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State Maternalism:
Rethinking Anarchist
Readings of the *Daodejing*
道德經

State Maternalism: Rethinking Anarchist Readings of the *Daodejing* 道德經

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Abstract

In this paper we review Western discourse on the relationship between Daoism and anarchist political theory. In particular, we focus on the anarchist reading of Daoism given by Roger Ames, and the more recent contrasting argument against reading Daoism as an anarchism by Alex Feldt. Centring our discussion on the *Daodejing* 道德經, we argue that, on the one hand, Laozi's 老子 political theory is less easily reconcilable with anarchist thinking than Ames suggests. On the other hand, we dispute Feldt's argument that Laozi's sage-ruler must, of necessity, maintain the capacity for coercive control. Counter to both Ames and Feldt, we suggest that Laozi's sage-ruler is better framed as a maternal overseer, in contrast to other more paternalistic extrapolations of Daoist thinking, such as that offered in the *Hanfeizi* 韓

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非子. In reading Laozi's thinking as a form of state “maternalism,” we aim to give a more distinctive voice to the nuances of early Daoist political theory.

Keywords: Daoism, Anarchism, Daodejing, Laozi’s Political Philosophy, Daoist Political Philosophy, Paternalism, Maternalism

Introduction

At the centre of Daoist political thinking we find criticisms of coercive forms of power and alternative models of non-coercive rulership. These points of emphasis provide a basis for the value of comparison between Daoist and anarchist political theory. To the extent that anarchism is definable, across its various forms, by a devout criticism of state coercion, one can see that there are evident affinities to be found between Daoist and anarchist approaches to politics, and to the relationship between the state and its citizens. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that Daoist political thinking is one of the most developed and coherent forms of anarchist thinking. As Clarke emphatically states this:

The *Lao Tzu* is one of the great anarchist classics. Indeed, there are good reasons to conclude that no important philosophical work of either East or West has ever been so thoroughly pervaded by the anarchistic spirit, and that none of the Western political thinkers known as major anarchist theorists (Godwin, Proudhon, Stirner, Bakunin, and Kropotkin) has been nearly as consistent in drawing out the implications of the anarchist perspective. (Clarke 1983: 65)

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The question of whether one can go so far as to suggest that Daoism in general is a form of anarchism is complicated by the diversity of approaches to the common theme of non-coercion that appears in various foundational Daoist texts. In this sense, it is by no means obvious that the texts themselves can be treated collectively as providing a straightforward answer to this question. The notion of *wuwei* 無為 (non-interference, non-coercive action, or the action-of-non-action) appears first in the context of a strategy for ideal rulership in Daoism's founding text, the *Daodejing* 道德經/the *Laozi* 老子. Therefore, in order to provide a more focused answer to the question of the relationship between Daoism and anarchism, we will restrict discussion in the following to the political vision espoused in the *Daodejing*. Our approach runs counter to the method employed by John Rapp in his *Daoism and Anarchism* (2012). Rapp notes:

Some scholars and practitioners of Daoism would argue that no clear school of Daoist thought exists and that to focus on those relatively few thinkers who brought out the anarchist themes in the classical Daoist texts risks distorting the essence of Daoism by radicalizing it. (Ibid.: 7).

However, we do not need to go as far as claiming that no clear school of Daoism exists to argue that the *Daodejing* presents a distinctive political vision that can be treated on its own terms. While there are passages within the text that may be said to align with an “anarchist spirit” (Ibid.: 25), we would argue that to label the text as a whole as an anarchist one is to treat the overall ideas about governance in the

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Daodejing reductively. Rather than interpreting the text directly, Rapp approaches the *Daodejing* through the lens of later Wei-Jin thinkers that are more easily identifiable with anarchism. His claim is that these later thinkers are merely highlighting anarchist elements already apparent in the *Daodejing*:

...The full-fledged anarchism of the Wei-Jin thinkers was firmly based on classical Daoist texts, which the later Wei-Jin Daoists only highlighted and did not distort. (Ibid.).

However, given the diversity of opinions on whether the *Daodejing* is actually an anarchist text, the assumption as to the authority of these Wei-Jin interpretations is suspect. Rapp later claims that,

To make the case for radical [anarchist] Daoism as genuine and intrinsic, one should start with the unambiguous anarchist Daoism of the Warring States and Wei-Jin periods and work backward to the time of the Guodian texts. (Ibid.: 76).

Even if there may be highly insightful interpretations among these later thinkers there are still, as we will see, numerous passages in the *Daodejing* itself that can be said to conflict with a strong anarchist interpretation.

