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Nature and Human Flourishing in the *Laws of Manu* and the *Daodejing*

by

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Introduction

By comparing the interpretation of dharma in the ancient Indian Laws of Manu (Manusmṛti) with the concepts of dao 道 in the Chinese classic, Daodejing 道德經, I will demonstrate that, despite the plausible perception that the former represents despotic, hierarchical governance while the latter promotes freedom (and even anarchy), the two texts in fact share a similar envision of human flourishing through the following of one's nature, as well as a foundational belief that both laws and political ideals emerge from nature.

The Laws of Manu, dated between 1250 BCE by the nineteenth century philologist Sir William Jones and second to third century CE by contemporary indologist Patrick Olivelle, is generally considered one of the most important texts in ancient India to justify discrimination based on caste. Though scholars doubt whether the Laws of Manu was ever put into force in ancient India as a law code, as opposed to being regarded merely as a religious text, most of them agree that it was translated by the British colonizers, who in turn used it to form the basis of Hindu law under the colonial British Raj (Das). Probably because of its close connection with the caste system and the colonial past, the Laws of Manu has been unpopular and even notorious to many modern western thinkers as well as leaders of the modern Indian independence movement. William Jones, as an English supreme court judge in Bengal during the colonial period, might be supposed to have praised the Laws of Manu, since it was the foundation of Indian law designed by the British. However, Jones criticized the text strongly, writing that it “contains… many
blemishes which cannot be justified or palliated. It is a system of despotism and priestcraft” (Jones 88). Resistance to the text has been even stronger since the initiation of the independent movement against the British colonizers. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, one of the founding fathers of the Republic of India, considered the Laws of Manu as the primary source of the inhuman caste system in India, and burnt it in a bonfire during a protest in 1927 (Dirks 255-274). Similarly, Jayaram V, a contemporary writer on Indian religions and philosophy, believes that ancient law books like the Laws of Manu thwart India from developing into an “egalitarian society.” He further asserts that “it is time [to] consign [the Laws of Manu] to the dustbin of history” (Jayaram).

On the other hand, the Daodejing, as well as the Daoist philosophy inspired by it, is perceived by many people, especially in contemporary western countries, to be one of the first “clear expressions of an anarchist sensibility” (Josh). For example, Mark Gillespie argues that to anarchists, “one is only alive when one is free,” and that the Daodejing, by suggesting states should leave their people act on their wills on topics such as taxes and relations with neighbors, shares a fundamental premise with anarchism (Gillespie). In a related but also somewhat distinctive fashion, within Chinese popular culture Daoism is usually portrayed as apolitical. While Confucianism encourages people to actively join the political affairs jiji rushi 積極入世 (lit. actively entering the society), mainstream Chinese culture generally considers Daoism the opposite of Confucianism, and thus related to the passivity or reluctance to join political discussions, or xiaoji chushi 消極出世 (lit. being passive and detaching from the society) (Yi 129). This is why in many Chinese films or
television dramas, students of Confucianism all have the ambition to pass the imperial examination and become part of the government, while the Daoists, often retired government officials, live a secluded life deep in the mountains; Confucians debate policies in the imperial court, while the presence of Daoists in the imperial palace is usually limited to religious ceremonies.

In short, the *Law of Manu* might be read as a work of propaganda and a set of restrictions that aim to consolidate the political power of the Brahmin caste, given that Manu\(^1\) asserts “the excellence of the Brahmin” (M 1:92-101) and places great emphasis on discipline and submitting to the status quo. On the other hand, Daoism is usually perceived as apolitical, and the *Daodejing* is often read—especially in the modern West—as a one of the first works to introduce the idea of anarchism, since its purported author Laozi 老子 (lit. Old Master) criticizes the hierarchies and rules of a conservative “Confucian” regime, and promotes *wuwei* 無為 (lit. no action) as a “method” for sages and rulers. However, in this thesis I will argue that such interpretations of the two classics miss some important and interesting subtleties within each of these influential classic texts. While “Manu” (the central figure in the *Laws of Manu*) accepts the privileged status of the Brahmin or priestly caste, there are strong hints in the text of a view of nature and the cosmos that imply a measure of equality across social divisions. To Manu, people of different castes have different duties and capacities; performing their caste-distinctive duties and fulfilling their capacities is the only way to manifest their own *dharma*; in turn, fulfilling their *dharma* is

\(^{1}\) In this thesis “Manu” refers to the “voice” in the *Laws of Manu*. 
completing the world in its natural state, and people of all castes thereby enter the world of harmony. This is probably why the other founding father of independent India, Mahatma Gandhi, argued against Ambedkar, and claimed that the text included “lofty teachings,” despite its “inconsistency and contradictions” (Gandhi 129). While Gandhi criticized caste discrimination for harming India’s development, he believed discrimination had little to do with Hinduism and ancient texts, such as the *Laws of Manu*. He argued that the text “defined not one’s rights but one’s duties, that all work from that of a teacher to a janitor are equally necessary, and of equal status” (Dirks 255-274). While the *Laws of Manu* imposes restrictions on people, it does not deprive their right to “happiness.”

Similarly, though Laozi does advocate *wuwei* for sages and rulers, he actually means ruling in accordance with *dao* 道 (usually translated as Way but perhaps more effectively as “self-so-ing”), rather than doing nothing. Arguably, when one who has “attained” (or manifested) the *dao* acts, she\(^2\) is not acting, because she is naturally performing, rather than “actively acting.” As scholar Franciscus Verellen claims, the “political attitudes [of the *Daodejing*] are on the whole pragmatic, and its mystical insights, rather than denying worldly reality, claim a ‘truer’ grasp of the sources and exercise of power” (Verellen 77-78). The laissez-faire style of governing in the *Daodejing* is a political approach proactive in another sense—it is an effort of the sagacious rulers to actively maintain the harmony of *dao*. Moreover, far from encouraging people to retreat from the

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\(^2\) Since the term “he/she” is lengthy, in this thesis, I will use the pronoun “he/him/his” when referring to “someone” in the *Laws of Manu*, and use “she/her/her” when referring to “someone” in the *Daodejing*, considering the *Daodejing* has more feminine elements and a more feminine tone.
conventional society and to pursue a secluded life deep in the mountains, as shown in many films concerning the Daoists, the Daodejing suggests that its teaching is to be manifested in everyday life.

With the goal to counter the misleading unilateral interpretation of the two texts and to bring the two together through their similarities in (human) nature and human flourishing, chapter one of this thesis explicates the relations to nature of dharma and dao. I will start with the etymologies of the two words and then show that their approaches to nature are in fact remarkably similar. Dharma derives from the sanskrit root dhri-, believed to mean “to support and hold up” (Easwaran 31), and has etymological relation with the Lithuanian words derme (agreement) and darma (harmony) (Brugmann 100). Therefore, it can be translated as truth or law that both supports the world and allows the world to come into its natural state of harmony. On the other hand, dao derives from two parts—shu 足 (lit. foot), conveying the sense of “to go through,” and shou 首 (lit. head), meaning “to give a heading” (RADH 57). Dao therefore means a path that leads to something wholesome or rightful. In the Daodejing more specifically, dao is the way that things are naturally; it may be understood as “truth about the natural way of being.” In similar fashion, besides what would become the “orthodox” meaning of dharma in later “Hindu” texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, Manu introduces an innovative one: dharma as a natural way of being that allows everyone to fit into the world. Dharma in this sense resembles the de 德 in Daodejing. De 德 is usually translated as “virtue,” but it is important to note that in the Daodejing, virtue is something like “spontaneous action.” Dao is the field while de is “a
focus of potency or efficacy within its own field of experience” (RADH 59). In this sense, *dharma* of Manu is similar to both *dao* and *de* of the *Daodejing*. As I will argue, this resemblance is the basis of Manu and Laozi’s similarity in political view.

Chapter two will analyze the concepts of human nature found in both the *Laws of Manu* and the *Daodejing*. Contrary to the popular Hobbesian view that it is in the nature of human beings to compete, to win over and to accumulate as much as possible, both *Manu* and the *Daodejing* maintain that human nature is not rooted in desire. In *Manu*, laws represent the natural state of humans. Following the laws, which strictly assign the duties and rights to different castes, and not desiring anything else, is fulfilling one’s *dharma* and waking to one’s pure and harmonious natural state. Similarly, the *Daodejing* “claims that it is unnatural to have excessive desires and that having them will… paradoxically result in destitution, want, alienation and self-destruction” (Ivanhoe vxiii). The idea of *wuyu* 無欲 (lit. no desire) is one of the most important concepts in the *Daodejing*. This term should be understood metaphorically rather than literally. What is proposed is not an utter denial of desire, but rather an “objectless desire… shaped not by the desire to own, to control, or to consume, but by the desire simply to celebrate and to enjoy” (RADH 42). Meanwhile, it is also a “subjectless desire,” since when one is manifesting *dao*, she acts spontaneously, without the consciousness of self. *Wuyu* in the *Daodejing* coincides with *Manu*’s idea of desire, which, at least in its “natural” form, is not about amassing power or wealth, but rather fulfilling *dharma* and striving for broader human flourishing. Considering their
similar beliefs of human nature, we can see that the superficial reading of the *Laws of Manu* as a manifesto of oppressive governance is untenable.

