



Medical Ethics

Natural or Unnatural—An Application of the Taoist Thought to Bioethics

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Abstract

The rapid progress of biotechnology has enabled physicians to substantially prolong a patient's life through the aid of life-sustaining systems. Is life supported by manmade devices natural or unnatural? If unnatural, is the huge amount of money spent justifiable? How would a practitioner of Taoism, who regards artificiality as evil, feel about all the new biotechnologies that utilize machines to save a person's life? This article depicts the Taoist teachings and argues that if unnatural measures are used to restore a person's natural ability to function, the unnatural measures become the vehicles to affirm life, and are thus ethical and justifiable. (*Tzu Chi Med J* 2009;21(3):270–274)

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1. Introduction

The rapid progress of medical sciences has enabled physicians to indefinitely prolong life using life-support machines. The new techniques have saved many lives, but have also complicated medical decision-making in a society where filial piety is regarded as a social norm. In order to appear to be filial, many people insist that their elderly relatives—potentially close to death or suffering from persistent vegetative state (PVS)—be kept alive. However, some people, realizing the impending death of their loved ones, request that the life-support systems be shut off. In some countries, the right-to-die movement is

gaining momentum, yet only a few countries have passed laws that allow euthanasia. According to the Taoist view, all the endeavors and attempts to prolong or shorten life are artificial, arbitrary, unnatural, and should not be contemplated. The key to peoples' equilibrium, prosperity, and health is to allow the *Tao* to flow freely so that all things can operate according to their set places and rules. Any attempt to disrupt the flow of the *Tao* is against nature and leads only to dissatisfaction and misery. The survival of humanity depends on the establishment of harmony in the universe and in peoples' health; in other words, the harmony of the microcosm within the body.

2. Natural and unnatural

2.1. Three key concepts in Chinese philosophy

There are three key concepts in Chinese philosophy of which we must first have a general understanding before discussing the Taoist view of natural and unnatural events.

Heaven or *Tien* is a sacred power and the source of everything in the world. This *Tien* is impersonal, yet functions like a moral force that rewards good and punishes evil. The concept of Heaven is sometimes known as the *Tao*.

The *Tao* is the ultimate principle of the universe. The *Tao Te Ching*, the seminal text of Taoism, states that "The *Tao* begot One, One begot Two, Two begot Three and Three begot ten thousands things" (1). The *Tao* is the "Super One" (2), the prime source. The One is the primordial being or chaos, the Two indicates *yin* and *yang*, and the Three is *yin*, *yang* and their unity. The *Tao* determines all things and everything depends on it. It is mysterious and omnipresent. "When you look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form. When you listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound. When you grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible. From above, it is not bright. From below, it is not dark. It is the form of the formless, the image of the imageless...there is no beginning and there is no end..." (3).

The *Tao* is beyond the capacity of ordinary knowledge and human intellect, yet "one may see the *Tao* of heaven without looking through the window" (4) as it is in all things. The most primary meaning of the *Tao* is a road, way or path. It can refer to the path of nature, the movement of stars according to natural law, the order of seasons, or the activities of living things according to their nature. The *Tao* is intangible, invisible, absolute, eternal, and unchanging. However, there are forms that bear the substance of it. From the past to the present, the *Tao* has never ceased to be and has been the beginning of all things. It is the beginning of all things and it has been there before all things came into being. It is the absolute, yet formless, fathomless, always present, unchanging, and everlasting. The *Tao* is the mother of all things.

The interaction of *yin* and *yang* is the basis of change. *Yin* originally means covered by clouds, the shade, dark, hidden, secret, and cool. *Yang* means shining, bright, light, open, and warm. These two opposites are seen as the constituents of all things. The idea of sexuality is understood from the viewpoint of *yin* and *yang*. The male is open, active, and aggressive, thus it is *yang*. The female is hidden, passive, and yielding, thus it is *yin*. Some may regard *yin* as bad and *yang* good, but essentially this is not the case. The entire system is good because it is the way

of heaven and the proper ordering of the world. A healthy life is one in which the forces of *yin* and *yang* are balanced. An imbalance of these polar energies causes a shift in the organism's equilibrium, which in turn coalesces into patterns of disharmony and illness in the physical body (5). Thus, when one part becomes too dominant, it creates an imbalance and harmony is broken. An important balance is the balance between *yin* and *yang*, and harmony among all the internal organs—expressed through the interactions of the *Five Elements*. Disease is the breakdown of this balance and harmony. To treat the diseases resulting from this imbalance is to recover the original balance so that the *Tao* in the form of *qi* can smoothly flow within the microcosm of the body.