Criticisms of Daoism as an Anarchism: Alex Feldt

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Despite the seeming affinity, based primarily in the notion of *wuwei* 無為, between Daoism and anarchism, there are also reasons to suspect a profound and perhaps irreconcilable gap existing between the two traditions. This is firstly because the *Daodejing* 道德經 lacks the outward condemnation of the notion of the state, and of governance by a singular ruler, that is so readily identifiable within most anarchist theories. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that the *Daodejing* is a text directly addressing a ruler of some form on how best to govern and even to gain power over his (or her) people.¹ Secondly, the text offers a particularly pronounced argument that a state should be governed from the vantage point of a centralized authority. In chapter 11, Laozi 老子 uses the often-cited metaphor of the hub of a wheel in relation to its spokes to describe the relationship between the *Dao* 道 (the way of all things) and *wanwu* 萬物 (ten thousand things/all things). By implication, chapter 11 suggests that the sage-ruler, embodying a microcosm of this relationship, occupies a central position in relation to the diverse aspects of society and the various groups of people who constitute the populous. To summarize then, as Feldt puts this, “the *Laozi* accepts the very thing rejected by anarchists: a centralized political authority” (2010: 329).

Even where we might be able to identify, in certain anarchist strands, the idea that some form of authority structure will always emerge naturally in the process of human socialisation, there remains a profound suspicion as to idea that such a structure would amount to a hierarchical or centralized form of governance. This is interesting because the *Daodejing* seems to be recommending measures for the *centralized* consolidation of power on the part of a would-be-ruler. As Feldt further explains this, if the *Daodejing* were extrapolating an anarchist critique,

¹ When referring to the character of the sage or sage-ruler, we use male pronouns hereafter. This is not a normative choice but merely reflects the general assumption of male rulership in pre-Qin China.

Rather than making [...] frequent arguments for minimal government interference, the text could have simply argued that the government or ruler is illegitimate or ought not to exist. However, no such claim is offered. The text consistently assumes the legitimacy of a political order governed by a single ruler. (2010: 328)

However, the paradoxical twist to the *Daodejing*'s view of centralized power, is that such a consolidation of efficacy can only be achieved through the outward rejection of coercive measures of control. The Daoist sage thus gains power over the state only to the extent that his power is not actively exerted: "In wanting to rule the world be always non-interfering in going about its business, for in being interfering you make yourself unworthy of ruling the world" (*Daodejing* 2003: ch.48).² We can take this as a basis for concluding that the sage-ruler does occupy a position of power (*de* 德) over the state, he is after all "the shepherd of the world" (*Daodejing* 2007: ch.22), but only insofar as he resists interfering with its citizens. In this sense, Feldt's argument against the anarchist reading of the text ignores the extent to which the consolidation of power on behalf of the Daoist ruler embodies a critique of aggressive or coercive means of governance.

Hence in the words of the sages:

We do things non-coercively (*wuwei*)

And the common people develop along their own lines....

² We have used both the Ames and Hall (2003) translation as well as the Moeller (2007) translation of the *Daodejing*, preferring one or other translation for different passages of the text.

(*Daodejing* 2003: ch.57)

Feldt has suggested that because the text describes a model of ideal rulership, it therefore makes reference to a ruler/ruled relation. This in turn, he argues, means that by definition the sage-ruler has at least the capacity and “mechanisms” for coercion of the people, even if he never chooses to use them (2010: 330):

I would argue that some measure of coercion is a necessary aspect of the ruler/ruled relation. By definition “ruler” conceptually requires the existence of at least one person who is ruled, and the only way that individual can be ruled is if the ruler has the ability to force her to act when necessary. This ability to force another to act entails the presence of coercive power. Without the ability to coerce and force action when needed, there can be no ruler/ruled relation. (2010: 329-330)

Feldt then justifies his seemingly contradictory view that *wuwei* can be reconciled with the capacity for coercion, with reference to the fact that the *Daodejing* mentions the presence of ministers. These, Feldt suggests, provide a mode of action through which the sage can interfere with the activities of the people through a third party, while himself remaining unsullied by such methods of positive coercion.

We get a notion of *wuwei* that makes sense of the ruler as personally passive, while still actively governing through ministers, and non-authoritarian in allowing ministers to govern day-to-day, while still

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being authoritarian by maintaining ultimate control over the state at large. The ruler, through *wuwei*, is able to remain distant and vigilant over all things, making sure they accord with the *Dao*, yet when action is required act to set the conditions (via policy changes) to allow continued accordance with the *Dao*. (2010: 333-334)

Feldt justifies this reading through tenuous connections drawn with the purported *Shenzi* 慎子 fragments wherein, “*Wuwei* is described as an advantageous technique in which the ruler appoints ministers to carry out the actual functions of his administration, while he is freed to supervise the overall course of things without losing perspective” (2010, 333).