Chapter three will examine the visions of the path to harmony and human flourishing in the *Laws of Manu* and the *Daodejing*, as well as the political implication of such visions. Clearly, Manu asserts that fulfilling one’s *dharma* is the right path, while the *Daodejing* simply terms the path *dao*—but what does it mean to fulfil one’s *dharma* or to follow *dao*? To Manu, fulfilling one’s *dharma* is to practice the duties and rights ascribed to him as a member of the caste system. Doing so actually enables the one to position himself in the world, and he thereby contributes to the happiness of the whole humankind, because when everyone find their right/natural place in the world, the world is complete and is in its pure, natural and harmonious state. Similarly, the *Daodejing* argues that to realize *dao*, one has to eliminate thoughts, and what is “natural” will follow. When the text states that “*Dao* declined as one reflects upon the things one does and seeks to understand why one does so” (Ivanhoe xxvi), it seems to imply the *Manu*-like idea that duties and rights are not something to contemplate, but rather to *manifest or make one’s own* (which is what one will naturally do when one’s thoughts are eliminated). Given Manu and Laozi’s belief that following (natural) rules is essential to attaining harmony and human flourishing, the *Laws of Manu* aims for happy and fulfilling lives for all the four castes.

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3 It might be a bit misleading to say the *Laws of Manu* “aims” for happy and fulfilling lives for all castes, including the Sudra, as it is impossible for us to know the exact intention of its writer. However, my thesis provides basis for such an alternative interpretation of the *Laws of Manu*, and this interpretation, in turn, raises interesting and meaningful questions, such as the following: if Manu did care about the Sudra’s happiness, does his care justify limiting the Sudra’s social role to servants?
while the *Daodejing* calls for a return to the natural order—the rule of nature—rather than anarchy or “Confucian” civilization.

**Chapter 1 On the Words *Dharma* and *Dao***

Both *dharma* and *dao* are words from ancient civilizations dating back to the time of the *Vedas* of India and the bronze inscriptions of Zhou dynasty China, around 1500 BCE to 770 BCE, with oral traditions that are probably even much older. Looking into the etymology of the two words may grant us insight into their meanings, which are abstract, subtle and usually controversial. According to Helmut Rix, the word *dharma* derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *dʰer-, which is transformed into Sanskrit as *dhri* (Rix 145). Most scholars, including Eknath Easwaran, whose translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* have enjoyed great success, understand the root *dhri* as “to support, hold up or bear” (Easwaran 31). In this sense, *dharma* is etymologically related to Avestan √dar- (to hold) and Latin *firmus* (steadfast, stable, powerful) (Brugmann 100) and bear the meaning of “something that support the world” or “something without which the world cannot hold”. However, according to Yoga Vidya, an organization promoting traditional Indian culture, the Sanskrit root *dhri-* also means “to place,” explaining why Brugmann claims *dharma* is also related to the Lithuanian word *dereti* [to be suited, fit] in etymology (Easwaran 100) and why in *Laws of Manu*, the concept that every being has his own place in the world is emphasized. Another understanding of *dhri-* is implied by Brugmann, when he examines that *dhri-* has etymological relation with the Lithuanian words *derme*
(agreement) and darna (harmony) (Brugmann 100). Brugmann’s observation conforms to Manu and the Gita’s view of dharma as a completion of the world into oneness. In later paragraphs, I will examine the meanings of dharma in orthodox Hinduism, as expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, and the similar yet different understanding of the word that Manu proposes.

The three ways of approaching to dharma, as elaborated above, are 1) something without which the world cannot hold, or simply, truth and law, 2) a natural way of being that allows everyone to fit into the world, and 3) something that completes the world, joining every piece of the world together harmoniously. In fact, these three interpretations are closely entangled. They may be derived from one another and support one another. However, some people may pay more attention to one or two aspects while others may emphasize different aspects. The Bhagavad Gita, on one hand, associates dharma with “support from within: the essence of a thing, its virtue, that which makes it what it is” (Easwaran 31). This understanding is close to the first interpretation, but only on the level of individual beings. It confirms that there are truths, but it only refers to the truths that are particular to a group of beings. It states that there is a truth, a natural way of being for each group of people. For example, Easwaran comments that the orthodox Hindu viewpoint sees the Gita as a condonation of “war for the warrior class: it is the dharma, the moral duty, of soldiers to fight in a good cause” (Easwaran 75). On a larger scale, however, the Bhagavad Gita also considers the dharma as “the law that expresses and maintains the unity of creation” (Easwaran 24), and “the law of life’s unity” (Easwaran 112) following the third
interpretation that focuses on oneness and unity. This idea of unity or oneness is also conveyed by another sacred text, the Rig Veda, where one encounters the famous verse “Truth is one” (Easwaran 22). In this view, the true world is one entity; dharma, the law, exemplifies this entity by including everyone and supports it by holding everything together.

There seems to be a tension between the two understandings of dharma in the Gita. While one implies that there are many truths, each for a certain group of people, the other clearly states that “truth is one.” To me, the conflict between these two interpretations is not irreconcilable. In fact, Manu does an admirable job in reconciling the two contending views by using the second interpretation, a natural way of being that allows everyone to fit into the world, as a bridge between the individual and the cosmic. The Gita acknowledges that there are natural laws or truths regarding the duty of different groups of beings, but it fails to recognizes that these different truths actually place each individual into a suitable place in the world, and thereby complete the world into one single unity and one single truth. It is the Laws of Manu that makes this claim. Manu believes that every caste of human being, as well as every class of fauna and flora, has its own distinct duties and capacities. Different castes also have different occupations and qualities, which are all determined by birth. Because of these set ways of being, everyone is able to position himself/herself in the world effortlessly, and “this whole world comes into being in an orderly sequence” (M 1:27). Under this ideal state, all beings live harmoniously and fulfillingly together, and the world has therefore become one. While Easwaran notes that
*dharma* in the *Bhagavad Gita* is “support from within” (BG 31), readers can see that to Manu, *dharma* is more of a “support from outside,” as he emphasizes more on the communal aspect of *dharma* than on the individual.

Interestingly, Manu’s ingenious way of joining the multiple truths for individuals and the one Truth through an interpretation of *dharma* as a natural way of being that leads to the one Truth is very similar to the idea of *dao* in the Chinese classic *Daodejing*. *Dao* is usually translated to English as “the Way.” It is true that when the character *dao* 道 first appeared in written text in the *Book of Documents* (c. 10th century BCE), it was within the context of a channel for the water to flow in order to prevent flood (RADH 57)—though Sarah Allan disagrees with this claim and suggests that the river here refers not to a canal or a river on our globe, but rather to the Milky Way (quoted in Jia 75). Either way, these scholars relate *dao* as a noun. However, unlike English, in which nouns and verbs usually have different forms, in Chinese, especially classical Chinese, the differentiation between nouns and verbs is not clearcut. For example, the character *shu* 书写 means both books and to write. As Ames, Hall and Jia point out, at least during the time of Laozi, *dao* was among those words that have both meanings as a noun and a verb. Looking into the etymology of *dao* may help us in understanding this claim. *Dao* derives from two parts—*shu* 步 (foot), conveying the sense of “to go through,” and *shou* 首 (head), meaning “to give a heading or direction” (RADH 57). When used as a noun, it means a right direction to go or a path that leads to something wholesome and upright. On the other hand, when used as a verb, it means going in the right direction or following the wholesome/upright path. In fact, the
word was “used frequently as a loan character for its verbal cognate dao 導 (to lead forth)” in early Chinese texts (RADH 57 and JJH 75). Therefore, besides the often quoted interpretation of dao as “the Way,” dao has a more dynamic aspect in its second meaning “way-making” (RADH 57).

I found these two meanings of dao, one as a cosmic truth and the other as actions aligned with that truth, very similar to the first and second interpretations of dharma in the Laws of Manu: the truth of the world (ontology) as well as a natural way of being in accordance with that truth (phenomenology).4 The contentious point over whether dharma and dao are veritably similar or merely ostensibly similar rests on the idea of oneness. While dharma implies a sense of establishing cosmic unity, Ames and Hall suggest the common understanding of the Daodejing with “One-many” metaphysics, as in the title of Arthur Waley’s translation The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought (1934), is misleading (RADH 12). They argue that in Daoism, there is no “permanent reality behind appearances,” no “unchanging substratum,” no “essential defining aspect behind the accidents of change. Rather, there is just ceaseless and usually cadenced flow of experience” (RADH 14).5 Because of its ever-changing nature, in Daoism, the “cosmos” is not oneness, but the “ten thousand things.”