2.1.1. The Five Elements

The *Five Elements* refer to five dynamic and interactive forces. They are water, fire, wood, metal, and soil. Water is used to moisten and descend; fire to flame and ascend; wood to be crooked and strengthen; metal to yield and to be modified; and soil to provide for sowing and reaping. These five are mutually begetting and yet mutually conquering. In the human body, these elements also represent certain organs: water represents the kidneys (lower orifices); wood represents the liver (and eyes); earth represents the spleen (and mouth); fire represents the heart (and ears); and metal represents the lungs (and nose). All these need to be kept in balance or disease will ensue. All dietary regimens are intended to nourish the respective organs in the right proportions with foods and medical herbs containing energy corresponding in quality to their respective elements. In Taoist China, the seasons and hours of the day are classified with respect to the elements and various internal organs. Spring relates to the liver, summer to the heart, late summer to the spleen, autumn to the lungs, and winter to the kidneys. Different diseases attack people in different seasons. The human body is an integral whole in which all organs and tissues correspond with one another. Chinese medical philosophy aims to restore balance and harmonization by treating the diseases holistically. Neglecting this principle when treating patients invites disaster.

2.2. Natural and unnatural

Chuang Tzu, a Taoist sage, explains that what is of nature is internal, and what is unnatural is external. That oxen and horses have four feet is of nature. That a halter should be put on a horse's head or a string through an ox's nose is of man. Following things of nature is the source of all happiness and goodness, while following things of man is the source of all pain and evil. All beings may have different natures

and natural abilities, but when they have full and free exercise of their natural abilities, they will be happy. Chuang Tzu further explained that the duck's legs are short but if we try to lengthen them, the duck will feel pain. The crane's legs are long, but if we try to shorten them, the crane will feel pain. Therefore, we cannot amputate what is by nature long nor to lengthen what is by nature short (6). If we should try to help wheat in the field grow by pulling it gradually everyday, the plant will wither and eventually die. The natural thus refers to flowing the way of the Tao and the unnatural is man's attempt to force his own will upon the Tao.

In this case, does Taoism teach that we should not do anything at all? No, Taoism teaches actions without artificiality and arbitrariness (7). If one overreacts, it becomes harmful rather than good. One cannot force things to happen. If one tries to make things happen it is not real. Real value must come naturally and spontaneously. Artificiality and arbitrariness are opposite to naturalness and spontaneity.

Artificiality is thus the source of evil. Even the best intentions can lead only to suffering because it is not the simple reflection of the Tao. One must adjust to the flow of the Tao. The wise therefore have no personal interests and are impartial. He or she acts only according to the Tao—that is acting naturally and spontaneously.

3. The changing notion of natural and unnatural

Though Taoist sages Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu lived around 300–200 B.C., their views of natural and unnatural reflect the understanding of most people in far Eastern Asia until recent times. In the past, the world was divided into things that were natural (or given by nature) and things that were artificial (or made by human craft). However, technology has changed this understanding. We can use technology to improve things. Yet the changes come with a price that challenges the traditional code of ethics. Technology is neutral in terms of value. It is up to the hands of man who created it to decide how technology should be used. Professor Oliver O'Donovan of Oxford University stated the following: "When every activity is understood as making, then every situation is seen as a raw material, waiting to have something made out of it" (8). John Wyatt, a British scholar, called this a "Lego kit". In a Lego kit, there is nothing natural or unnatural, no right or wrong way to put the pieces together. In other words, there is no ethical basis for Lego construction; you can do whatever you like (9). In fact, as it says in the advertisements, "the only limitation is your own imagination" (10).

Modern medical technology exemplifies this unlimited venture. Reproductive technology is a particularly good example. Technology is changing the very nature of parenthood so that the definition of natural and unnatural is becoming ambiguous. John Wyatt, a pediatrician at University College London, posed some thought-provoking questions: is a frozen embryo in a tank of liquid nitrogen a being of nature or is it a product of human planning, an artifact of human creation? Does reproductive technology mean that the process of making babies has changed from being a natural activity to being an artificial activity, or is the distinction no longer meaningful?

