mind may be the origin of disorder in the world. Therefore, Laozi thinks that "desirelessness", which means in other words the "mastery of satisfaction", is the solution to everything. Because 'if there are no desires at its "heart," the whole social body will be without desires. It will be internally and externally peaceful'³⁵. In other words, Hans-Georg Moeller interprets that 'desires indicate the absence of satisfaction, and satisfaction indicates the absence of desire'³⁶.

³⁰ Legge, *Chinese Text Project*, [accessed 27 July 2022].

³¹ Legge, *Chinese Text Project*, [accessed 27 July 2022].

³² Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 87.

³³ O'Keefe, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [accessed 25 July 2022].

³⁴ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 96.

³⁵ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 87.

³⁶ Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 93.

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