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Jack R
Toward a New Anarchism: Anarcho-Daoism
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the *DDJ*, and how past critiques of anarchist interpretations are not convincing.

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The latter half makes more sense in the context of abandoning conventional wisdom in favor of what the *Dao* provides. The former half is more difficult to grasp, considering what we have discussed about the nature of the sage. Is this just a contradiction to reflect the contradictory nature of the *Dao*? Ought we abandon sages entirely? Maybe we want to cultivate ourselves to the point of not even needing a sage to serve as a moral guide, effectively rendering him useless. I think in all three cases, we are in accordance with anarchist principles. The purpose of quoting these chapters is to show that there is no clear-cut answer to the question of the sage. One chapter alone proves nothing, as we see constant contradictions. Therefore, to say that chapter 60 alone undermines an anarchist interpretation is misguided; we ought to look at common themes within the *DDJ.*

In sum, we have described the role of the sage as a moral leader whose alignment with the *Dao* inspires others to align themselves with the *Dao* through their own free will. The sage opposes directly imposing himself onto the populace in favor of a noncoercive method of evoking the *Dao.*

Conclusion

To this point, I have laid out general anarchist principles opposing coercion and political authority. Then, I discussed the differences between diluted and pure anarchism, and how a smooth-running governmental structure is permissible in the former, thus allowing for more loose guidelines when interpreting the *DDJ.* Next, I discussed the anarchist principles laid out in the *DDJ* and how easily one could interpret the rejection of bureaucracy and a return to a simpler life as anarchistic. Following that, I tried to formulate a version of the sage king that is a noncoercive authority who is more of a moral teacher than monarch. I think I have sufficiently demonstrated the anarchist principles present in

Introduction

Political thinking arises by going beyond the individual. Specifically, we consider the individual in a network of relations within a city, state, or nation. Various schools of political thought have different conceptions of what these relationships entail. While some argue for a more rigid system of affairs, philosophies rooted in individualism advocate for fewer restrictions. In the case of anarchism, some more diluted forms argue in favor of noncoercive authorities. This essay will argue that the *Dao De Jing* advocates for a system of diluted anarchy. Though several contemporary scholars doubt that the *DDJ* endorses such a form of anarchy, I hope to demonstrate that, at any rate, it implies one. The crux of this argument is the role of the sage in relation to his people. The sage serves as a moral leader who teaches through *wu wei,* or non-action. His benevolence and mastery of the *Dao* lead his constituents to align themselves with him through their own free will. Therefore, the sage can exist in an anarchist society as a moral leader, rather than a political leader.

Background on Anarchism

Anarchism's loose principles lend itself to sprout many variations. Therefore, rather than give a concrete definition, I will propose some guiding principles of anarchism to allow us to understand what could constitute anarchism. Unfortunately, much of the work comprising the corpus of anarchist philosophy comes from outside the scholastic tradition. Thus, we are presented with an issue: a mass amount of diverse anarchist texts with very few common principles. However, in the most abstract sense, Richard Sylvan proposes three notions common to *most* schools of anarchism: opposition to "authority, coercion and, normally comprehending

both, the state" (Goodin et al.).[1] Sylvan thinks that the former two entail the latter, which is to say that someone who opposes coercive authority should naturally oppose the modern political state. This definition is about as specific as Western anarchism gets, due to the massive number of branches that have sprouted in the past couple centuries.

Sylvan also distinguishes between "diluted" anarchism and "pure" anarchism (Goodin et al.). A more diluted anarchism can "endorse carefully controlled coercive authorities," allowing for something akin to a smooth-operating governmental structure (Goodin et al.). Certain governmental structures are permissible so long as they are careful to avoid exerting a coercive authority over the populace. To clarify this position, we should look to John Rawls. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls writes: "political power is always coercive power backed by the government's use of sanctions, for government alone has authority to use force in upholding its laws" (Rawls). By this, we can understand that, traditionally, countries enforce laws via coercive forces, such as law enforcement in the form of police. Anarchists oppose these types of authority. They do not all, however, oppose noncoercive authority. More diluted forms of anarchy permit some governmental structures.

Now that I have discussed the basic principles of anarchism, I think I ought to describe what anarchism is not. Anarchism is not chaos; as previously stated, smooth-operating governmental structures are permissible. Each branch of anarchism has some sort of authority. This authority typically serves as the branch's epistemology. For example, anarcho-primitivists think that the Industrial Society suppresses our innate drive to perform dangerous tasks in order to lead a fulfilling life. Anarcho-primitivist Ted Kaczynski argues that Industrial Society "[forces] human behavior into the mold

[1] I say "most" schools of anarchist thought because some branches (e.g., anarcho-capitalism, anarcho-monarchism, anarcho-nationalism, among others) do not fulfill these principles. Whether or not these ideologies deserve the "anarcho-" prefix is not important for this paper.

conclusions from what an author *did not* say instead of what they did say borders on a psychoanalytic approach to evaluating philosophical texts. The fact that Lao Tzu does not explicitly deny all authority does not preclude us from interpreting the *DDJ* in that way. Moreover, I have already given an exhaustive argument as for why the sage himself does not violate any anarchist maxims.