4 In later chapters, I will develop in more details the idea that ontology and phenomenology in the Laws of Manu and the Daodejing are essentially one thing, as the “truth” has to be manifested in actions or the way of being.
5 Though in later eras like the Ming Dynasty, one of the primary jobs for the Daoists was to assist the emperors in developing through alchemy medicine that retained the vitality of the emperors and prevented them from death, the Daodejing seems to suggest that both life and death are essential for the balance of nature (PJI xviii), and rejects immortality and permanence.
Both texts touch upon the creation of the universe. In the *Laws of Manu*, the Self-existent Lord, who is also called “that One,” creates the world out of darkness (M 1:5-7). On the other hand, the *Daodejing* reads “Dao gives rise to continuity, Continuity gives rise to difference, Difference gives rise to plurality, And plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (wanwu)” (DDJ 42). Since dao is itself dynamic, the basis of Daoist metaphysics is not “One behind the many” (RADH 14), but “many behind the many.” Such a comparison between the *Laws of Manu* and the *Daodejing* may give rise to the mistaken view that the *Laws of Manu* is more rigid while the *Daodejing* promotes a sense of freedom. I argue that such a viewpoint is untenable for the following reasons. If one consider the fact that most later Hindu and even early Vedic gods (such as Agni) can have multiple forms of being, the “Self-existing One” in the *Laws of Manu* may very likely be anything but “one.” Moreover, since the *Laws of Manu* was, presumably, a tool of ruling, the rulers would prefer it to be flexible, so that it can fit easily into the different social conditions of the different periods of their reigns. It’s also important to note that, as I will elaborate in later chapters, the idea of the so-called “freedom” in the *Daodejing* is different from that assumed by most modern people. As I will argue in later chapters, while it may be “personal” in the sense that each individual has her own path, it is not necessary a choice, as it is predetermined “by” nature or the dao.

Another possible refutation to the idea that dharma is about rigid order while dao is about freedom of personal choices is to understand the notion of “oneness” as community, instead of “a single truth.” In the *Laws of Manu*, people are encouraged to follow their own
dharmā in order to position themselves correctly in the world and complete the world into a oneness. This oneness is a “state” of harmony where every member lives a meaningful and flourishing life. One can conceptualize this oneness as a harmonious community for human beings. On the other hand, the notion of community is also an important element of the Daodejing, regardless of the different interpretations. To “traditional” scholars studying Daodejing, such as Philip J. Ivanhoe, Laozi believes that “the dao declined as civilization and high culture arose” (PJI xxi), for in such a society, people try to set themselves above others, by accumulating wealth, building military power or other means, and at the same time “the various virtues that are heralded as the highest achievements of civilized society become vehicles for hypocrisy, deceit and fraud” (PJI xxi). Opponents to Ivanhoe’s interpretation may argue that, the Daodejing concerns not only the negative aspects of civilization; it criticizes civilization as a whole, believing that any human manipulation, including those that might seem to benefit the society. This very argument also demonstrates the importance of the concept of “community” in Daodejing. Since people, as any other thing in the world, are “in fact processual events, and are thus intrinsically related to the other ‘things’ that provide them the context” (RADH 15), and since civilization always creates difference between individuals, it is a deviation from nature, and thus is definitely flawed. Therefore, a community where people live together harmoniously without trying to overpower others or setting themselves out, is what Laozi proposes. (This does not necessarily mean, however, an elimination of hierarchy in the common sense. It only means that people do not conceptualize themselves as rulers vs. the ruled, or as the
upper-class vs. the lower-class. On one hand, differences between individuals exist, in the sense that people are different objectively, but on the other hand, such differences do not exist, since there is no civilization to give rise to the concepts of hierarchy and difference. This point will be elaborated in later chapters.)

As I have argued above, the similarities between the idea of dharma in the Laws of Manu and that of dao in the Daodejing are striking. They both mean a cosmic truth or cosmic truths. They both refer to the act of living a life as it is spontaneously, so as to position themselves correctly in the world. They are both rigid in some senses and fluid in others. And they both emphasize the importance of community. Even the fact that dharma has lost its meaning as a verb later in the Bhagavad Gita is similar to that dao in modern Chinese is merely a noun. In the following chapters, I will examine in details what the cosmic truths, i.e. (human) natures, what the ways of living for human flourishing, and what their political implications, are.

Chapter 2 On (Human) Nature in the Laws of Manu and the Daodejing

While the idea of dharma in the Laws of Manu and that of dao in the Daodejing, on one hand, represent a path to the Truth, what really is this path? Looking into the etymologies of the words dharma and dao, as described in chapter one, one may realize that it means fulfilling one’s dharma and acting in accordance with dao, or “dharma-ing” and “dao-ing.”
Then what does it mean to fulfill one’s dharma and to act according to dao? In the following chapters, I will argue that it means abiding by nature. Before delving into the matter, however, it is important to have a clear sense of what the word nature means to both Manu and Laozi, as the Laws of Manu and the Daodejing either present or imply a very different notion of nature from what may be assumed by modern western readers. Since the Daodejing has explicitly foregrounded nature, I will start my interpretation with the Daodejing.

Although the Chinese word ziran 自然 is usually translated as nature, in the sense of environmental and ecological nature, in fact, like the word dao, which is both a noun and a verb, ziran actually bears another meaning that is more dynamic. The first character zi 自 refers to the concept of self, as in zizun 自尊, (lit. pride), and the second character ran 然 means “in a state of...” or “has the appearance of,” as in xinran 欣然 (lit. with the appearance of happiness). Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the original meaning of ziran aligns more with the sense of “self-being,” which Ames and Hall render as “spontaneously so,” than with the western or modern idea of environment and ecology. The concept of ziran in the Daodejing concerns mainly humanity. Every time it talks about ziran, it is in a context regarding human beings. For example, with the famous lines,

Human beings emulate the earth, The earth emulates the heavens, The heavens emulate dao (way-making), And dao emulates ziran (what is spontaneously so).
Laozi argues that “the human experience is an integral part of the majesty (of the cosmos)” (RADH 117), while ziran is embodied by and thus can/should be found in human experience.

Also conveyed in the lines of Chapter 25 is the idea that ziran “is an alternative to the notion of initial beginnings” (RADH 69). There is ziran, in the beginning, and then all other things, finally human beings, emulate it. However, since ziran comes into exist only through the embodiment of other things, the relation between ziran and humans is not one-way, but interdependent and ongoing. This is why Ames and Hall stress that the “‘beginnings’ are fetal rather than primordial” (RADH 69). Ziran is the beginnings not in the sense of time sequence, but rather in the sense of production and reproduction.

While the Laws of Manu does not mention the word nature or any equivalent, it does share a similar idea as ziran in suggesting that the text itself is portraying a pure, original, fetal state of the world. For example, in chapter seven “Laws for the Kings,” Manu “deals with the origin of the king; the organization of the state machinery, including the appointment of officials; the construction of the fort; the king’s marriage; the conduct of foreign policy, including war; and finally taxation” (M xxxii). Patrick Olivelle notes that Manu is “envisaging a new king occupying a virgin territory here” (M xxxii), since the king has to build the infrastructures and state apparatus out of nothing.

Moreover, the Laws of Manu begins with the creation of the world:
There was this world — pitch-dark, indiscernible, without distinguishing marks, unthinkable, incomprehensible, in a kind of deep sleep all over. Then the Self-existent Lord appeared — the Unmanifest manifesting this world beginning with the elements, projecting his might, and dispelling the darkness.

—M 1:5-6

Then the Self-existent One further develops the world by bringing forth the waters, the sun, the sky, the earth, and all other creatures, including human beings. “After bringing forth in this manner the whole world, that One of inconceivable prowess once again disappear into his own body” (M 1:51) and fall asleep in tranquility. However, when he awakes, everything starts changing violently again.

In this manner, by waking and sleeping, that Imperishable One incessantly brings to life and tears down this whole world, both the mobile and the immobile.

—M 1:57
In this sense, the natural state in the cosmology of the Laws of Manu is no less dynamic than that in of the Daodejing. Yet another interesting similarities between the concept of ziran in the Daodejing and the suggested natural order in the Laws of Manu is that both imply a circular relation. As stated above, ziran gives rise to human beings while humans, in their natural state, manifest ziran. Similarly, in the Laws of Manu, the Self-existent One gives birth to humans and prescribes their natural state, while the idea of humans interacting with gods, which became fully developed as the “divine play” (lila), in the later Hindu classics, such as the Bhagavata Purana, is a necessary affirmation of the Creator’s existence. Evidence can be found in the narrative structure of the text. The creation story (and the whole book) is framed in layers, in which “the Creator taught the treatise he had composed, [i.e. the Laws of Manu.] to his son, Manu, and he in turn taught it to his pupils, including Bhrgu. It is Bhrgu who becomes the spokesman and recites the treatise to the gathered seers” (M xxii).

The actual passage of the treatise, however, is not as simple as Olivelle’s summary. The narrator switches back and forth among Manu, the Self-existing One, and the anonymous “I,” probably Bhrgu. For example, in the “Second Account of Creation,” the Self-existing One is speaking, “desiring to bring forth creatures, I heated myself with the most arduous ascetic toil” (M 1:34). However, a few verses later, in “Cosmic cycle,” the narrator changes back to Manu, who says “After bringing forth in this manner this whole world and me, that One of inconceivable prowess once again disappear into his own body” (M 1:51). At the end of Chapter One, the anonymous narrator steps back in, and calls for
attention to his teaching, “just as, upon my request, Manu formerly taught me this treatise, so you too must learn it from me today” (M 1:119). The situation is made even more complex when the book introduces another meaning of Manu. According to the “Second Account of Creation,” Manu refers not only to the son of the Self-existing One, but is also a title of creatures of “immerse energy” by the ten great seers (M 1:36). The changing perspective between the gods and the human “I” implies the necessity of humans to interact with gods, i.e. the “divine play”. They believe that it is the responsibility of humans to dance with the gods, and Manu proposes a “dance” through playing one’s role, i.e. fulfilling one’s dharma, and thus sustaining the world.