Although Feldt argues that there is nothing in the *Daodejing* to contradict reading the text in this way, it would also seem at least strange that this depiction of the primary mechanism for coercive rulership through the ministers doesn't actually appear in any of the passages. Rapp also adds that Feldt's understanding of such mechanisms relies on the problematic assumption that the *Daodejing* is in line with other ancient Chinese political texts, all of which assume an autocratic structure of governance (Rapp 2012: 47, ff2).

Contrary to Feldt's analytic argument, that the ruler/ruled relation necessarily implies the capacity for coercion, there is a broader suggestion made throughout the *Daodejing* that coercive force is precisely *not* a necessary aspect of rulership. One could even go as far as to say that the book is a treatise against exactly such an assumption. Feldt's position on this issue seems to rest on the view that a ruler without coercive capacity is meaningless whereas the *Daodejing* outwardly celebrates

such a paradoxical image. A number of chapters intimate this point, including the natal and maternal imagery appearing in chapter 10:

To give birth to it, to rear it,
To give birth to it without possessing it,
To let it grow without commanding it,
This is called: dark efficacy.

(*Daodejing* 2007)

Here we see a depiction of the notion of a ruler/ruled relation that does not imply coercive force. The *Daodejing* returns to this depiction of rulership in a number of chapters. The main point being that the actual power or efficacy (*de*) of the Daoist ruler is uniquely defined by his non-coercive approach. One can therefore say that Feldt's expression of the definition of the ruler/ruled relation is exactly the same assumption that Laozi's model of rulership, through *wuwei*, rejects. The paradox of non-coercive rulership advocated in the text is a purposeful and knowing one: "doing nothing and nothing is undone" (*Daodejing* 2007: ch. 48).

One could find some basis for justifying the view that the sage-ruler's non-coercion is backed up by the possibility of coercion based on chapter 80, where Laozi suggests that the ideal state contains within it various weapons that are never put to use: "Though you have armour and weapons enough / Have no reason to parade them" (*Daodejing* 2003). However, this same chapter can also be read, not as highlighting the presence of weaponry as a back-up to non-violent rulership, but rather as putting emphasis on the idea that the ideal state will have no need of the use of such weapons because it does not arrive at situations of violent conflict. Whether or

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not such weapons exist would then be a matter of indifference because the main point would be that even if they do exist, they are laid aside from lack of use. More importantly, there is no suggestion in the text that such motifs of coercive force – weaponry and so on – are ever designed with the internal control of the state in mind. This point is especially pronounced because chapter 80 seems to be more focused on the relationship between the state and its neighbouring states, rather than the ruler and his subjects. Such an interpretation is further backed up in chapter 46, that maintaining the paraphernalia of warfare is a requirement only when a state is lacking the *Dao*:

When the world has the Dao,
saddle-horses are returned to fertilize the fields.
When the world does not have the Dao,
war horses are bred in the outskirts.
(*Daodejing* 2007)

And also in chapter 30:

When the ruler of the people has the Dao
Then the force of weapons is not used in the world.
(Ibid.)

In sum, Feldt is correct to highlight the difficulty of reconciling the political philosophy offered by the *Daodejing* with that of anarchist political theory, because the text does not criticize or reject the legitimacy of the state or of governance via a

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single, centralized authority. However, Feldt neglects the extent to which the consolidation of power on behalf of a Daoist ruler embodies a critique of aggressive or coercive forms of government. Feldt relies on a definition of a ruler/ruled relation that inherently entails at least the capacity for coercion. But it is precisely this paradox of a ruler who rules in non-coercive ways that the *Daodejing* celebrates.

Daoism as an Anarchism and the Paternalist Features of the *Daodejing*

From a rather different angle, Roger Ames has previously argued for the value of reading Daoism as a form of anarchist thinking. After assessing “Taoist political theory on the basis of [...] four conditions for an anarchism,” Ames claims that, “Taoist political philosophy is essentially anarchism” (1983, 43). The four general characteristics of Western anarchist theories on the basis of which Ames assesses Daoist political theory are: (1) a “metaphysical preconception” that underlies a “concept of individual freedom”; (2) “a rejection of coercive authority, coercive authority being regarded as inimical to human realization”; (3) “some notion of a non-coercive, non-authoritarian society realizable in the future”; and (4) “a method or program of moving from the present authoritarian reality to the non-authoritarian ideal” (1983, 30-31). Ames, with some qualifications, sees Daoism as satisfying all four of these conditions.

