

On Laozi's View of Desire

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Laozi's concept of desire has rich ideological connotations, not only referring to reducing personal desires. Laozi's concept of desire is based on "desire" as human nature, acknowledging the legitimacy and necessity of desire and demand. The rational criticism of "having desire" formed by "no desire" is the value pursuit of Laozi's concept of desire. From both personal physical and mental aspects and social order, "no desire" plays an important guiding role. Nature is the essence of Laozi's concept of desire, and being in harmony with nature is the best state of desire. Laozi's concept of desire reveals a deep spirit of love, and the "ethics of love" highlights Laozi's strong sense of care for the "other" and ethical attitude towards responsibility. Laozi's contemplation of desire contains a strong humanistic spirit, with the aim of promoting the healthy and sustainable development of life and society.

Keywords: Laozi, desire view, having desires, having no desire, nature, kindness

Introduction

As a great thinker in the pre-Qin period of China, Laozi's concept of desire has profound ideological connotations, and academic research on it has gradually deepened. This article argues that Laozi's view of desire does not simply mean to diminish an individual's desire. His understanding of human nature and his pursuit of value for inaction in nature constitute an important component of Laozi's view of desire. From the perspective of ethical care, the emphasis on "desire without desire" and the elucidation of the spirit of love both indicate that Laozi's concept of desire has a broad spirit of great love and an ethical dimension that benefits the people. Understanding Laozi's view of desire only as the control and regulation of personal desires is not enough to encompass the meaning and dimension of Laozi's philosophy of "deep morality". Laozi's concept of desire is based on the human nature of "desire", with "no desire" as the criticism and value pursuit of "desire", and its best state is to conform to nature. In Laozi's discourse on desire, it reveals a deep spirit of love, and "ethics of love" highlights Laozi's strong sense of care for the world and ethical attitude towards responsibility.

Desire: The Human Nature Foundation of Laozi's Desire View

The human nature foundation of Laozi's concept of desire is "having desire", which acknowledges the legitimacy and necessity of human desires and needs in social life. Laozi's discourse on the "desire" of human nature is divided into two aspects: on the one hand, he has a clear understanding of the legitimacy of human desires and advocates "being content with food, beautiful in clothing, comfortable in living, and happy in customs." (Chapter 80 of Laozi). This satisfies people's daily needs and ensures their safe living from the perspectives of quality of life and social customs. On the other hand, Laozi strongly criticizes the excessive desire, believing that "the five colors make the eyes blind, the five tones make the ears deaf, the five flavors make the population happy, the

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wild hunting makes the human heart crazy; rare goods make it difficult to do.” (Chapter 12 of Laozi). Laozi believes that appropriate desire satisfaction is necessary, but a life that blindly pursues desires can lead to distortion and dwarfing of human nature, alienating people into the existence of other things. Blindness, deafness, smoothness of the mouth, madness of the heart, and obstruction of behavior reveal the enormous harm of indulgence, directly pointing to the personal safety of human existence, and suggesting the harm of excessive “desire” from the perspective of physical and mental health. This indulgence not only causes harm to individual existence, but also poses a threat to social stability and the well-being of the people. So Laozi strongly advocates that “serving the stomach is not the purpose”, limiting the satisfaction of desires to the premise of physical and mental health, rather than pursuing external desires, thus losing the value of human existence. At the same time, the external influence of desire cannot be at the cost of damaging social development, but rather takes the healthy development of society as the direction of moderately satisfying human desires. Laozi regulates human “desire” from both personal and social perspectives, in order to express his concern for individual survival conditions.

Laozi's description of “desire” can also be analyzed from the two sentences in the silk book “constant desire” and “those who have desire cannot reside”. The difference between these two sentences in Laozi's silk manuscripts and those that have been passed down lies in the fact that “there is always desire” in the writing of the passed down manuscripts, and “there is always desire”; The term “those who have desires” has been passed down from generation to generation, and is written as “those who have the Tao”. From the unearthed literature that has been passed down earlier, it can be seen that the sentence based on “desire” and “no desire” is more reliable. “desire” and “no desire” are both states of people's exploration of the Tao. “desire” recognizes the “beauty” of the Tao, while “no desire” recognizes the “beauty” of the Tao. From “beauty” to “beauty”, there is a constantly deepening process of recognition. From a side perspective, it is necessary to elevate “desire” to reflect on itself in order to reach the state of “no desire”. The phrase “those who have desires cannot reside” indicates that Laozi's understanding of human desires, especially the desires of rulers, is profound and comprehensive. He does not solely emphasize the importance of “no desires”, but fully pays attention to “having desires” in regulating desires, based on human “having desires” and using regulating desires as a means to achieve a state of “no desires”. The pursuit of “desire” is based on “non desire”, while “non desire” is based on “desire”. Laozi has reached a certain level of dialectical thinking in his view of desire.

