



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Lou Marinoff, *The Power of Tao: a Timeless guide to Happiness and Harmony*, Argo Navis (Perseus Books). New York 2014 . ISBN 978-0-7867-5608-7, 312 pages.

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The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten the words so I can have a word with him? (Zhuangzi, *Waiwu (External things)* 1994)¹

If we practice philosophy in our every day life, philosophy supports us in dealing with our daily problems and in living a full life. In this sense philosophy serves as a means for “self-help”. As Marinoff points out in *The Power of Tao* most of the so called “self-help” books are usually “other assisted help books”. They do not necessarily lead to self-reliance or self-sufficiency, since there is still “the other” i.e. “the book” that helps. The same holds true for philosophy: if we use philosophy in our everyday life and get support from philosophical practice we rely on a kind of “other-assisted help”. But as soon as philosophy is really working and is internalized, the books or the philosophical practitioner may be “forgotten”—they are only tools on the path to real “self-help”. In this respect we may understand many classical Daoist texts as real guidelines to self-help and the same holds true for *The Power of Tao*. It is a *real* self-help book, a gentle guide to happiness and serenity. It offers an access to Daoism for novices as well as for experienced philosophical practitioners, primarily from the perspective of philosophical practice, less from a mere textual or even philological point of view. Daoist Philosophy is very much engaged with self-cultivation and reveals its true value, if we put it into practice. This is in my view one of the reasons, why Chinese philosophy in general and Daoism in particular most notably suit philosophical practice.

The Power of Tao is a concise introduction to Laozi's Daoism. Marinoff carves out some of the most important ideas of the *Daodejing* and presents them in a very insightful way. Furthermore, if you are familiar with the theory and practical knowledge of Daoism, it becomes obvious, that Marinoff's explanation of Daoism results not only from the experience with clients in his philosophical practice, but also from his own personal and even physical experience in the sense of Daoist martial arts. This bestows a special value upon the book.

The 18 chapters conceal the whole spectrum of the human condition, from everyday matters up to the big questions of life. Beginning with the individual aspects of health and wellbeing, questions of the self and serenity, Marinoff discusses the issues of stress, career and work as well as love and marriage, up to morality and the three harmful emotions (anger, greed and envy). Finally he exposes how Daoists confront mortality and—in view of the culturally-induced epidemics in the West—why it is so important to live in harmony with nature, before he comes to the question of the Golden Age.

Each of the 18 chapters is headed by two quotes from the *Daodejing* and the central ideas of each chapter are illustrated by different case studies.

Marinoff focuses on several main ideas in the *Daodejing*—some of them are not yet very well known in the West—and explores them in detail and from various perspectives in the corresponding chapters. One of them is the idea of the “Uncarved Block”.² The Uncarved Block represents the original human nature, “the primal self,”—as we may find it in children for example—and reveals itself in a “serene state containing infinite possibilities” (p.47), while the Carved Block is the Block deformed by life itself. Beginning with chapter 4 (Self and Serenity) Marinoff develops different notions of the “Uncarved Block” in various aspects, and in doing so, he reflects the Daoist idea of Perspectivism. (Chen & Hertzner, 2016)

Since the Uncarved Block is close to the Dao itself, the “primal self” is not ultimately determined, but holds infinite possibilities, it is like an open future, that is not defined by the past. The fact that we all are carved by life itself does not mean, however, that we can not return to the serene state of the Uncarved Block—which is a direct contradiction to the idea of Western psychology! From a Daoist perspective you may rather regard “every day and every moment as an Uncarved Block” (p.51), “the Uncarved Block retains its potential to include every possible shape” (p.48).

The various quotes at the beginning of each chapter offer Laozi’s original access to the receptive subject. Marinoff makes a choice from different translations and he is fully aware of the difficulty translating Chinese into a European language: “We are depending on translations of ancient Chinese ideograms into modern European languages, and that the difference between and among some of these translations may be perplexing to readers, particularly those to whom the *Daodejing* is new” (p 116). From a sinological point of view (and since I am sinologist and a translator myself, I can not be beyond having a look at all the original quotes) the difficulty of translating classical Daoist texts is omnipresent and a translation is always a balancing act between being too literal and too interpretative. Nevertheless some translations are closer to the text and therefore to the intended meaning, while others are rather interpretative. Marinoff favored in some cases the translation of Mitchell, which is in my eyes more an adaption than a translation, for example at the beginning of chapter 4, where the translation of Mitchell (Laozi & Mitchell, 1992) says:

Know the personal, yet keep to the impersonal, accept the world as it is, then the Tao will be luminous inside you, and you will return to your primal self. (p.41, *Daodejing*, verse 28).