In arguing for the value of reading Daoism as an anarchism, Ames states his intention is to show how consideration of Daoist political philosophy might be used to supplement and potentially resolve problems endemic within Western anarchist theories. In comparing Daoist and anarchist political theory, Ames therefore moves beyond trying to highlight the possibility of reconciling the two:

More important, however, this comparison might have significance for Western anarchist theory. I think that many of the weaknesses and vagaries of this tradition can be overcome by reference to Taoist political thought. (1983: 29)³

For example, in regards to the first and third characteristics, Ames suggests that the ontology of personhood that lies beneath Daoist political thinking can provide a better foundation for imagining a state in which all forms of authority emerge from the ground up, as a mutually determining relation between subjects and the state. This “organismic conception of existence permits a mutually determining relationship between the part and the whole (i.e., the individual and his society) which is not necessarily coercive” (1983: 32). Recognizing the correlative relations between individuals and the state, the sage-ruler does not attempt to coerce individuals into falling in line and following prescribed norms and patterns of behaviour. Rather, the sage establishes the proper environment for each individual or group to express their unique talents for the benefit of the state as a whole: “The ruler functions in an organizational rather than authoritarian capacity, simply orchestrating the natural expressions of the people and facilitating their collective realization” (1983: 40). To support this reading, Ames quotes chapter 49 of the *Daodejing* 道德經, translating the passage as follows:

The sage is without a fixed mind,

³ Similarly, Rapp claims that “[...]the Daoist anarchists’ focus on the state ruling for itself, while they noted at the same time that other political ideologies only disguise this fact, may have much to teach Western anarchists about internal consistency and may aid in a revival of anarchist themes in the contemporary world” (2012: 5).

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And takes the mind of the people as his own

(1983, 40)

While it may be that Daoist political thought can be used to critique, enhance and improve upon Western anarchist theories, this does not mean that Daoism is itself a form of anarchism. A comparison of the two traditions can show areas where there are affinities, but to label Daoism as an anarchism can also serve to distort the distinctiveness of the vision of rulership that the *Daodejing* offers. As Ames himself notes, “the project of isolating and articulating the essential characteristics of anarchism and Taoist political theory will generate a contrast that will both register their similarities and give clear relief to their important differences” (1983: 29).

In arguing for Daoism as an anarchism, Ames broadens his focus to include materials from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. For example, Ames states that

[A]s long as we are willing to include the *Huai Nan Tzu* in the corpus of Taoist literature, it can be claimed that Taoist political theory evolved toward a practicable anarchism which was willing to establish concrete measures in its attempts to move from the ideal to the real. (1983: 43)

Taken from this broader perspective, we may well find better resources for reconciling anarchist theory and the Daoist position. But the case is less compelling with respect to the *Daodejing* in particular. Ames claims that “one must consider that the Lao Tzu is a collection of rhymed lecture topics to be given flesh in the discussion

that they might inspire” (1983, 40-41). However, despite the ambiguities and the possibility of multiple readings emerging from the text, this does not imply that the *Daodejing* cannot offer us a coherent and well explained political position in its own right, with clear assertions as to the advantages and disadvantages of differing models of rulership. We might also go as far as to say that, with respect to certain anarchist characteristics, the political philosophy of the *Daodejing* is arguably at odds with key features of these later Daoist texts. For example, the *Zhuangzi* exhibits far less concern for cultivation of effective rulers and at times a disdain for politics in general that we don’t find in the earlier text. This is not to undermine the legitimacy of any particular text in the Daoist cannon, only to highlight its diversity.

To the extent that our evaluation is limited to the *Daodejing* specifically, one can argue that the text is less easily reconcilable with anarchism than Ames suggests. This is particularly the case in relation to what can be identified as the paternalistic features of Laozi’s 老子 sage-ruler. Although we agree with Ames’s view that the sage-ruler is not an authoritarian one, he (the sage) nonetheless retains a position as a centralized leader, and also maintains mechanisms of authority (be they non-authoritarian ones) for the good of the people. Thus, the idea of the sage-ruler offered in the *Daodejing*, does still in some senses, directly oppose anarchist critiques of centralized authority in a manner not easily resolvable. Ames justifies his view with the suggestion that the form of governance proffered within Daoism emerges from the ground up as a mutually determining relationship between the people and the state. But this interpretation rests on a reconcilability with a notion of the organic emergence of social ordering in the later Daoist texts. For example, according to Ames, the *Huainanzi*, stresses “the primacy of personal realization” and claims that:

[This] particular model of Daoist political organization is the defining feature of its entire political program. It is personal realization which is organismic in nature, extending out from the person to constitute the political organization as a whole. (1983: 40)

However, no such primacy is so readily apparent in the *Daodejing*. Where personal realization is mentioned in the text, it is almost exclusively with respect to the requirement for the self-realization of the ruler himself as the basis for the formation of an ordered society more generally, rather than a focus on the personal realization of the people.

The *Daodejing* and Paternalism

Although non-coercive in his methods of rulership (in ruling through *wuwei* 無為), the *Daodejing*'s 道德經 sage-ruler exhibits a tendency for doing what is best for the people, irrespective of whether they agree to this or even have knowledge of it. Indeed, the text suggests that the people ought not have a transparent view of the ruler and his activities. The sage is therefore often characterized as controlling or managing the people, without their knowing participation.