In short, Laozi's concept of desire is based on the recognition of human desire, affirming the legitimacy and necessity of human desires. On this basis, he advocates controlling the boundaries of “desire”, distinguishing between legitimate needs and excessive desires, and taking the healthy development of individuals and society as the premise. Laozi emphasizes the guiding role of “sages” and emphasizes the rational desire view of sages that “desire is not desire”. By criticizing “desire”, he achieves the goal of “no desire” and makes desire conform to the benign requirements of human survival, development, and ethical morality. As the core concept of Laozi's concept of desire, “no desire” also requires special attention.

No Desire: The Value Pursuit of Laozi's Desire View

Through a reasonable critique of “desire”, Laozi advocates that “no desire” be the value pursuit of his ethical thought. “No desire” is not simply a rejection of all desires, nor is it a “complete desire”, but rather a comprehensive consideration of desires from the perspective of pursuing appropriate desire satisfaction in a context that is in line with individual and social development. The representative vocabulary of Laozi's desire view, which uses “no desire”, fully demonstrates his rational thinking and vigilant attitude towards the “desire”

of human nature. It should be clarified that Laozi not only opposes indulgence, but also does not support the general meaning of “absolute desire”. It is inaccurate to say that Laozi rejects all desires in a general sense. As mentioned earlier, Laozi’s view of desire is a “diminished” view of desire. Individuals achieve the goal of physical and mental rest through the reduction of external desires, and society forms a healthy life order through the norms and guidance of saints. This is the fundamental concern of Laozi’s “no desire” thought.

Firstly, individuals maintain a harmonious and healthy body and mind through a “no desire” cultivation approach. Laozi emphasized that after meeting needs, one should not excessively pursue extravagance. In the balance between life and fame and fortune, the principle of life first cannot be shaken. In Chapter 44 of Laozi, it is said:

Which is closer to the name and body? Which is more to the body and goods? Which is the disease of gain or death? Therefore, if you love deeply, it will cost a lot, and if you hide too much, it will be thick and perish. If you are satisfied, you will not disgrace yourself, and if you stop, you can last for a long time. (Chapter 44 of Laozi)

Chen Guying (2009) explained: “Laozi awakens the world to cherish life, and should not sacrifice oneself for fame and wealth.” (p. 235). Compared to the external value of fame and wealth, the existence and continuation of life are the primary things worth paying attention to. But the world often puts the cart before the horse, abandoning the precious value of life and pursuing fame and fortune, which actually leads to the weakening of life. Therefore, responding to the temptation of external objects in a “no desire” manner can consciously resist bad habits and achieve a state of contentment of “no desire to gain”. “Non desire” means an individual’s conscious satisfaction with “desire”. Therefore, Laozi said, “There is no greater harm than dissatisfaction, and no greater blame than desire to obtain. Therefore, contentment is often sufficient.” (Chapter 46 of Laozi). Only those who are constantly in a state of contentment can understand the enormous role of “non desire” in cultivating one’s character. “No desire” also manifests as cherishing one’s own spirit, and Laozi advocates achieving the “deep rooted and long-lasting path” through “stinginess”.

Secondly, society achieves a good order of life through the concept of “no desire” governance. Laozi was deeply saddened by the chaos of the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. In the turbulent era of “the world has no way, and soldiers and horses were born in the suburbs”, how to make society move towards stability was the “problem of the times” that Laozi faced. For the immoral behavior of the rulers in reality, Laozi bitterly criticized it as “theft and exaggeration”. The governance of the immoral ruler presented a “non Dao” situation of “eliminating the dynasty, leaving the land barren, and the warehouse empty. He was skilled in literature, carried sharp swords, disliked food, and had surplus wealth” (Chapter 53 of Laozi). Faced with such social reality, Laozi strongly advocates that rulers should have “no desires”. Under the guidance of “Dao often does nothing”, as the ruler of the feudal lords, they must follow the operating rules of the Dao and achieve a stable situation of “no desire for tranquility, the world will determine itself” by returning to the “nameless simplicity”. The political form of “no desire” in governing society is manifested as “no action”. In Chapter 48 of Laozi, it is said:

As learning increases, the way decreases day by day. The loss also leads to the loss of inaction, and inaction leads to inaction. Taking the world without action is often based on inaction, and even if there is something, it is not enough to take it. (Chapter 48 of Laozi)

The “no desire” of rulers is a prerequisite for individuals to achieve reasonable desires in society and an important guarantee for good social order. So Laozi advocates “governing the country with integrity”, where rulers promote a good social life through inaction and disinterest.