There is, however, one chapter that challenges those wanting to read this text as anarchistic. The chapter that haunts us is chapter 60, in which Lao Tzu claims that

> Ruling a big kingdom is like cooking a small fish (Wu, 60).

Indeed, Feldt and Stamatov both think that this chapter nails the coffin in the anarchist reading of the *DDJ*. However, I think we ought to slow down and offer a more naturalistic reading of this chapter. This is not an explicit call for the establishment of a large kingdom whose ruler barely controls what the day-to-day operations entail. I think this passage is best compared to chapter 17 in which Lao Tzu posits that

> The Highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware (Wu, 17).

It calls for a reduction in the amount of meaningful power the sage has in his kingdom. It calls for a self-sustaining society in which the people, due to their alignment with the *Dao* and simple lives, do not need a sage to impose strict orders on them. Rather, they have the immortal *Dao* to follow. Both chapters 17 and 60 call for a reduction in political power held by the ruler of a kingdom in favor of more self-reliant citizens. The contradicting passages in the *DDJ* also lead us to have conflicting views of sagely wisdom, as some translations of chapter 19 tell us to

> Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom (Feng&English, 19).

what it brings. Instead of learning and doing from what we learn, we ought to act instinctively through the *Dao*. This leads to two chapters comparing the narrator's actions — presumably the sage — to those of a toddler or newborn baby.[4] This is the preferred form of "revolution," if one would like to call it that. Instead of a peasant class collectively gathering to topple a centralized authority only to instate a new centralized authority, the *DDJ* offers a more individualistic approach to revolution. By renouncing knowledge, one emancipates oneself from centralized authority its aberrations. Instead of imposing the will of the peasant class onto the populace, one allows the *Dao*to impose itself on oneself.

Feldt lays out a number of unconvincing arguments in favor of a non-anarchistic reading of the *DDJ*. While I agree that there is some leeway — as both anarchism and Daoism are loosely-defined and often self-contradicting ideologies — his arguments do not hold much weight. For instance, he says that instead of "making these frequent arguments for minimal government interference, the texts could have simply argued that the government or ruler is illegitimate or ought not to exist" (Feldt). I think this is a bad reading of the *DDJ* and a really unconvincing argument. Firstly, it ignores the poetic element of the *DDJ*. The *DDJ's* obtuseness is intentional — it mirrors the chaos and harmony of the balancing *Dao*, also known as the *yin* and *yang*.When does the *DDJ* "simply argue" anything? The fact that it has been translated so many different times demonstrates how multi-faceted the text is. I think Feldt is trying to hold it to the same standard as Western political philosophy, the likes of which are more straightforward and linear. Ultimately, this leads to a problematic reading of the *DDJ*. Secondly, he tries to argue that in order to have a certain interpretation of the *DDJ* — in this instance, an anarchist reading — Lao Tzu must explicitly express a political idea. I find this unconvincing for aforementioned reasons, but I should add that drawing

[4] Cf. chapters 20 and 28.

that society requires" (Kaczynski). From this example, we can see that primitivism specifically sees human nature as the authority to follow. Each branch of anarchism diagnoses similar problems, but the solutions all differ. Therefore, when people, like AleksandarStamatov, say that "there can be no correct or legitimate authority," we can reject this claim (Stamatov). Authority is an invariable part of human existence. Therefore, anarchists think that we ought to follow their conceptions of correct authority in order to live in the best possible society. Within Daoism specifically, authority is twofold: the sage and the *Dao*. One must align oneself with the *Dao*, while looking toward the sage for inspiration. The notion that all hierarchy or all authority is illegitimate in anarchist thought is demonstrably false. More modern anarchists, such as Noam Chomsky, proudly argue in favor of anarchism. This, by the very nature of an argument, places the political philosophy of anarchism above other philosophies, like liberal democracy and fascism. They act as teachers trying to convince students. This relationship is hierarchical, yet permissible. The relationship is not coercive in any meaningful sense. The student is free to retain whatever beliefs they so choose. In sum, not all authority is illegitimate in anarchist thought. We have shown that noncoercive authority is permissible by explaining the relationship between teacher and student. With this understanding, we can proceed to discuss the immediate similarities between the *DDJ* and anarchist principles.