Of the best of all rulers
people will only know that he exists...
The works are completed,
The tasks are followed through.

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And the people declare:

It happens to us “Self-so” [spontaneously/of their own efforts]

(*Daodejing* 2007: ch.17)

In this sense, the *Daodejing* appears to recommend a form of paternalist oversight and hierarchical rulership, albeit one with that is characterized by a light touch and certain forms of dissimulation. Of the sage in relation to the people, Chapter 20 claims, “I am serenely among them and do not show any sign” (*Daodejing* 2007). For the *Daodejing*, the capacity for the people to undertake their various functions freely and unimpeded is premised on the particular mode of action of the ruler, namely, his practice of *wuwei*. In turn, this capacity seems to rely on some form of dissemblance, or concealment, on the part of the ruler. “He does not make himself shown, and thus he is apparent. He does not make himself seen, and thus he shines” (*Daodejing* 2007: ch.22).

Interestingly, A.C. Graham, in *Disputers of the Dao*, has referred to the text in passing through the idea of a “paternalistic anarchism.” Though, as Graham points out, the combining of these two perspectives is bordering on oxymoronic (*Graham*: 303). Further exhibiting such paternalistic overtures, chapter 49 states that:

The common people all fix their eyes and ears on the sages,

And the sages treat them as so many children

(*Daodejing* 2003)

There are of course various ways of understanding the idea that the ruler treats the people as children, the most obvious of which is to interpret this as a self-avowed

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paternalism. In other words, the ruler looks after the people as though they are children: naive and lacking in knowledge of what is best for them. The ruler is therefore characterized as responsible for fulfilling the needs of the people and managing their expectations. Chapter 3 states that the sage rulers “empty the hearts-and-minds of the people and fill their stomachs” (*Daodejing* 2003). The text suggests that the value of the sage lies in the fact that he is in the best position to rule society to the benefit of all of its citizens, whether they are aware of the mechanisms of such rulership or not.

Ames reads chapter 49 as evidence for the non-controlling, non-authoritarian character of the sage (1983, 36). But we would also want to emphasize that the ruler’s practice of non-action (*wuwei*) underscores an important distinction between the ruler having some degree of authority, in contrast with authoritarian or coercive techniques of rulership. If the *Daodejing*’s strategy for effective leadership is correct, to maintain authority does not require authoritarianism. Indeed, authoritarian practices are described throughout the text as an impediment to secure and stable governance.

Ames’s reading of Daoist political theory suggests that there is no real separation of the ruler from the people, when considering the political organism as a whole. The two are mutually constituting and thus in some sense unified. It is on this basis that he suggests that Daoism can be reconciled with a bottom-up conception of the organic emergence of political cohesion. This perspective may account for the fact that Ames downplays the paternalistic and hierarchical features in the *Daodejing*. As mentioned earlier, Ames refers to the “organismic conception of existence” when discussing the ontology of the relationship between the individual and the whole (or the citizen and the state). Drawing on a passage from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 that uses a body metaphor to discuss the role of the ruler in society, Ames claims that the ruler

occupies his distinctive position in name only. One of the main points Ames sees being made in the *Zhuangzi* passage is that “the various parts of the body are symbiotically interdependent such that, although convention identifies a “ruler”, the only true ruler is the organism itself in its entirety” (1983: 37). Elsewhere, Rapp has made a similar point with reference to the same passage. He states that “an anarchist view of classical Daoism would focus on the cybernetic vision of life” and that “the original author himself suggests that since there is no one body part that rules the others, there is thus a natural or spontaneous order in the universe that exists without human intervention” (2012: 25).⁴ But, for the *Daodejing*, although the sage-ruler takes the “the mind of his people as his own” (Ames, 1983, 40), this is not to say that the ruler is not also fundamentally separate and distinct from the people or that his position as ruler is only nominal. In fact, the various claims made elsewhere that the ruler, unlike his subjects, maintains an empty and impartial perspective, would suggest that he can never be thought of as truly one with, identical to, or operating at the same level as, his subjects. Although ruler and subject exist in an interdependent manner, the sage maintains a fundamentally distinct position in society and his traits and tendencies are quite often characterized as the inverse of those of the people. Numerous passages in the text elaborate on the distinction of the sage from the common people. For example, chapter 20 states that:

Most people are happy, happy,...