Due to the fact that saints have no desire to imitate the Heavenly Way, the people also regard the Heavenly Way as their object of worship. The expression of “no desire” is a criticism of the phenomenon of “multiple desires” in society. Laozi adhered to the spirit of natural inaction and fiercely criticized the abuse of power by rulers, as well as the use of clever governance. In ancient times, good was the way, not based on the understanding of the people, but on ignorance. When the people were difficult to govern, they were wise. Therefore, governing the country with wisdom was the thief of the country; not governing the country with wisdom was the blessing of the country. In the practice of rulers’ hypocrisy and deception, the people were also difficult to manage, which would inevitably lead to the decline of society. Laozi called for “no desire” to govern the country, restore the simple essence of the people, and thus purify the social atmosphere. By not governing the country with cleverness and wisdom, we achieve a state of “no desire” of “seeing simplicity and embracing simplicity, with few selfish desires”, which is also the social ethical style that Laozi yearns for. Individuals form a “natural” good state in a simple and stable social order, thereby achieving physical and mental health and harmony.

Overall, “no desire” is the value pursuit of Laozi’s concept of desire. From the perspectives of personal physical and mental development and social order, “no desire” plays an important value guiding role. By imitating the natural inaction of the Heavenly Way to regulate the behavior of rulers, from the inaction of the Heavenly Way to the lack of desires of saints, Laozi wants to guide human society in a standardized way through the connection between heaven and humanity, highlight the ideal state of a “Dao” society, and criticize the harm of multiple desires in real society. Laozi’s transformation from affirming the human nature foundation of “desire” to regulating the “no desire” of desire demonstrates his sincere concern for personal and social security. Its exhortation and admonition to rulers, as well as its earnest expectations for the people, all prioritize the survival of individuals and the development of society. Of course, simply discussing “having desire” and “having no desire” cannot effectively solve the contradiction between social development and personal needs. Therefore, Laozi deeply rooted his view on desire in the elucidation of the core concept of “nature”. Nature is the best state for achieving desire, and it is also the essence of Laozi’s view on desire.

Nature: The Best State of Laozi’s Desire Concept

As discussed above, Laozi’s view of desire is based on nature as its essence, and “nature” is the core concept in “Laozi”. How to understand “nature” has become the key to understanding Laozi’s view of desire. There are different views in the academic community on Laozi’s concept of “nature”, for example, Liu Xiaogan (1995) believes that the concept of nature has three meanings: “it’s like this”, “as it is”, and “as it should be”. When discussing Taoism’s nature, Zheng Kai (2019) compared the ancient Greek Physis (nature, growth) and pointed out that Taoism’s nature includes several meanings of “automatically”, “by nature”, and “natural”. This article is inspired by Xie Yangju (2014) and tends to understand Laozi’s “nature” as a natural state and trend, that is, the best situation. “Nature” appears five times in the popular book *Laozi*:

Success is achieved, and the people call me nature. (Chapter 17)

Hope to speak naturally. (Chapter 23)

People follow the earth, the earth follows the heavens, the heavens follow the Tao, and the Tao follows nature. (Chapter 25)

The reverence of the Tao, the preciousness of virtue, and the constant nature of Mo’s destiny. (Chapter 51)

To supplement the nature of all things without daring to act. (Chapter 64)

The corresponding subjects of “nature” in these five appearances can be divided into two categories. Firstly, Dao and De are the subjects of nature, such as Chapter 25 and Chapter 51. The second is that the people and

rulers are the subjects of nature, such as Chapter 17, Chapter 23, and Chapter 64. Therefore, “nature” can be said to be the hub for implementing the metaphysical and metaphysical levels. Overall, nature refers to the optimal state of being in harmony with the Tao. Nature is not only the optimal state for the existence of all things among the people, but also the essence of the Tao and the principles of its operation. “Non desire” is a way of unfolding in the best state under the guidance of nature. Therefore, fundamentally speaking, nature has become the essence of Laozi’s concept of desire, defining the limits and tendencies of “non desire”. “Non desire” displays a dynamic equilibrium state, neither blindly suppressing the satisfaction of reasonable desires nor absolutely rejecting desires from the world. It is a sense of satisfaction that can be achieved through the legitimate needs that can be formed through appropriate regulation in people’s living conditions. This regulation is not a unilateral external control or command, but a self-driven conscious behavior that can be formed through self-recognition of the Tao. From both internal and external aspects, it has become the standard for measuring Laozi’s view of desire, and more importantly, it is reflected in the rational control of self over desire.