When we change the nature of parenthood, we change our relation and our attitudes toward children. Perhaps when a child is created by embryo donation and *in vitro* fertilization, the child may be seen no longer as a mysterious and wonderful gift but more as a product of human ingenuity and meticulous planning. There is a phrase in Chinese to denote the naturally conceived child as *Ch'in-sheng*, meaning that "I gave birth to this baby myself and this baby bears my genes". It is only natural for the mother to say this, but the surrogate mothers' program, developed by modern reproductive technology, changes this. The *Ch'in-sheng* no longer means that this baby is the mothers' own; the baby may have no genetic tie to the bearing or the rearing mother at all.

In addition to reproductive technology, and challenging the traditional understanding of what is natural and unnatural, prolonging life using machinery also poses a question to the Taoist. Is breathing aided by a respirator natural or unnatural? If unnatural, is the person who depends on it still a person? Does the person breathe, or does the air through the machine breathe the person? Is this operation still meaningful? Or, when we intentionally terminate a life in the name of euthanasia, is it natural or arbitrary? Does death occur naturally or artificially? If artificially, would it constitute murder?

Readers may undoubtedly consider that if Taoists believe the above, then no medical treatment is possible. However, medical treatment is considered acceptable and it can be explained using a story told by Chuang Tzu: "Yen Ho was about to become tutor of the Crown prince, the son of Duke Ling of the state of Wei. He went to consult Chu Po Yu, saying, 'Here is someone who is naturally violent. If I let him remain undisciplined, the state will be in danger. If I try to correct him, I shall endanger myself. He knows enough to see the faults of others but not to see his own. Under these circumstances, what shall I do?' Chu Po Yu replied, 'That is a good question! Be on guard, be careful and be sure that you yourself are acting appropriately. Appear to be flexible but maintain harmony within. However, there is danger in doing these two things. While being flexible, one must be

sure to remain centered. While maintaining harmony within, do not display it openly. If you are too flexible and lose your center, then you will be overcome, destroyed, and you will collapse. If you try to demonstrate your composure, you will be criticized and slandered... If he wants to be a child, be a child with him; if he wants to act strangely, act strangely with him; if he wants to be reckless, be reckless with him. Then you can reach him and bring him to his senses.' (10).

Obviously, the crown prince in this story is correctly following the *Tao* as he is being violent. The master taught that he should be brought to his senses. In other words, when one departs from the way of the *Tao*, one will need help to correct the imbalance suffered within the person. This implies that those who go astray from the way of the *Tao* should be given a chance to flow back to the original natural way. Chinese culture views the individual as a microcosm, a reflection of the surrounding universal macrocosm. The principles of universal energy flow are embodied in the inner workings of human beings. Thus, a healthy life is one in which the forces of *yin* and *yang* are evenly balanced. An imbalance of these polar energies may cause a problem. The crown prince in the story apparently suffered due to it. His imbalance caused the violent behavior—he was therefore sick and needed help.

From this understanding, we discover that Chinese medicine is essentially an attempt to restore the balance of *yin* and *yang* flowing within the human body through *qi*. *Qi* is the foundation of body and life. In the Taoist view, everything is composed of *qi*. It is somehow mysterious in terms of science but it is an important and useful concept in Chinese culture, including in traditional Chinese medicine, the practice of acupuncture, and in *qi kung* exercise.

4. The application of the Taoist understanding to bioethics

The bioethics of Taoism is based on its definition of natural, the harmony of *yin* and *yang*, and the interaction of the *Five Elements*. Whatever follows the flow of the *Tao* is regarded as natural and thus ethical; moving in contrast to the *Tao* would be arbitrary and against the movement of nature. Applying these principles to bioethics, we can see that the Taoist is uncomfortable with extraordinary use of treatments. However, if the treatment enables the body to restore its ability to function according to the original goodness of *Tien*, then the unnatural measures become ways to help return to the way of the *Tao*. Thus, such treatment can be accepted. However, if the treatment is a violation of the natural process and is unable to restore the natural ability of the body to

function on its own, this kind of medical treatment would be rejected as arbitrary and against natural spontaneity. For instance, during open heart surgery, the function of the heart is temporarily replaced by a machine so that the surgeon can repair an ailing heart. This attempt may appear to be unnatural; however, if the heart eventually resumes functioning after the operation, this treatment can be accepted. If a person has to depend on life-support machines indefinitely, such a measure is seen as unnatural. The removal of the life-support system from the person would be ethical. The unnatural measures that lead to the restoration of natural ability are acceptable. However, if the unnatural measures fail to restore the body's natural ability to function, then the medical treatments should not be recommended.