⁴ Much of Rapp’s book is devoted to the purported utopianism of the *Daodejing* and “the positive view of the stateless society expressed” in the text (Ibid.). Rapp does not go as far as to claim, alongside John P. Clark (1983: 84-85), that the *Daodejing* removes power from the ruler to such an extent as to render him obsolete (or as a leader only in the sense of being a model for self-cultivation and personal development). Rapp seems to agree, however, with Joseph Needham’s (1956: 100-132) assessment that, in the words of Rapp, “the *DDJ* was trying to change “feudal” rulers back into leaders of primitive communal tribes, that is, into tribal elders or wise men with no monopoly on the legitimate use of coercion” (Ibid: 23).

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I alone am so impassive, revealing nothing at all,...
Most people have more than enough,
While I alone have lost out.
I have the heart and mind of a fool-so vacant and dull!
The common lot see things so clearly,
While I alone seem to be in the dark.
The common lot are so discriminating,
While I alone am so obtuse....
The common lot have their purposes
While I alone am a dull-witted yokel.
My needs alone are different from other people,
Cherishing my mother's milk.
(*Daodejing* 2003)

Chapter 66 also underscores the separation of the sage-ruler from the people and furthermore highlights the hierarchical structure of the state:

...the sages in wanting to stand above the common people
Must put themselves below them in what they have to say;
In wanting to stand before the common people
They must put themselves behind them in their personal concerns
(*Daodejing*, 2003).

Some amount of separation of the sage-ruler from the common people does not exclude the possibility of a non-coercive and wholly interdependent relationship

between them. But this relationship can be more fully explained through the notion of a peculiar form of paternalism. It is to the extent that the ruler is never acting according to his own partisan desires or for his own advantage, that he takes “the mind of the people as his own”. In this sense, the ruler never coerces the people into behaviours or actions that are at odds with their own interests. But the hierarchical model still implies that the ruler stands in a position fundamentally removed from the people, and their co-determining existence does not undermine this distinction of rank between them.

The *Daodejing* and Maternalism

The notion of paternalism can aid in explaining how the *Daodejing* 道德經 allows for a non-coercive yet hierarchical structure of governance; with control in the hands of the ruler, who maintains order, yet still in a manner aligned with the best interests of the people. What is interesting however, is that the paternalist characteristics of the *Daodejing* are decidedly different from other forms of paternalism, on the basis of the stress on the ruler’s practice of *wuwei* 無為 (non-interference). Typically, paternalism is associated with forms of coercion, effective legislation, and hands-on oversight, that are justified with reference to the idea that such actions are in the best interests of the persons being coerced. As Gerald Dworkin puts this, “Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm” (Dworkin, 2017). Clearly, the *Daodejing* rejects such mechanisms of control and interference, not necessarily in defence of individual

autonomy or the right to non-interference, but because such mechanisms are ineffective strategies for stable rulership:

The more prohibitions and taboos there are in the world,

The poorer the people will be....

The more prominently the laws and statutes are displayed,

The more widespread will be the brigands and thieves.

(*Daodejing* 2003, ch.57)

Describing the political model of the *Daodejing* as a form of paternalism therefore requires significant caveats. For this reason, we suggest that the manner of relating to the common people by the sage-ruler would be better described as a form of *maternalism*. Of course, neither the paternalist nor maternalist characterisations here are intended to imply any form of gender essentialism. But they do however allow us to make effective use of the characteristic features stereotypically associated with so-called maternal and paternal practices, and to identify a subset of political paternalist theory perhaps unique to the *Daodejing*.

What we see in the *Daodejing*, is a method of governance that is designed to serve in the best interests of the state as whole. Within such a framework the people are treated as children and as a requirement for effective rulership their vision of the ruler's activities is obscured. At the same time however, Laozi 老子 devoutly rejects interventionist mechanisms of control including penal interference. A term is therefore required that adequately summarizes the relation between the ruler and subjects; wherein the sage has an impartial concern for the interests of his people and his approach to rulership directly fosters their capacity to flourish, but where the sage

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is also able to manage such an environment without recourse to direct forms of positive interference or overt mechanisms of control. The term maternalism is used here for precisely this purpose.

The notion of maternalism in the Western context was initially developed in relation to movements asserting the value of allowing women into specific working roles, based on their supposed ability to bring uniquely female qualities to such activities. “Maternalism” was employed by scholars in the 1990’s “as an analytical tool that helped to explain the emergence of modern welfare states in the U.S. and Western Europe” (Plant and Van der Klein 2012: 1). Kashani-Sabet describes maternalism as “an ideology that promoted motherhood, child care, and maternal well-being not only within the strictures of family, but also in consideration of nationalist concerns” (2006: 2). Koven and Michel state that:

Maternalism has always operated on two levels: it extolled the virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women’s public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace. (1990: 1079).