Both the Laws of Manu and the Daodejing stress that there is “something natural” that founds the base of the humanity, and that it need to be manifested in humans. Then what do Manu and Laozi, the purported authors of the two texts, believe about human nature? In the following section, I will elaborate on the ontological ideas important to the two works by taking a closer look into specific chapters of the texts.

A common idea on human nature shared by both the Laws of Manu and the Daodejing is the one on desires. The Daodejing explicitly expresses its view that people in their natural state, those who are practicing the dao, or are in the dao, have no desire, which Laozi frames as wuyu. While literally means “no desire,” wuyu must be understood philosophically, rather than literally. The Daodejing is not arguing that people should be shameful about their desires, abandon them, and live a austere or even ascetic life. Ames and Hall explain wuyu as the following: what is proposed is not an utter denial of desire,
but rather an “objectless desire… shaped not by the desire to own, to control, or to consume, but by the desire simply to celebrate and to enjoy” (RADH 42). In my perspective, the Daodejing is even more radical. There could neither be desire nor the need for an effort to eliminate desire at all, because when dao is manifested, when people have “returned” to their natural state, they will feel so content in the harmonious world that they think about nothing else than what they have.

Speaking of human desires, people tend to think about physical or material desires first. In fact, the Daodejing, encouraging people to adopt a non-desiring (wuyu) lifestyle, also tries to convince people that the possession of wealth is transitory and untenable.

When treasure fills the hall,

No one is able to keep it self,

Those who are arrogant because of station and wealth

Bring calamity upon themselves.

To retire when the deed is done

Is the way (dao) that tian works.⁶

—DDJ 9

⁶ The word tian is literally translated as heaven, but it is usually used very broadly to refer to something wholesome, rightful, or natural. In this particular sentence, the literally translation would be “… is the way (dao) of tian.” Since dao is considered wholesome and natural, the dao of tian is just dao, and Laozi is simply just saying “… is dao” here.
The commentary of Ames and Hall on this chapter focuses on the verb “fill,” and hence the idea of fullness and extremity. They argue that in this chapter, Laozi is drawing an analogy between the human world and the natural world (nature in the modern sense). “Taking any endeavor to its extreme will result in a reversal of this direction and a self-induced subversion of the enterprise” (RADH 89). They further assert that the idea presented in this chapter is similar to a probably spurious chapter found in the Confucian classic Xunzi, where Confucius states “you need a measure of ignorance to cope with an intelligence… you need a measure of humility to cope with accomplishments… this is what is called the way of draining some off and reducing the amount” (RADH 89). It is true that the concept of not desiring fullness, usually termed as zhizu 知足 (lit. knowing the sufficiency of one’s possession) in Chinese and translated as contentment in English, is important to the Daodejing, as in the following passage:

Therefore, those who know contentment avoid disgrace,

And those who know where to stop avoid danger.

They will be long-enduring.

—DDJ 44

While the English word contentment fits well into Laozi’s idea of dao, the Chinese word zhizu seems a bit ambiguous and need careful investigation. The English word contentment is mostly a description of a mental state, but the Chinese word zhizhu,
especially because of its Chinese characters, implies a physical state of possessing. *Zhizu* literally means knowing that what one has is enough, and therefore linguistically implies a sense of possession, since one cannot *zhizu* without possessing something. However, in my opinion, to understand the essence of the *Daodejing* or the *dao*, one need to understand *zhizu* metaphorically, adopting its philosophical meaning of satisfaction. To do so is to understand that impermanence is a fundamental aspect of *zhizu*. Impermanence is one of the key elements of the cosmos in the *Daodejing*, as elaborated in Chapter one. Since the “ten thousand things” that comprise the cosmos are ever-changing, it is impossible to cling onto or to possess anything, according to the *Daodejing*. Therefore, I believe that the main point of Chapter 9 is not something like “do not drive to the extreme in your possessions,” as Ames and Hall focus on in their commentary, but rather something as “do not try to possess anything.” An important distinction to draw between the Daoist concept of possession and the Indian one is that while the Indian practice of relinquishing possession is against the usage of the possessed things, and hence asceticism, the *Daodejing* takes on a more pragmatic approach. In fact, effectively using something is manifesting the Dao, according to Laozi. No one can keep a house full of gold and jade, not because it is full, but because one would not be able to keep anything at all. The people who are arrogant because of their wealth and social status are bound to calamity, not because they have gone to the extreme, but because their wealth and status are in fact untenable — anyone who clinging onto something is bound to calamity.
To me, Ames and Hall seem to have aligned too much with the Confucian idea of the middle way or *zhongyong* (lit. being in the middle and plain) in Chinese, just as they quote the Confucian Classic (though probably spurious) in their commentary. However, while the Confucian balance is found in being in the middle and not driving to the extreme, balance in Daoism is a character of way-making. The Confucian idea of *zhongyong* is more of a cognitive concept, and thus something “active,” while the Daoist balance is found in the “passive” spontaneity. The Daoist balance sometimes seems extreme and weird to the conventional (Confucian) eyes, because it is not restricted by conventional morality. The *Daodejing* concerns little about finding the literal balance or the midpoint between wealth and poverty, intelligence and ignorance, timidity and courage, and etc. Instead, to Laozi, achieving balance is nothing more than manifesting the *dao*, and since impermanence is one of the most important aspect of the *dao*, to live a balanced life, one need to understand that everything is impermanence and cannot be clinged onto. Therefore, Laozi proposes, “to retire when the deed is done is the way (*dao*) that *tian* works” (DDJ 9). Having done something, the sage leaves it as it is, instead of clinging onto it. In other words, *wuyu* refers not only to *zhizu* and *zhongyong* (not desiring to possess more than one has and not desiring to possess the fullness), but also to the idea of not desiring to possess. Things in the world are not for the purpose of winning over, possessing or controlling, but are simply there to be experienced and enjoyed. Such an idea aligns with what Ames and Hall term as “objectless desire.”
As stated above in the earlier part of the chapter, I believe that the concept of wuyu in the Daodejing is more radical than an “objectless desire.” Radical not in the sense that it is a total denial of desire and advocation of an ascetic lifestyle, but that few people till today have proposed a similar idea—a subjectless desire. This denial of desire derives from the Daodejing’s argument that in the natural state, when/where dao is manifested, there is no awareness of self, and hence there is no subject of the action of desiring. In this sense, the idea of wuyu is closely related to another wu-form word in the Daodejing—wuxin (lit. no heart-mind). In one way, it is natural that no desire means altruism and thus concerning little about one’s own, as in “Lessen your concern for yourself and reduce your desires” (DDJ 19). However, this chapter in Daodejing is advocating people not only to lessen their concerns for the material life, but also literally to think little about their “selves.” While people tend to think of desires as those of physical need, there is also philosophical desires, such as making sense of oneself. In the Daodejing, wuyu is not only a rejection of luxury life, but also a denial of learning one’s self.

The Chinese word xin, usually translated as heart-mind, is a concept similar to the idea of ego, inner self or one’s essence. Just like other wu-forms, wuxin is not a total negation of one’s heart-mind. The Daodejing does not suggest that people are essence-less entities. Rather, wuxin is a natural state when dao is manifested and when people do not actively think of themselves as different from others. In other words, in the Daodejing, the negation of xin is restricted to the artificial self-consciousness/identity, which people create themselves in civilized cultures. To Laozi, with the formation of civilization, people
struggled to give shape to their own lives, and there came the created selves, which Laozi deems as a departure from the nature or the dao. Chapter 49 of the Daodejing explicitly states this point:

Sages [are constantly wuxin].

They take the thoughts and feelings of the common people as their own.

…

As for the presence of sages in the world, in their efforts to draw things together,

They make of the world one muddled mind.

—DDJ 49

In some other versions, the verse “sages [are constantly wuxin] 聖人恒無心” is written as “the Sage is without a constant mind 聖人無恒心” and the phrase hunxin 渾心 is understood as a verb “to merge one’s mind” rather than a noun “muddled mind.” Because of the text’s long history, we couldn’t determine whether “constantly wuxin” or “without a constant mind” is the original. However, while the idea of no constant mind fits well with the ever-changing Daoist cosmos, the idea of constantly wuxin fits better with and helps readers understand other wu-forms in the Daodejing. Similarly, we could not know for sure whether hunxin was designed to be read as a verb or a noun by Laozi. However, to understand it as a noun, a muddled mind opens readers to an alternative interpretation of the Daodejing. When understood as a verb, the phrase is translated as “with the world he merges his mind” (H 120-121). Compared to “they make of the world one muddled mind,” the sage merging one’s mind with the world seems to care about the people from above, as opposed to be amid the people. Therefore, to read hunxin as a muddled mind enables readers to interpret the Daodejing as not only a work for the rulers, but also a work for the community.
The sages, those who are “living with” the dao, do not make significance of their own heart-minds, and thereby separate themselves from the common people. Rather, they take the populance’s heart-mind as their own. Laozi believes that in a harmonious society, the one when dao is manifested, people do not have their own heart-minds, but all the people share “one muddled mind.” In my perspective, sharing one heart-mind does not only mean that people share such solidarity that they aim for the same thing. It is more important for people to “eliminate” their own selves and the awareness that each of them is a separate entity. It is also important to the note that Laozi stresses on the muddled state, which might seem to be negative in English. However, the word muddle in Chinese is a neutral word and in the Daodejing, it is very likely to convey a positive sense, because that is one of the characteristic of ziran, or the spontaneity. The Daoist “one mind” is a open, unorganized one, disrupting the norms and distinct from the more restrictive Confucian or Legalist practice. Because heart-mind is deemed unwanted and even detrimental in the Daodejing, the desire to understand oneself is also discouraged, as in