From this Taoist understanding, we can easily find that cloning or using a surrogate mother, as well as using donated eggs and sperm to help any pregnancy would not be acceptable. However, a treatment that enables a woman's own body to bear a baby is acceptable. All illnesses including infertility are due to the disharmony of *yin* and *yang*, and the interaction of the *Five Elements*. Medical treatments to restore the natural flow of the *Tao* are always acceptable.

In the case of a PVS patient, if the patient can breathe on his own, he is still considered alive; but if this person has to depend on a life-support system to remain alive, the life is no longer natural. The removal of the system is to let the *Tao* be the *Tao*. Taoism, however, would oppose active euthanasia as it is an artificial way of ending life. Palliative care would be the Taoists' option to let nature take its course. Thus, a Taoist would be in support of the hospice movement and in opposition to the right-to-die movement.

Death must not be fought against but accepted as a natural development of life. When Lao Tzu died, his friend Chin Shih criticized the violent lamentations of the other mourners: "This is to violate the principle of nature and to increase the emotion of man, forgetting what has been received from nature. When the master came, it was because he had the occasion to be born. When he went, he simply followed the natural course." (11). Experiencing the death of his wife, Chuang Tzu said, "When she died, I couldn't help being affected. Soon, however, I examined the matter from the very beginning. At the very beginning, she was not living, having no form, nor even substance. But somehow or other, there was then her substance, then her form, then her life. Now by a further change, she has died. The whole process is like the sequence of the four seasons, while she is thus lying in the great mansion of the universe, for me to go about weeping and wailing would proclaim myself ignorant of the natural laws. Therefore, I stopped mourning." (12).

What would the Taoist bioethicist say to the dilemma that Karen Quinlan's father faced? Here is a brief revisit to the episode: in 1974, after drinking a potent mix of hallucination drugs and alcohol at a party in New Jersey, 21-year-old Karen lapsed into a coma. After being rushed to the hospital, she was placed on a respirator. However, Karen never regained consciousness. Seven months later, her father requested to have Karen's life-support system removed so that she could die with dignity, but his plea was rejected. Two years later, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued a landmark decision declaring that Karen had a constitutional right to die. Karen, however, lived on for another 9 years after the respirator was removed. When Karen's respirator was removed, her father was asked if he wanted Karen's feeding tube to be removed as well. He said that Karen had the right to nutrition and wanted her feeding tube to remain connected. The decisions made by Karen's father evoked many heated debates regarding the right to die, the right to food and water, and what is considered ordinary and extraordinary treatment. A Taoist would applaud the decisions that Karen's father made. After all, breathing through a respirator is unnatural. Since Karen was able to breathe naturally on her own, her life should not be artificially terminated despite the fact she remained in a deep coma.

Francis Schaeffer's death offers another example. Dr Schaeffer was a Christian apologist and a close friend of Dr C. Everett Koop, the Surgeon General of the United States under Carter's administration. He had been suffering from terminal cancer for several years. The extensive treatments allowed him to write and lecture to very near the end of his life. However, when the final decision about treatment had to be made, Schaeffer was no longer able to make it himself. His team of doctors asked his wife whether he should be placed on intensive care on machines. She reflected on the distinction that her husband had drawn between preserving life at all costs and prolonging death: "You have already done great things during these last years and these last few weeks. You fought for life and gave Fran time to complete an amazing amount of work. The time has come for him to go home." (13). Ten days later, Schaeffer, surrounded by familiar items in a bedroom at home—with a large window overlooking colorful flowers, died without the treatment that could have prolonged his life.

Was this decision unfilial according to Confucian tradition? Some people would suggest that it was. However, to a Taoist, the answer is almost definitely no. When treatment no longer bears any purpose,

a Taoist will happily let nature take its course. This is the way of the *Tao*.

5. Conclusion

In a society where filial piety is regarded as a social norm, should a son consent to withdraw treatment to his terminally ill father, or should he request that his father's life be maintained as long as possible? Leaving a father unattended is deemed unfilial in a Confucian society, let alone leaving him untreated while ill. However, the Taoist asserts that artificiality is unnatural; uselessly prolonging life through life-support devices or futile treatment in an incurable terminally-ill patient is against the flow of the *Tao*.

Artificial life relying on external means is not harmonious with nature. Maintaining the life of a PVS patient using a respirator is unnatural. If medical procedures fail to improve the deteriorating health of the person, and treatments prove to be futile (12), foregoing treatments should be the way of the *Tao* and are thus ethically justifiable.

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