Clearly, using ‘maternalism’ in relation to Laozi’s political thinking to describe a peculiar form of political paternalism is drastically removed from this original context. But the term can have explanatory power nonetheless. Whereas paternalism has the aforementioned association with ideas of coercion and strict legislation, maternalism, in contrast, speaks to a rather more liberal depiction of the ruler’s method of oversight: allowing the people to go about their everyday activities without interference, but at the same time maintaining his position as an overseer. As such the

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sage embodies maternal roles in relation to the people such as that of provider of nourishment—he “fills their bellies” (*Daodejing* 2007: ch. 3)—and of progenitor—he gives “birth to it without possessing it” and he lets “it grow without commanding it” (ch. 10). The sage of the *Daodejing* often operates behind the scenes and surreptitiously in order to curate the best environment for the flourishing of the people, but his control over the population is never a visible one. He is also described on a number of occasions as standing in somewhat of a self-sacrificial position in relation to the people, in the sense that the sage lacks the positive wants and desires that the people have (see for example *Daodejing* 2003/2007: ch. 19/57), refrains from displaying outward appearances of his wealth (ch. 3) and power (ch. 17), and places himself below the people, being willing to occupy places that others are not:

The highest efficacy is like water.

It is because water benefits everything (*wanwu*)

Yet vies to dwell in places loathed by the crowd

That it comes nearest to proper way-making [*Dao*].

(*Daodejing* 2003: ch. 8)

Furthermore, one of the key strategies for effective rulership in the *Daodejing*, is that the sage is expected to take on the broader characteristics of the *Dao* 道 in relation to the state. A number of passages refer to the *Dao* by means of maternal imagery: “It can be thought of as the mother of the heavens and the earth” (Ames & Hall 2003: ch.25), and, “The nameless (*wuming*) is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening” (Ames & Hall 2003: ch. 1). In chapter 51 we find a rehearsal of the

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description in chapter 10 of the ideal sage fulfilling a role as mother, this time with direct reference to *Dao*. Chapter 51 reads:

Way-making [*Dao*] gives them life and nurtures them,

Rears and develops them.

It brings them to fruition and maturation,

Nourishes and guards over them.

(*Daodejing* 2003)

Interestingly, this way of reading the text, through the notion of maternalism, also fits particularly well with the *Daodejing*'s repeated appeal to the feminine as a metaphor for the various effective characteristics and strategies of the sage-ruler. For example, Chapter 28 guides the ruler to:

Know the male

Yet safeguard the female

And be a river gorge to the world.

As a river gorge to the world,

You will not lose your real potency (*de*)....

(*Daodejing* 2003)

In their commentary to this passage, Ames and Hall point out that it “is the river gorge of the impregnated female that gives birth to the world,” and that such imagery is “pervasive in the *Daodejing*” (2003, 121). Another example can be found, again in chapter 10. Here the ruler is asked:

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In loving the common people and breathing life into the state,

Are you able to do it without recourse to wisdom?

With nature's gates swinging open and closed,

Are you able to remain the female?

(*Daodejing* 2003)

At other stages the ideal state itself is described as female:

A great state is like the lower reaches of water's downward flow.

It is the female of the world.

In the intercourse of the world,

The female is always able to use her equilibrium (*jing*) to best the male.

(*Daodejing* 2003: ch. 61)

Finally, the sage-ruler is described as both being nourished by (ch.20) and safeguarding the *Dao* as mother. Chapter 59 tells the ruler that:

In presiding over the mother of the realm

You can be long enduring.

(*Daodejing* 2003)

The attempt to interpret the *Daodejing's* political perspective as maternalist raises a great number of complications. Not least the precise manner in which the maternalist gestures outlined in certain passages, should be related to the broader

theme of the feminine so often noted as central to the text.⁵ Indeed, this serendipitous correspondence between the maternalist reading and the emphasis on feminine power in the text is no mere accident. We would not go so far as to suggest that the maternalist reading is in any sense providing support for a *feminist* interpretation of the text and its goals, which would be a bizarre anachronism and would also take too seriously the connection between stereotypes of gendered forces and actual sexes in a way that is alien to the text as a whole. However, neither do we wish to dispute such feminist implications within the various approaches we might take to the *Daodejing*. Instead, the maternalist reading fits well into a view of the *Daodejing* as recommending the balancing of so-called feminine and masculine forces, in order to achieve the most productive outcome in any given scenario. This balancing principle is a natural result of the depth of connection between the *Daodejing* and yinyang thinking. As D'Ambrosio and Shen have noted:

Yin tendencies are not, however, exclusively valued. The *Laozi* offers a more balanced view, which is why it can be used as a resource of feminism, but is not necessarily feminist itself.
(Undated).

What is particularly interesting about the political theory of the *Daodejing* is the manner in which it represents a reappraisal of those 'feminine' qualities so often associated with weakness, instead presenting them as forms and means of power. So the overall point is not that one should avoid the consolidation or exercising of power altogether, rather that, there are other forms of power than those bludgeoning,

⁵ For example, see Chan 1963: 143; Chen 1969: 402-404; Hall and Ames 2000; Kaltenmark 1969: 58ff; Moeller 2007: 36-40; Needham 1956; Waley 1934: 57.