It is on this model that the sages withdraw their persons
from contention yet find themselves out in front,
Put their own persons out of mind
yet find themselves taken care of,
Isn’t it simply because they are unselfish that they can
satisfy their own needs?
This chapter captures the essence of *wuyu* very well. The first sentence talks about the relinquishment of the desire to contend with others, either for wealth, social status, or other benefits. The second sentence, on the other hand, talks about the desire to make sense of oneself, such as the philosophical questions of “who am I/ where did I come from/ where am I going to.” Laozi believes that in the pure, natural state, human beings do not conceptualize themselves, and are pull out of their self-created heart-minds, and yet, they are naturally taken good care of, by *dao*, and it is only in this state, when *dao* is manifested, that people are truly content. Therefore, the word “unselfish” in the last sentence, comprises both the altruistic idea of not contending with others for material comfort, and a literally “self-less” mental state of human beings. Such a relinquishing of self echos with the last sentence of Chapter 9 “to retire when the deed is done, is the way (*dao*) that *tian* works.”

On one hand, retiring from the deed implies contentment and objectless desire, as it seems to encourage people to enjoy the process and ignore the product. On the other hand, it also calls attention to subject-less desire, as it proposes people should disassociate their achievements from themselves, and refrain from developing an unnatural ego.

In the *Laws of Manu*, on the other hand, the relation between desire and austerity is seemingly paradoxical. At some points, the *Laws of Manu* praises austerity as one of the most important practices in life:
Knowledge, austerity, fire, food, earth, mind, water,

smearing with cow dung, wind, rites, sun, time – these are

the agents of purification for embodied beings.

—M 5:105

Being enumerated together with the fundamental elements of human beings, of all creatures and of even the whole world, such as earth, water, sun and time, as well as with essential aspects of human society/ civilization, such as knowledge and rites, austerity must have been highly regarded. Austerity is also mentioned in the section “Mode of Life” (M 6: 5-28) together with “Great Sacrifices.” Considering how important sacrifices are to ancient Indians, one may easily sense the weight Manu has put on austerity.

When thinking of austerity, the image of a monk emaciated due to self-starvation, beating himself with a wooden stick, might come to many people’s mind. In fact, the Laws of Manu also have detailed instruction of how one should engage in physical self-punishment:

He should… surround himself with the five fires in the summer; live in open air during the rainy season; and wear wet clothes in the winter—gradually intensifying his ascetic toil… and engaging in ever harsher ascetic toil, he should inflict punishment on his body.
Advocating all such self-inflicting, is the Laws of Manu a entirely different in its fundamental beliefs, from the Daodejing, which as argued above, opposes asceticism? Manu’s attitude to austerity and desire is actually much more complex than what the two quotes above show. While the Laws of Manu does encourage an ascetic lifestyle, contrary to most people in the West would believe nowadays, to Manu, austerity and desire are not necessarily two incompatible concepts. Rather, they coexist harmoniously.

When the Self-existent One creates the world, according to the Laws of Manu, he brought forth “time, divisions of time, constellations, planets, rivers, oceans, mountains, flat and rough terrain, austerity, speech, sexual pleasure, desire and anger.” (M 1:24-25). In other words, to Manu, both austerity and desire are among the natural characteristics of human beings. The emphasis on adopting an ascetic lifestyle does not mean one should eliminate his desire. In the Laws of Manu, desire, just like austerity, is regarded as important to human beings and the whole society. One of the reasons not to relinquish desire is that there are good desires, such as the desire of the Self-existent One to create the world (M 1:8, 34, 75 and etc). Moreover, desire is the stimulus of vedic study and the performance of vedic rites (M 2:2). Not only should one retain his desire, one also could not detach from desire. The Laws of Manu explicitly states that “it is impossible here (in this world) to be free from desire” (M 2:2) and that “nowhere in this world do we see any
activity done by a man free from desire; for whatever at all that a man may do, it is the work of someone who desires it (the impulse of desire)” (M 2:4).

How then, does Manu resolve the seeming contradiction between the retention of desire and asceticism, which often associated with the relinquishment of desire? While the Laws of Manu does not give an explicit answer, my supposition is that Manu shares with Laozi a distinction between material austerity and mental asceticism, as well as the idea of passively acting without actively desiring. When talking about austerity as an agent of purification, Manu further distinguishes between the different levels of purification:

Purifying oneself with respect to wealth, tradition tells us,
is the highest of all purifications; for the truly pure man is
the one who is pure with respect to wealth, not the one who becomes pure by using earth and water...

— M 5:106

Can one be austere while acquiring wealth? At first sight, it seems odd for a person who highly regards wealth to live a frugal life. However, Manu’s argument actually makes sense. If a person respects wealth and yet still remains austere, he is purer than those who live in austerity due to their aversion to wealth, because he manifests the true meaning of austerity – it’s not a byproduct of other emotions or beliefs, such as aversion, but a characteristic of dharma, or the natural state/spontaneity. Austerity derived from loathing
of wealth is similar to the physical self-inflicting in that they are both superficial aspects of austerity. On the other hand, austerity with respect to wealth is one on the mental level, having *dharma* on its back. Asserting that the purity by “using earth and water” is inferior to purity with respect to wealth, Manu clearly values mental purity more than physical purity, and hence mental austerity more than material austerity. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the *Laws of Manu* is not belittling material austerity as a whole, since mental purity manifests materially. However, Msnu does place more value on mental purity (and its manifesting material purity) than on other purity without spiritual/mental support. This idea is strikingly similar to the concept of *wuyu* in the *Daodejing*. Asceticism does not represents the essence of austerity or desire-less (*wuyu*), the natural/spontaneous state of not actively desiring does.

Similar to differentiating two kinds of purification, the *Laws of Manu*, borrowing from the *Vedas*, also prescribes two kinds of action: advancing and arresting. An action performed in order to satisfy one’s desire is called an advancing act, and by engaging in such an action, one “attains equality with the gods.” On the other hand, an action performed without desire is termed as an arresting act, which “procures the supreme good,” and whereby one “transcends the five elements” (M 12:88-90). Keeping in mind that according to the *Laws of Manu*, it is impossible to be free from desire, how does one act without desire? Is it ever possible to perform the arresting acts while desire is a natural part of human beings ascribed by the Self-existing One when he creates the world? My attempted answer to this seemingly paradoxical question is that Manu has a similar view on desire as
the concept of *wuyu* in the *Daodejing*. To Laozi, the sages, who have manifested the *dao*, are desire-less, not because they adopt an ascetic lifestyle, but because they act according with the *dao* and are totally unaware of their desires. The advancing actions in the *Laws of Manu* shares a similar idea. Since desires are so natural, it is possible that one can act without actively desiring. Such a state is achieved when one manifests the *dharma*, and acts according with the nature/spontaneity—while desire is a natural part of actions, the actor is desire-less in his mental activities.

In the *Daodejing*, the notion of human desire or the lack of it (*wuyu*) is central to its argument about human nature, and other important concepts regarding human nature, such as *zhizu* contentment, *wuxin* no self-constructed self, and *wuzheng* “striving without contentiousness” (RADH 68), are largely supporting or deriving from *wuyu*. However, in the *Laws of Manu*, while austerity and desire (or the lack of it) are important aspects of human natures, they are by no means central to the whole treatise. Another essential part of the natural state of human beings addressed in the *Laws of Manu* is the hierarchy among the four castes.

Manu first attempts to reinforces the hierarchy of caste system by stating that the Brahmin’s excellence is designed by the Self-existing One along with his creation of the world. He asserts that:

\[
\text{A man is said to be purer above the navel. Therefore, the} \\
\text{Self-existent One has declared, the mouth is his purest part.}
\]
Because he arose from the loftiest part of the body, because he is the eldest, and because he retains the Veda, the Brahmin is by Law the lord of this whole creation.

— M 1:92-93

The account of the Self-existing One creating the world and the human species is manipulated by Manu to justify the sociopolitical status of the brahmins among the other castes. The *Laws of Manu* explicitly states that because of their noblest nature, a gift from the god at their birth, the brahmins have “a clear right to this whole world,” and “this whole world is the property” of them (M 1:100). However, it seems that Manu is not convinced of the effectiveness of the statement about birth order in protecting the exceptional status of the brahmins in the long run. He turns to the idea of natural classification of duties and occupations for a stronger support:

I will now explain to you exactly which type of activity is ascribed here to which type of creature, and also their relative order with respect to birth.