Direct Similarities

In Daoist lore, Lao Tzu abandons bureaucratic society to "leave the civilized world forever" (Laozi., and R. L Wing). Before venturing west, however, a guard asks him to ascribe some of his knowledge for future generations to study; following this interaction, Lao Tzu wrote the *DDJ*. Daoism began as a reaction to the increasingly bureaucratic structure in which Lao Tzu lived, at least, ac-

cording to Daoist lore. Frederic Bender thinks that certain utopian elements drove Lao Tzu to retreat west: "the underlying assumption of the [Daoist] utopia is that nature and natural sentiments are good while civilization's influences are corrupting" (Bender). Per Bender, Lao Tzu abandoned the state in favor of a more natural living with the *Dao*. Certainly, we can see a similarity here between anarchism and Daoism, and extrapolate that a form of anarchism would facilitate alignment with the *Dao*. How can we align ourselves with a primordial natural force if we live in a society dominated by institutions? The more that people rely on institutions, the further away from the Dao — and thus more corrupted — they become.[2]We can see this in the *DDJ* as well:

> When the Great Tao was abandoned,
>
> There appeared humanity and justice (Wu, 18).

The negative effects evoked after abandoning the *Dao* clearly show a departure in lifestyle. *Prima facie*, this departure from the *Dao* appears to be beneficial. For, a society should focus on developing its conceptions of "humanity" and "justice." However, the problem lies in semantics. These terms usher in their opposites: "inhumanity" and "injustice," which lead us to have to find meaningful differences between the two. This problem did not exist when we followed the Great *Dao*. Prior to abandoning the *Dao*, we knew how to act instinctually instead of having to categorize our actions.

The change from simple societies to overly-bureaucratic societies causes us to abandon the *Dao*in favor of unnatural institutions. Therefore, the *DDJ* calls for a return. Moreover, it criticizes the violence and inequality during the time in which it was written:

[2] This is akin to what Ralph Waldo Emerson declares in his essay titled "Self-Reliance": "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" (Emerson). Institutions in a society do not reflect the natural *Dao*. Therefore, Lao Tzu calls for abandoning them in favor of returning to a simpler time. We can see a glimpse of individualism within both philosophies.

guidance, aligning himself with the *Dao*, the nurturing force that sustains all life.

The notion of *te* comes from the sage when, as Bender puts it, "one is aware of and aligned with the forces operative" in the *Dao* (Bender). In this respect, actualization of alignment with the *Dao* inspires others to follow the sage. As previously mentioned, he does not assert himself onto the people. Therefore, it is up to the people to align themselves with the *Dao*. The sage's cultivation relies heavily on the principle of *wu wei*, or nonaction. The *Dao* is a chaotic force; accordingly, the sage does not try to impose his own actions on it. The sage knows that he is not as powerful as the *Dao*:

> Does anyone want to take over world and do what he wants with it?
>
> I don't see how he can success.
>
> The world is a sacred vessel,
>
> Which must not be tampered with or grabbed after.
>
> .....
>
> Therefore, the Sage avoids all extremes, excesses and extravagances (Wu, 29).

In this passage, we see that Lao Tzu thinks that the only force capable of ruling the world is the *Dao*. This is crucial to understand within the context of anarchism. When Alex Feldt says that the *DDJ* does not explicitly make any "rejection[s] of government or the state," he is half correct (Feldt). What he forgets to say, however, is that Lao Tzu calls for the *Dao* to control the world — not a state or government. In fact, I would argue that the state is symptomatic of a deeper problem that also manifests in the desire to abolish the state. The *DDJ* argues that the abolition of the state comes with the engendering of *wu wei*. This is not explicitly oriented toward anarchism, but would bring it into being nonetheless. The solution, per the *DDJ*, is to renounce knowledge gained from civil society and

The Role of the Sage

Much of the tension between anarchism and the *DDJ* lies with the sage. Some scholars will claim that anarchy sees all forms of authority as illegitimate and thus the existence of a sage precludes the *DDJ* from being an anarchist text. However, as we have shown previously, noncoercive authority can be legitimate. We must be careful when discussing the role of the sage as an "authority figure," because there are different senses of the phrase. Most scholars think that the existence of the sage undermines any possibility for anarchy. I will respond to these various critics by elaborating on the nuances of "authority."

As we have already discussed, Stamatov thinks that anarchists view all forms of authority as illegitimate. While this statement holds true for political authority, it is not true for *all* authority. We need to flesh out all senses of the notion of "authority." Certainly, the sage has more authority than his constituents. However, he is a moral force — not a political force. Because the sage acts in accordance with the *Dao*, the populace looks toward him as a moral guide. The *DDJ* describes the duties of the sage and the *Dao* in the last chapter:

> The [Dao] of Heaven is to benefit, not to harm.
>
> The [Dao] of the Sage is to do his duty, not to strive with anyone (Wu, 81).