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outward and forceful ones usually associated with ‘masculine’ forces. For the *Daodejing* these more subtle ‘feminine’ forms of power, it turns out, are often even more efficacious in any strategic scenario than their less yielding masculine counterparts. This is true, especially in the context of rulership. For example:

Nothing in the world is as soft and weak as water

And yet in attacking what is hard and strong,

There is nothing that can surpass it.

(*Daodejing* 2003)

As Robin Wang has so rightly put this, in the context of her discussion of yinyang thinking, ‘Even in the *Daodejing* the masculine is associated with power, control and dominance, whereas the female is associated with yielding, flexibility, and submissiveness’. However, and indeed far more importantly: ‘The *Daodejing* inverts these values, pointing out the power of the feminine...’ (Wang 2012: 105). In the context of maternalism (here defined as a peculiar sub-set of political paternalism) the issue is not one of balancing gender forces as a whole, through some form of archetypal female power structure. Instead, the text appears to be suggesting the use of subtle techniques of political persuasion in order to achieve the broader goal of social harmonization. As we know, the text outwardly states that to interfere too aggressively in the lives of the people will cause disruption, but conversely the state does not simply fall into harmonious line without the specific actions (or lack thereof) of a centralized authority. So once again, the issue here is about drawing a balance between extremes and perhaps, one might say, making use of the position of a tension between opposite approaches (such as masculine and feminine forces) so as to

achieve a specific goal (in this case, effective governance and the flourishing of the people).

Advantages of the Maternalist Reading

To conclude, when we treat the *Daodejing* 道德經 as a text that offers its own distinctive view on political governance, an anarchist reading becomes problematic. Using multiple texts from the tradition, Ames has shown that Daoist political philosophy can be used as a tool for rectifying some of the problems endemic to anarchist political theories. We do not disagree with such a comparative approach, but we would argue that this is a separate enterprise from trying to define the political vision of Daoism on its own terms. For the project of conceptualizing the political program found in the *Daodejing* in particular, it is important to recognize that it is one text within a broad and varied tradition. Towards such an aim, Ames's multi-textual approach, and those of others such as Rapp, serve to distort the text's unique vision of the ideal state and of the sage ruler.

However, to argue against an anarchist reading of the *Daodejing* does not mean, as Feldt suggests, that we need to reconcile ruling through *wuwei* 無為 with some amount of, or capacity for, coercion. To attempt such a reconciliation is to go against the rejection of coercive techniques of governing that the text explicitly presents on multiple occasions. A term then is needed that can summarize the relationship between the ruler/state and his people that incorporates the notion of non-coercive (*wuwei*) rulership, but that also recognizes that the ruler does exert some unseen form of authority over the people; in nourishing, nurturing, caring for, and providing the grounds for their capacity to flourish.

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Examining the maternal and feminine imagery used in the *Daodejing* to describe the characteristics of the *Dao* 道, the sage, the ideal state, and the sage-ruler in relation to his people, we have argued for reading the political philosophy of the text as a form of maternalism. The sage-ruler provides for his people, has concern for his people, and guides them in their wants and desires. The people are treated as though they are children, under the protection of their mother-like ruler who supports them to maturation and yet takes no credit for their successes. Importantly, they are still able to undertake their own activities spontaneously (*ziran* 自然). The ruler does not coerce his people through interventionist or aggressive policies in order to make them abide by specific norms of behaviour and laws. Rather, he obscures his activities behind the scenes, those that contribute to his adjusting of the people's temperaments and providing a stable environment in which they can go about their affairs without conflict or interference. He cares impartially for all of his children and takes on a self-sacrificial position in relation to them.

It is interesting to note that readings of the *Daodejing* as anarchist and those contrasting readings that find coercion and hierarchy central to the text, also differ in their views on human nature. On one hand, anarchist readings suggest that Daoism has a positive view of human nature, such that if the people are given freedom from authoritarian rule, then a naturally emerging cohesive social structure will develop from the ground up. On the other hand, coercive and hierarchical readings, such as that offered by the legalist philosopher Han Fei 韓非, suggest that human nature is essentially corrupt and self-serving and that the people therefore cannot be trusted to govern themselves. On such a reading, the ruler is required to positively intervene and to force the people, when necessary, to fall in line. In contrast, a maternalist reading of the *Daodejing* falls somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, wherein the

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text can be understood to assert neither an optimistic nor pessimistic depiction of human nature. Such a reading is more in line with the text's avowed critique of essentialist discriminations between normative opposites, and better captures the paradoxical depiction of rulership through *wuwei*.

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