In summary, “nature” is the essential requirement of Laozi’s concept of desire. Both “having desire” and “having no desire” take nature as their optimal state. From the external requirements of social governance to the internal attributes of the existence of all things, whether rulers take various measures to achieve the governance of “having no desire” or individual beings regulate their own rational “desire space” based on their rational abilities, they all contain the pursuit of the best state of nature. Only in the optimal state of human law and nature can the needs of individuals and society be fully and comprehensively developed. “Desire free” is a transcendence of “desire free” and a manifestation of human rational ability. In addition, in the best state of conforming to nature, Laozi implemented the reasonable realization of people’s desires into the level of social governance, emphasizing the benevolent character of rulers through the rule of sages, cultivating the people with the concept of justice and goodness, and reflecting on oneself with a weak and humble attitude. The emphasis on “no desire” reveals a broad and profound spirit of compassion, and Laozi’s view of desire demonstrates a profound and broad ethical dimension. It should be said that the love of saints is selfless dedication like a mother, containing a strong sense of worldly care and responsibility.

Kindness: Laozi’s “Other” Concern for Desire

Kindness is an important symbol of Laozi’s ethical thinking and also the concern of Laozi’s desire view towards the “other”. From the perspective of rulers, “no desire” implies kindness. The first of Laozi’s “Three Treasures” is kindness, which is an important guarantee for national stability and social development. Kindness reflects a strong altruism, just like the love of parents for their children. Kindness does not require return or reciprocity, but is only a care for the other. Therefore, the governance of the people by saints should be as selfless as the love of mothers, and it is the responsibility of saints to achieve the best state of nature. This is not a substitute for the rational desire of the people to experience, but to create the conditions for people to achieve the greatest happiness, and to achieve the nature of all things for the people with their own “no desire”. At the same time, the sage’s actions are also in line with the nature of the Tao, reflecting the human law and nature, because the Tao is manifested as

all things are born without giving up, achievements are not known, clothing nourishes all things without giving up. Often without desire, it can be named as small; all things return to Yan without giving up, it can be named as great. (Chapter 34 of Laozi)

This kind of love that does not seek reward is a manifestation of compassion.

Due to his compassionate heart, Laozi put forward strict requirements for the sage himself. Firstly, sages should follow the principles of the Tao and not compete with the people, so that “no one in the world can compete with them”. The desire for competition arises from the difficulty of satisfying desires, while Laozi strongly advocates the state of “the highest goodness is like water”. The eighth chapter of Laozi states: “The highest good is like water. Water is good for all things but does not compete, and is disliked by others, so it is almost inferior to the Tao.” (Chapter 8 of Laozi). The highest good nourishes all things like water without competition, and is often in a place that is disliked by others, but voluntarily assumes it. Such behavior is close to the Tao and demonstrates the spirit of sacrificing oneself for others. It is precisely because saints maintain a humble and unyielding heart that the phenomenon of “the world is happy to push without being tired” is formed. Secondly, saints also need to treat the people with a just heart, and treating them equally is an essential character for saints. Without a special preference, the “inhumanity” of sages is selflessness towards any individual. Therefore, Laozi advocates “knowing the constant appearance, tolerance is the public, the public is the king, the king is the sky, the heaven is the way, and the way is long. Without body, one is not dangerous.” (Chapter 16 of Laozi). Wang Bi and Lou Yulie (2008) annotated “tolerance is the public” and said, “everything is inclusive, and even completely fair.” (p. 36). To treat the people and all things fairly is to let them follow the trend in their natural best state and not interfere with the existence of all things. We do not impose our own selfish desires on all things, so the best state of governance is “the highest, the lowest knowing”, which truly reflects the spirit of “governing without action”. Finally, saints need to have a spirit of great love, with the goal of solving people’s normal desires. “Saints have no constant heart, and take the hearts of the people as their heart.” (Chapter 49 of Laozi). This is the urgent needs of the people, the interests of the people, and there should be a “virtuous” cultivation of “good people, I am good; not good people, I am also good”. Saints do not take all things for themselves, but always care about the people, achieving the ideal situation of “considering people as the more they have; considering others as the more they have” (Chapter 81 of Laozi).