— M 1:42

While this quote is found in the excurses of the classification of fauna and flora, the idea of assigning certain activities as natural to certain groups of creatures is extended to the
classification among the four castes. Just as each type of animals and plants have different duties or jobs according with their birth, the different castes of people each has its own occupations—“reciting and teaching the Veda, offering and officiating at sacrifices, and receiving and giving gifts” for the Brahmin; “protecting the subjects, giving gifts, offering sacrifices, reciting the Veda and avoiding attachment to sensory objects” for the ksatriya; “looking after animals, giving gifts, offering sacrifices, reciting the Veda, trade, moneylending and agriculture” for the vaisya; “ungrudging service of” the upper castes for the sudra (M 1:91). These caste-constraint activities are deemed as the natural way of people’s life and hence the dharma and the sacred, unchangeable order among the different castes of people.

People may argue that the account of human nature in the Laws of Manu serves primarily to reinforce the sociopolitical status of the brahmins, and therefore represents a sharp distinction from that in the Daodejing, which emphasizes the forgetting/ignoring of the self-constructed ego, as well as a solidary community among all people. While I believe there is some truth in the first part of the argument—the Laws of Manu does protect the brahmins as the highest caste—I don’t think the understanding of sociopolitical order of Manu and that of Laozi are on the opposite side. It is true that the the Laws of Manu explicitly places a certain caste of people above the others, but is the ideal society, as proposed by Laozi, when the dao is fully manifested, an equal society with no existing hierarchy? The notion of “one muddled mind” may give us the answer. While on one hand, the muddled mind embodies a regime not totalitarian, as argued in earlier paragraphs; on
the other hand, the society with a muddled mind is also not an egalitarian one. It is important to note that the ideal society proposed in the *Daodejing* does not represent conventional justice. The best social order to Laozi does not aim to find the middle way as stated in the Confucian classics, nor does it have to follow the principle of checks and balances in the liberal democratic ideal. For a society to be supreme, according to the *Daodejing*, all it need is the manifestation of the *dao*, which does not have to be just in the conventional sense, as we will see in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 The Path to Harmony and Human Flourishing and Its political Implications

Happiness is one of the most important topics in the *Laws of Manu*. In fact, the whole work can be understood as a manual of achieving a happy life and afterlife. Manu states that a learned man should strictly follow the law proper to him/her according to the scriptures and tradition, because doing so enables him/her to “achieve fame in this world and unsurpassed happiness (सुखम्: sukham) after death” (M 2:9). In other words, Manu believes that one should always do the “right things” that would lead him to happiness, and that the whole text, detailing which kinds of activities are proper to people of which castes, aims to instruct people their caste-specific rights and duties, so that they can achieve happiness. Arguably, the intention of compiling the *Laws of Manu* is to lead a path to happiness among people of all castes.
According to Manu, to fulfill one’s dharma is to perform one’s duties and to exercise one’s capabilities, both determined naturally by birth. Because of the relatively fixed duties and capabilities for each caste, people can easily find their own places in the world, whereby completing the world into a Oneness that is harmonious and fulfilling. In this sense, the caste system—at least in theory—brings happiness to everyone, including the Sudra. Unlike what people from other cultures tend to believe, the caste system may not be a dreadful system to the Sudra. Rather, they may feel content with their life as they believe they are fulfilling their dharma, performing the natural way of life, and working towards their “human flourishing.” The idea of human flourishing is fundamental to understanding the Laws of Manu. While the word “happiness” appears frequently in the text, readers must note that the idea of happiness in the Laws of Manu is by no means the same as the concept of happiness commonly understood in contemporary English usage. Rather, it is closer to human flourishing, as I will explain in more details in the following paragraphs.

For one thing, the Laws of Manu advocates asceticism, both physical and mental. While mainstream understanding of happiness has not gone so far as to equal the pursuit of happiness to hedonism, the majority of people today definitely would not consider self-abnegation as a means of achieving happiness. Moreover, whereas people today tend to believe that slavery is against human rights and that no slave can be called happy, the Laws of Manu sees slavery in another way. According to Manu, the Self-existing One assigned “ungrudging service of the upper castes” as the duty of the Sudra, the lowest
castes of all Indians. And it is through the manifestation of the laws, the tradition, the intention of the Self-existing One, and nature (which are ultimately all the one thing), and the performance of their slavish service that the Sudra could achieve happiness. Just as Manu carefully notes that one achieves “unsurpassed happiness after death,” the experience of this life is not necessarily pleasurable.

Another difference between the concept of happiness in the Laws of Manu and that of the twenty-first century is that Manu’s happiness is more community/caste-based. People living in contemporary liberal democracies generally accept the idea that people have the fundamental right to freely pursue happiness in their own ways, as long as doing so does not violate the laws or the rights of others. However, to Manu, there is no individual understanding of what happiness means—it is predetermined by the Self-existing One/nature, neither is there an individual way of achieving it—people of the same caste share exactly the same way of attaining happiness. Furthermore, according to the Laws of Manu, the “self” element should be limited in one’s path to happiness:

When by the passion of his spirit he frees himself from attachment to every object of passion, then he wins eternal happiness (सुखं; sukham) both here and in the hereafter.

— M 6:80
In the mainstream understanding of happiness today, one feels happy when one have achieved something he desires, but to Manu, happiness is gained through detaching oneself from his desires. Similar to the idea of freeing oneself from one’s passions, Manu advocates that people perform with a subjectless/passive mental state, because it is through doing so that one becomes closer to their natural state, closer to the teaching of the scriptures and tradition, and hence closer to happiness. The Sanskrit word of happiness used by Manu is **sukha**, which can also be translated as bliss or ease. It represents a state of a lasting happiness, as opposed to the sanskrit word **preya**, which denotes a transient pleasure. Manu is less concerned with the material abundance or satisfaction, which is usually momentarily and untenable, than with the long-term happiness derived from self-confidence and self-fulfillment.

In this sense, happiness in the *Laws of Manu* is better termed as human flourishing. It is not necessarily pleasurable, such as the ascetic work for the Brahmin and the slavish work for the Sudra. It is also not individualized or self-generated, since 1) acts should be performed without consideration of oneself, and 2) people of the same caste share the same vision of what happiness is and how to attain it. Therefore, the concept of happiness in the *Laws of Manu* is closer to the idea of human flourishing than to way ‘happiness’ is usually understood in the context of liberal democratic societies. Happiness here is not the same as leading a pleasurable life, having abundant food, being close to the people significant to oneself, obtaining what one has longed for, and so on. Most importantly, it is leading a meaningful or significant life; i.e. fulfilling one’s **dharma** by performing selflessly the
natural duties assigned to him/her by the Self-existing One, which includes studying the *Vedas* and performing sacrifices for the Brahmins, offering “ungrudging service of the upper castes” for the Sudra, and so on. Such activities are meaningful and grant people a fulfilling life, according to Manu. Moreover, happiness is not only an individual matter in the *Laws of Manu*, it is closely related to the duties and capabilities of the (caste-based) community that one belongs to. Rather than the feeling of happiness when one meets with a friend after a long period of separation or when one finally accomplishes something after several attempts, the concept of happiness in the *Laws of Manu* concerns all human beings—it is about how the four different castes of people dwell harmoniously together; it is, again, at least in theory, about the flourishing of the human kind as a whole.

Because of the importance of working on one’s duties and capabilities in one’s attainment of happiness, it is not surprising that Manu emphasizes disciplines and rules of conduct, as following orders and rules is central to one’s duties/*dharma*. For example, Manu elaborates in details the regulations in an ancestral offering (M 3:122-285), the rules in a Vedic initiation (M 2:26-64) and proper salutation for a student (M 2:117-133). He also highly values obedience, especially to teachers and parents. He states that “obedient service to [teachers and parents] is said to be the highest form of ascetic toil. For [teachers, mothers and fathers] are the three Vedas; and they alone are called the three sacred fires” (M 2:229). One on the other hand, because many orders and rules in the *Law of Manu* conform with the hierarchy of the caste system, stressing their importance and linking them with nature and happiness through *dharma* helps reinforce the Brahmin’s privilege. On the other hand, it is
noteworthy that quite a few of the rules are harsh to the Brahmins, like the one that states a Brahmin “who does not know how to return a greeting… is no better than a Sudra” (M 2:126), showing that rules in the Laws of Manu are not entirely written to strengthen the Brahmin’s social status. Similarly, Manu connects social conventions and politics with nature through dharma; one may hold that Manu does so to convince people to follow laws that benefit the Brahmin, still others can argue that he does so because he sincerely believes following the laws make everyone from every caste fulfilling. Moreover, while Manu has not gone as far as the Buddhists who claim that one’s nobility lies in how one acts, rather than which caste one belongs to, he does suggest that birth status, though important, is only fulfilled by one’s behaviors. Stressing the importance of human relation between students and teachers, children and parents, and valuing one’s noble acts over one’s birth, the Laws of Manu clearly comprises some humanities move.

Arguably, reinforcing the caste system and emphasizing discipline are the most important elements in the Laws of Manu, and perhaps, Manu employed the idea of human flourishing in order to convince people the “excellence of the Brahmin” (M 1:92-101), and to formalize rules of conduct that would benefit the Brahmin. On one hand, Manu establishes the view “the Brahmin are always the noblest” by connecting the Brahmin’s privilege with the celestial power of the Self-existing One, as illustrated by the creation of beings. However, he seems to believe that merely relating the excellence of the Brahmin to God’s power is insufficient to ensure long term protection of the Brahmin’s privileged status. He also draws help from the power of nature and the concept of happiness/human
flourishing. He emphasizes the importance of strictly following the disciplines stated in his law, most of which reflect the caste system’s hierarchy and serve the interest of the Brahmins. Manu convinces his people that rules and orders in his law are closely related to nature, or dharma, and that abiding themselves by the established rules is fulfilling their natural duties and manifesting their dharma, which in turns grant them “unsurpassed happiness” (M 2:9). In other words, Manu inculcates people of the lower castes that their only way of attaining happiness is serving the interest of the nobler castes, because merely by doing so could they dwell harmoniously with their natural state, or dharma.