Considering the sage's alignment with the beneficial force, it makes sense that his job is not to impose any coercive laws. The will of the sage is not important; it is not the responsibility of the sage to impose himself onto the population. If he were to do that, he would potentially detract from the power of the *Dao*. Instead, he should lead by example, and show how to align oneself with the *Dao*.In this sense, the sage does not use coercive forces on the population, such as law enforcement and laws. Rather, he leads by

> Rule a nation with justice
>
> .....
>
> The more laws and restrictions there are,
>
> The poorer people become.
>
> The sharper men's weapons,
>
> The more trouble in the land.
>
> The more ingenious and clever men are,
>
> The more strange things happen.
>
> The more rules and regulations,
>
> The more thieves and robbers (Feng&English, 57).

Here, Lao Tzu offers a social critique of burdening laws and regulations. For him, the *Dao* is the force we need to follow — not arbitrary laws and restrictions. There is some tension, however, regarding how we engage with the *Dao*. For, it is an enigmatic metaphysical force. Lao Tzu will say that the sage is the exemplar of following the Dao. In the same chapter mentioned above, the sage is described as follows:

> Therefore the sage says:
>
> I take no action and people are reformed.
>
> I enjoy peace and people become honest.
>
> I do nothing and people become rich.
>
> I have no desires and people return to the good and simple life (Feng&English, 57).

This passage specifically highlights the sage's nonaction, or *wu wei*. I will elaborate on this later when describing the particular roles of the sage and how he can fit into an anarchistic model, but for now we can say that the sage's nonaction is noncoercive. His

benevolence inspires people to model themselves after him: a return to simple living relies on the free will of the individual. Rather than being coerced by laws and law enforcement, the individual can make their own decisions while using the sage as a guide.

Lao Tzu describes the *Dao* as being such a strong force, one does not need more than the minimum food to sustain oneself. Moreover, one ought not brag or act in vain with the *Dao.*When describing excess, he says:

> In Tao [excess is] called 'unwanted food and extraneous growths,'
>
> Which are loathed by all things.
>
> Hence a man of the Tao does not set his heart upon them (Wu, 24).

The *Dao* itself is so strong, it precludes any need for excess. Excess, in the context of Lao Tzu, was the product of a highly organized bureaucracy. He did not want to see efforts channeled toward producing useless excess. Especially with respect to vanity, we can see that Lao Tzu puts the *Dao* above all humans. There is no need to assert oneself above anyone else; for, to do this is not worthwhile in the grand scheme of things, as the *Dao* is the natural and more powerful force. Moreover, doing this only leads one further astray from the *Dao.* From this passage, Lao Tzu seems to reject mortal authority in favor of submitting to the *Dao.*[3]

Finally, the *DDJ* calls for individual cultivation of benevolence. It sees benevolence as starting from within:

[3] Let us not make the mistake of thinking that the *Dao* violates the anarchist principles. Certain forces are permissible in anarchism so long as we choose to recognize them as legitimate. In this case, we have the ability to reject the *Dao*. Moreover, not all coercive forces are unjust. For example, anarcho-primitivism relies on human nature as its justification for a smaller, more primitive society. They do not reject human nature as being coercive. Rather, they think it is an invariable part of existence, and for that we need to accommodate it. The same principle applies to Daoists. The *Dao* is a nurturing force.

> What is well planted cannot be uprooted
>
> .....
>
> Cultivate Virtue in your own person,
>
> And it becomes a genuine part of you.
>
> Cultivate it in the family,
>
> And it will abide (Wu, 54).

Here, we can see the necessity for each individual to cultivate virtue and spread it across their family. The foundation of virtue must be strong, lest it diminish over time. The *DDJ* does not mandate that a certain governmental structure or institution be dedicated to developing this virtue. Stamatov argues that the government ought to follow the *Dao*: "the [*DDJ*] does not oppose government itself, but only the government which is not in accord with the standards of the *Dao*" (Stamatov). However, I would ask him if the government precedes the *Dao.* He suggests that government is permissible if it follows the *Dao*, but I will later demonstrate that the *DDJ* calls for a more individual rejection of the state. Government is not necessary to follow the *Dao*, and it detracts from the natural way of things. The institutions will always complicate some facet of living that was once simple. Therefore, Lao Tzu seems to trust each individual to make the right decision and pursue virtue on their own — independent of institutions or government. The only semblance of government is the sage, who is more of a moral authority rather than political authority. Like previously mentioned, Lao Tzu likely did not want strict laws enforcing cultivation in this way for fear of oppressing the populace and complicating social customs.

To this point, we have assessed some passages in the *DDJ* that can be read as anarchistic. Focal to the *DDJ* as an anarchist text is the role of the sage, which I will be discussing in detail.