If we compare this to a translation, which is closer to the original, the text goes like this (I took the translation from Lafargue, Roger T. Ames (2003) (Laozi, Ames, & Hall, 2003) and Moeller (Moeller & Laozi, 2007) as reference):

Know the white purity, but keep to the muddy, and be a valley to the world. As a valley to the world, your continuous potency will be enough, and you will return to being an Uncarved Block. (*Daodejing* verse 28, 2003)³

I don’t mind the diversity of the two translations and I am far away from being philologically picky, I rather would like to point out, that being closer to the text illustrates the philosophical argument usually more clearly. So the second translation underlines Marinoff’s argumentation even better, since it discloses the nature of the Uncarved Block: being in a receptive state (like a valley to the world) and being in a state of continuous potency.

Another aspect in cultivating the Uncarved Block is the question, how to get rid of the “unhealthy ego” with all its “wants” and toxic emotions (chapter 12, Anger, Greed and Envy) and instead unfold the greater self, that focuses on what we really “need” and not on what we “want” (“needs are

finished, wants infinite” p.142). As Marinoff precisely noticed, from a Daoist perspective a “primary cause of unhappiness is a false conception of ‘self’, including the self-contradictory myth of a healthy ego” (p. 43).

With regard to the concept of time Daoism focuses on the present, and that implies being able to evade all kind of unhappiness that derives from religious or psychological myth. While the former posits an afterlife that will balance the present unhappiness and suffering with goodness (“theodicy problem” p.155), the psychological myth assumes that present suffering is caused by the past, but the past is never fully explained. Marinoff introduces here the brilliant idea of calling this the “psychodicy problem”, that “is ‘solved’ sometime in the past, but meanwhile people are condemned to suffer now.” (p.157). The Daoist answer to this kind of suffering is to return to the Uncarved Block and the greater self in the present moment, by exercising goodness with others. Emphasizing the here and now implicates at the same time a different focus on human nature: “While religion and psychology are bound to focus on what's wrong with you, Tao focuses on what's right with you, here and now” (p.166).

Another characteristic concept of Daoism is that of prevention and defense. Prevention is both the root and the goal of Chinese Medicine—it is less costly (in every respect) and less stressful. The same holds true for politics (and war) from a Daoist perspective, since “the Tao is geared toward prevention” (p.27). Beyond that Marinoff relays the Daoist concept of prevention even to the wide field of love and marriage. Starting with Laozi’s notion of *ci*,⁴ originally meaning “the loving kindness between parents and children” he unfolds the distinctive forms of love from the perspective of ancient Greek Philosophy in terms of Eros, Philia, Storge and Agape (chapter 8). This is a very good example for the strength of Marinoff’s approach to Daoism: He unfolds the Daoist concept against the backdrop of Western philosophy without leveling the differences between them. This approach is extremely valuable for philosophical practitioners, in order to illustrate the Daoist view to their clients.

Bearing in mind, that a majority of people live in cities right now, which implies environmental degradation as well as cultural and political conflicts, the chapter Harmony and Nature explores in which way the contact with nature may lead to more serenity and happiness. Given the fact that living in nature brings us closer to the *Dao* and makes us revert to the state of the Uncarved Block, Marinoff explores Laozi’s idea that “a good traveller leaves no track” (p.261) in an exciting way, by interpreting it on a literal, figurative and karmic level.

Finally the Daoist ideal of the good life reveals itself in the question of the Golden Age. It is, as one can imagine, not something ideally to be reached in the future or happened to be in the past, it takes place right now. Marinoff confers the Daoist approach of forgetting (history) and living in the present moment, in order to revert to the Uncarved Block one hand with the saying of Nietzsche: “happy people have no history” (p.272). (There is interesting contemporary research about the parallels between Nietzsche and Daoism in China, (Chen, 1996)). On the other hand he draws a very fascinating parallel to the Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott, the representatives of rational mysticism: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us” (p.284). So happiness and serenity reveal themselves as the Daoist ideal. They do not depend on the past or the future and they may be achieved through a union of mind and nature—by reverting to the Uncarved Block. It will be really worth further exploring the Transcendentalists, in order to illustrate the Daoist concept of time and history in relation to individual happiness and well-being.

All in all *The Power of Tao* is not only a self-help book that leads the reader on his “way (*Dao*)” to serenity and happiness with the aim to become self-reliant. It is also a philosophical adventure—for beginners as well as for experienced practitioners—where the reader encounters unfamiliar Daoist ideas that become familiar in the light of Western philosophy, but can still keep their identity: “A thing is not strange in itself, it depends on me to make it strange” (*Shanhaijing—Guideways through Mountains and Seas*—preface (Strassberg, 2002))

Notes

1. 陳鼓應 & 莊子, 1994
2. *pu* 朴
3. 陳鼓應 & 老子, 2003
4. 慈

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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