Manu not only strengthens the noblest status of the Brahmins through the philosophical congruence of dharma and happiness, he does so also by assigning political duties to the kings, and by depriving the lower castes of property:

The king should make Vaisyas pursue trade, moneylending, agriculture, and cattle herding, and make Sudras engaging in the service of twice-born people….

[Sudras,] tradition tells us, are without property.

— M 8:410-416

In a harmonious society ruled by a good king, according to the Laws of Manu, the Vaisyas and the Sudras engage in supportive work for the Brahmins and the Ksatriyas. It is the duty of a king to make sure that the lower castes are doing such work, and that the Sudras have
no property. If the king fails to do so, he is “throw[ing] this world into confusion” (M 8:418). It is interesting to note that to Manu, the nature, the *dharma*, the *Vedas*, the tradition, his laws, (all of which are ultimately the same thing), are interdependent with politics. On one hand, Manu states that it is the nature of the lower castes to perform supporting work for the higher castes, and it is the nature of the Sudra to possess no property. Manu believes that “nature” should not remain an abstract idea; instead, it is important that the rulers carry it into the real political life, and make sure the people are acting accordingly. In this sense, nature is dependent on politics to be manifested. On the other hand, nature is the basis of how kings should rule. Kings are expected to ensure the lower castes are doing their supporting work, not because doing so serves the interest of himself/herself or his ingroup (while it probably does benefit the Ksatriyas and the Brahmins, such benefits are not the intention, at least as argued by Manu), but because it keeps the society in its harmonious natural state, preventing his people from confusion. In this sense, politics is dependent on nature as its blueprint and guide.

While reinforcing the “excellence of the Brahmin” (M 1:92-101) is a central theme of the *Laws of Manu*, as analyzed above, it is not necessarily the intention of the text. The text aims at keeping the world in accordance with nature/dharma, and it is likely that the fortification of the high social and religious status of the Brahmins is merely a byproduct of this aim, as the nobleness of the Brahmins is part of nature/dharma. Therefore, the respect paid to the Brahmins can be understood as merely a reverence for nature. Similarly, it is probable that people respect the Brahmins for reasons more pragmatic than the hierarchical
ideology that they are the highest caste. For example, when describing the proper conducts for the king, Manu states that:

He should pay honour to Brahmins who have returned from their teacher’s house; for this is the inexhaustible treasure deposited with Brahmins decreed for kings. Neither thief nor enemy can steal it, and it never perishes. Therefore, the king should deposit this inexhaustible treasure with Brahmins.

— M 7:82-83

Manu seems to be asserting that while the kings should be devoted to the Brahmins, he is less concerned with the theoretical excellence of the Brahmins. Rather, the kings should do so because the Brahmins have made the most valuable contribution to their reigns and to their states—i.e., knowledge about the Vedas. Admittedly, whether the study of the Vedas is valuable to the rule of the kings is purely an ideological/philosophical question. Nonetheless, for the kings, as least as they are described in the Laws of Manu, a major reason of their devotion to the Brahmins is based on political considerations.

Just as the excellence of the Brahmins is not as important as many people would have thought, the lives of the lower castes are not as trivial. For one thing, their supportive work is integral to maintain the harmonious balance of the world in its natural state.
Moreover, a Ksatriya, member of the ruling class, has as his duties/dharma the obligation to protect “all of his subjects” (M 7:144), including the Sudras. Similarly, when accounting for the origin of kingship (M 7:2-36), Manu states that the Creator creates a king so that people would have a shelter:

The king was created as the protector of people belonging to all social classes and orders of life who, according to their rank, are devoted to the Law specific to them.

— M 7:35

According to the Laws of Manu, anyone, including the Sudras, would attain unsurpassed happiness as long as they follow the duties and capabilities specific to him/her, and manifests his dharma. To fulfill such a “promise,” the Self-existing One creates a king, who, at least theoretically, would protect the happiness of all people. The kings may, or are even supposed to, keep the Sudras busy with their service to the upper castes, and punish severely those who fail in their task. The ruling of the kings may seem inhumane to the eyes of people living in contemporary liberal democracies, but in the Laws of Manu, it is conceptualized as necessary to the maintenance of the harmony of the society, and to the ensurance of the happiness of the lower castes. In this sense, the political order and the Ksatriyas benefit the lower castes. Even the more radical argument of the Brahmins serving
the interest of the lower castes is tenable, since the Brahmans, with their Vedas study, support the politics, and therefore the lower castes indirectly.

While the Laws of Manu envisions a harmonious world where every person would feel “happy,” content and fulfilling, when he manifests the dharma specific to his caste, the Daodejing similarly proposes that a society in its natural state accordant with the dao would be safe, peaceful, and flourishing (anpingtai DDJ 35). The idea of peace in Chinese, however, also implies a sense of stableness and thus plainness. In the same chapter, Laozi describes dao:

But were way-making (dao) to be put into words:

It could be said to be so bland and insipid

that it has no taste.

— DDJ 35

On on hand, this depiction of dao may be a provocative rendering of its nature. The dao is the natural way of one’s being, and therefore is nothing more than a mundane habituality, far from something splendid. Yet, on the other hand, the Daodejing probably stresses the blandness and insipidness of dao to convey the message that the practicing of dao brings a person accordance with the rest of the world, rather than making him/her exceptional. In this sense, dao is plain because it does not help one to stand out among others. The idea of
“softening” oneself is expressed twice in the *Daodejing*, with the same phrases (though not in the same order), which is rare in the text. In chapter 4, Laozi compares *dao* to an abyss:

> It blunts the sharp edges and untangles the knots,

> It softens (*he*) the glare and

> brings things together on the same track.

> So cavernously deep—it only seems to persist.

—DDJ 4

The manifestation of *dao* requires one to situate herself in the world without imposing her accomplishments. One may have lots of glorious achievements, but *dao* requires her to be detached from those accomplishments, blunting her sharp edges and softening her glare, so as to fit into the world in her natural way. It is only through such a practice that one can “persist,” not in the sense of immortality, but continued flourishing. In chapter 56, Laozi repeats the same phrases of “soften the glare,” “bring things together on the same track,” “blunt the sharp edges,” “untangle the knots,” and states that doing so “is called the profoundest consonance.” The term translated by Ames and Hall as “softening” here is *he* 和, which is also the word for harmony. In Laozi’s perspective, harmony and consonance is achieved through the softening of self and the uniting within the society.

The *Daodejing* resembles the *Laws of Manu* in that they both emphasize that the manifestation of *dao* and *dharma* give rise to a harmonious and flourishing community.
Moreover, manifesting the *dao* is following one’s natural habituality, just like the practicing of one’s *dharma* in the *Laws of Manu*. However, unlike Manu, who assigns specific *dharma* for each of the castes, Laozi does not explicitly instruct his readers as to what their naturalness comprises. While the Indian readers of *Manu* can be confident that they have entered a path of “happiness” as long as they fulfill their caste-specific duties, such as studying the *Vedas* or herding cattles, the Chinese readers of the *Daodejing* are not given similar guidance on what to do on the day-to-day basis. The idea of manifesting the *dao* remains ambiguous, probably because *dao* is “nameless:”

*Dao* that can be put into words is not really *dao*,

And naming that can assign fixed reference to things

is not really naming.

— DDJ 1

The concept of “nameless,” similar to “desireless” *wuyu*, and “heartmind-less” *wuxin*, is not a conventional negation, but rather an affirmation of the nature/*dao*. Instead of arguing that *dao* is so obscure and mysterious that language cannot capture its insights, Laozi probably considers *dao* nameless because of its fluid and dynamic nature. The quote above, just like “desireless,” is not to be read literally. One need to refer to the Daoist cosmos to better understand this quote. Because the Daoist cosmos is ever-changing, the possibility of the manifestation of *dao* is infinite. When Laozi says *dao* cannot be put into words, he is
not rendering *dao* into an abstract or obscure idea; on the contrary, *dao* is always concrete, as it is nothing more than the day-to-day behaviors of the sages. Laozi is reluctant to associate certain acts with “the natural way of being,” as Manu has done, not because he believes conventional language cannot capture the obscure insight of *dao*, but simply because language cannot capture in full its possibilities, which are infinite.

However, the *Daodejing* does include some general principles for everyday conduct, such as being humble and dedicated in resetting the balance of the world. Both in the beginning (CH2) and to the end (CH77) of the *Daodejing*, Laozi describes the sages in the same way: “they act on behalf of things but do not lay any claim to them, they see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them.” The *Daodejing* is consciously reminding its readers to be humble and not be boast their own achievements. This quote is also closely related to the idea of objectless desire *wuyu*, and subject-less mentality *wuxin*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Laozi argues that the sages, who manifest the *dao*, do not actively desire to obtain or attain something, but rather, they passively live with their possession and accomplishments. While the mental states of *wuyu* and *wuxin* are central to the *Daodejing*, practical manifestations of these mental states, i.e. the activities brought about by these mental states, are by no means secondary. Indeed, according to the *Daodejing*, the “essence” of *dao*, such as *wuyu* and *wuxin*, are nothing more than its manifestation in the conventional world, or the actions inspired by it, such as “acting on behalf of things.” In another word, *dao* is ultimately *dao-ing.*
Good politics, according to the *Daodejing*, is similarly nothing more than the wholesome behaviors of the sages, especially their interactions with the other people. One of the most famous lines in the *Daodejing* on human relation between the sages and the populace is certainly:

> Sages too [like the heavens and the earth] are not partial to institutionalized morality.

> They treat the common people as straw dogs.

—DDJ 5

This idea of treating people merely as artificial dogs made of straws, which were used as sacrifice in ancient China and would be abandoned soon after the rites, may seem inhumane to contemporary democratic liberals. Indeed, in contemporary usage, the phrase “[the heaven and the earth *tiandi*] treat [all things *wanwu*] as straw dogs” (DDJ 5) is usually used to lament the misfortune of a certain person. Clearly, the general perception of treating people as straw dogs is negative—people are so insignificant to nature or to the sages, and nature/the sages are so indifferent to people’s happiness. However, impartiality does not necessarily mean cruelty. People in contemporary time may be so used to their privilege that they think not being favored by nature/environment/gods is a deprival of their right. However, to Laozi, an impartial ruler is beneficial to her people, since the people would not be diverted from their nature/dao from the ruler. Similarly, people would be able
to dwell with/manifest their “genuine moral feeling” (RADH 84), which Laozi considers superior to the artificial “civilization” represented in Confucianism. While heaven and earth, or sages and rulers, may be indifferent to the populace, people are taken good care of by dao, as discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, it may be the interference of the rulers that has a negative effect on people’s happiness/flourishing.

Similar to the “straw dogs theory,” the argument that the sages need to empty their people’s heart-minds may also sound appalling to many contemporary democratic liberals:

...in the proper governing by the sages:

They empty the heart-minds of the people and fill their stomachs,

They weaken their aspirations and strengthen their bones,

Ever teaching the common people to be unprincipled in

their knowing (wuzhi) and objectless in their desire (wuyu)

—DDJ 3

At first glance, such a statement seems to be an advocate for the rulers to brainwash their people—depriving them from knowledge and caring only about their material life. Without a better understanding of the idea of dao/nature/spontaneity in the Daodejing, the society described above does sound similar to the animal farm depicted by George Orwell. However, according to the reasoning in the Daodejing, emptying one’s heart-mind does not imply emptying one’s brain. On the contrary, Laozi believes that by emptying one’s
heart-mind, one stands closer with the truth, and sees the world as it is genuinely. He states that people who manifest the *dao* know about the world without traveling or seeing things happen (DDJ 47). In Laozi’s perspective, people ‘know’ about the world instinctively, but civilization has distorted their pure understanding of the world. If anything, the idea of emptying one’s heart-mind and being unprincipled in one’s knowing is anti-brainwashing, as it is fighting against the false knowledge (at least to Laozi) imposed by civilization and society.

Moreover, readers should keep in mind that while the sages empty their people’s heart-minds and weaken their aspirations, they do so *wuwei*-ly. As a *wu* form, *wuwei* 無為 (lit. non-doing), is not a conventional negation of *wei* (doing). It is performing according to nature/dao. For the sage rulers, it more specifically means ruling non-coercively and not imposing regulations/ideologies on their people. Therefore, when Laozi says the sages empty people’s heart-minds, weaken their aspirations, make them unprincipled in their knowing, he is not suggesting that the sages actively deprive their people of knowledge, ambitions, and the way to human flourishing. Rather, the sages are letting their people to develop and to flourish themselves. In the time when the *Daodejing* was written, states were increasingly adopting the idea of ritual structure and hierarchy. Laozi opposes this idea and insists that sagacious rulers do not actively impose ideologies or regulations on their people, since those impositions conflict with *dao*, or people’s spontaneity. Not filling people’s heart-minds with strict rules or a single set of ideologies, but rather “making sure that basic needs such as food and health are provided for” (RADH 82) and letting people to
develop flourishing lives according with the *dao*—this may be the true teaching of Laozi, when he says rulers should “empty the heart-minds and fill the stomachs” of the commoners. Since the Daoist cosmos is dynamic, and since *dao* implies infinite possibilities for people, the people under the rule of sagacious rulers are in fact full of opportunities and creativity (i.e., ongoing (re)productive power), when their heart-minds are empty of imposed regulations and ideologies.

Some people may misunderstand Laozi’s opposition to hierarchy and established institution as an advocate of anarchy. Such an argument, however, neglects that the *Daodejing* also emphasizes order. On one hand, under the framework of the *Daodejing*, there are always rulers and the ruled. The best type of society that Laozi has envisioned is one where the common people know nothing about their ruler, except for the fact that she exists (DDJ 17). Even for the ideal society, there still exists a government, according to the *Daodejing*. On the other hand, the non-coercive rule (*wuwei*) gives rise to order, instead of chaos:

> We [the sages] do things noncoercively (*wuwei*)
> And the common people develop along their own lines;
> We cherish equilibrium (*jing*)
> And the common people order themselves

—DDJ 57
The non-coercive rule of the sages leave people room to follow their genuine feeling/spontaneity like “unworked wood” (DDJ 57), and by doing so, the people dwell with harmonious order. Laozi argues that “were the nobles and the kings able to respect this [dao and the practice of wuwei], all things would be able to develop along their own lines” (DDJ 37). In this sense, the Daodejing is not proposing the destruction of established institutions. Rather, Laozi promotes a ‘tolerance’ that enables the people to flourish in their own, while working within the system. With such a political approach, people in the regime share "one muddled mind" (DDJ 53)—they may have different career path, different lifestyle and different value theories, but they belong to one community, a harmonious, orderly one. And this is why Laozi argues that the sages "does things noncoercively and yet nothing goes undone" (DDJ 48; lit. the sages do not act and yet have done everything).

As suggested in the paragraphs above, the argument that the Laws of Manu advocates unification while the Daodejing prefers anarchy is untenable. Both works express high regard for social order. The difference between the political theories of the two texts does not lie in their attitude to people's happiness, either. Some people may mistakenly consider the Laws of Manu a justification of exploitation of the lower castes, while the Daodejing gives people more freedom and is thus more humane. It is true that upon the basis of ensuring the people have enough food and healthy bodies, the sages in the Daodejing are more open to diversity, while the kings in the Laws of Manu punish those fail to abide by their strict rules. However, they are both concerned with the happiness of the common people, at least so they argue. The difference, in fact, lies in their different
conceptualizations of happiness (and this different approach to happiness, in turn, lies in their different understanding of nature, dao and dharma). While Manu argues that "happiness" for people derived from their fulfillment of their caste specific duties/capacities, Laozi believes that "happiness" depends on people's having access to their opened possibilities under the realm of dao/nature.

Conclusion

The analysis in the paragraph above may easily (and maybe usually) lead to a misunderstanding that Manu pursue his cause of bringing a fulfilling life to his readers by restricting their behaviors and manners, making sure that they act in accordance with dharma, while Laozi does so by imposing no restrictions on them for his readers and thereby creating an free environment for them to dwell flourishingly. Such an interpretation is flawed in that it takes for granted that the caste specific duties/capacities in the Laws of Manu are restrictions for people, and that the opened possibilities and ever-changing cosmos in the Daodejing mean people are absolutely free. This misunderstanding is similar to the attributions of the Laws of Manu to a despotic law and the Daodejing to an apolitical work and even anarchist manifesto. They all neglect that both the caste specific duties/capacities in the Laws of Manu and the opened opportunities in the Daodejing are respectively the essence of dharma and dao. In other words, they are the harmonious natural way of being. Manu’s readers, regardless of caste, perform their own dharma,
position themselves effortlessly in the world, and are in turn, opened up to enormous opportunities within their dharma, including procuring the supreme good and attaining equalities with the gods (M 12:88-90). The readers of the Daodejing, on the other hand, do have few “active” restrictions from their sagacious rulers, but meanwhile, they are also confined by nature/dao, such as being wuyu and wuxin, as well as the “passive” rule of the sages, who “act” in accordance with dao.

Both texts are human-centered. Despite the accusation of being inhumane to the lower castes, especially the Sudras, the Laws of Manu is in fact entirely a manual instructing every human being ways of achieving a fulfilling life, and even one that resembles the gods. Similarly, despite the flawed impression that the Daodejing is mysterious and despite the misreading of the wu-forms as a spiritual negation of self, the Daodejing actually affirms the importance of an agential “self” in dao, since dao is nothing more than one’s everyday actions—albeit in a transformed, spontaneous mode. Both the Laws of Manu and the Daodejing conceptualize a way of being “natural.” They present a vision of a harmonious and fulfilling life, which must be manifested in everyday activities. The manifestations of nature may be different in the two texts—caste specific duties/capacities in the Laws of Manu versus the more general opportunities in the Daodejing, but ultimately, they are about one thing—flourishing by the people and for the people.
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