In addition, from the perspective of Laozi’s compassionate care for the “other”, simply summarizing Laozi’s thoughts as metaphysical or political philosophy techniques is not enough to fully demonstrate Laozi’s deep concern for the human world. Through the discussion of Laozi’s concept of desire, it can be seen that his view on desire can precisely demonstrate the origin of ethical morality, highlighting a value connotation of “deep morality” from the dual perspectives of Dao and things, sage, and people, in accordance with the essential requirements of nature. Xie Yangju (2014) pointed out in this regard: “Taoism refers to this universal morality as ‘Xuande’, which is what I call ‘deep morality’.” (p. 80). In Taoism, morality cannot do without the Tao... virtue belongs to the Tao, which is why Taoism’s morality is deep morality. Deep morality originates from the unity of Dao and virtue, because it can also be said to combine the dual meanings of norms and descriptions. Perhaps this is the moral theory that criticizes humanity and reaches the deepest root of the disease. The altruism and selflessness demonstrated by compassion also need to be understood at the level of morality. Love is not only an inevitable requirement for the rule of sages, but also a manifestation of the nature of the Tao and the nature of inaction. It is also a guiding principle of primary ethics and morality towards a humane society. Laozi’s ethics can be called “love ethics”, which is an ethics proposed by Laozi based on his special philosophy of nature. In the perspective of benevolent ethics, Laozi’s view on desire also exhibits the characteristic of nature preserving.

Overall, Laozi’s view of desire is not only aimed at the requirements of individual society, but more importantly, it emphasizes the “no desire” of sages. The standardization of rulers’ desires and the care for the development of individual society all demonstrate Laozi’s spirit of love for the “other”. The purpose of Laozi is

“peace and tranquility”, opposing the rulers’ indulgence, and achieving a spontaneous and favorable social environment with a great love heart of “always being good at saving people, so not abandoning them; always being good at saving things, so not abandoning things” (Chapter 27 of Laozi). Laozi’s concept of desire serves as a behavioral criterion for all social classes, fully unleashing one’s potential through rational self-discipline in a natural environment, and achieving an internal and external balance between needs and desires. The broad and compassionate spirit in Laozi’s thought, as well as the “worry” about human existence, is precisely the precious human experience and wisdom of “knowing the ancient beginning, which is called the Dao Ji” (Chapter 14 of Laozi).

Further Discussion

In summary, Laozi’s concept of desire is manifested by affirming the human nature foundation of “desire” and advocating the value pursuit of “no desire”, with nature as the best state of desire. Laozi’s concept of desire is not limited to individuals, but rather achieves the ideal state of a world where there is a way by limiting the rulers’ private desires. The spirit of love is the “no desire” concern for the world, and Laozi’s “ethics of love” can provide thinking and reference for the development of modern civilization.

Laozi’s contemplation of desire reveals his contemplation of the value of human existence, reflects his reflection and vigilance towards desire, and also highlights people’s recognition and contemplation of their own existence. The purpose of understanding desire is to pursue happiness in life and explore individual values. In answering the question of what constitutes a good life, Laozi starts with the concept of limiting and regulating desires, and explains the active role of the subject from the perspectives of Dao body and Dao function. He advocates for curbing human desires through rational self-discipline, thereby achieving internal and external harmony at the spiritual and material levels. In the interaction between the natural inaction of the Tao and the rational adaptation of human desires, the role of desire is both limited and explored. This rational attitude towards desire fully reflects Laozi’s deep contemplation of the relationship between heaven and humanity. In the relationship between heaven and humanity, humans have elevated from passive subordination to active participation. Although thrown into it, they can achieve the realm of recognizing heaven through their own practice. From the perspective of the subjective role demonstrated by rational reflection on desire, it is precisely this emphasis on people’s internal understanding of their own life that highlights the long-standing humanistic spirit in Chinese tradition. The regulation of desire is rooted in the continuous recognition of the Tao by humans themselves, rather than simply seeking the divine will. This fully demonstrates that Laozi values the humanistic spirit of humans themselves.

Laozi’s profound understanding of desire also lies in guiding and regulating desire from a transcendental perspective of the Tao, transforming people’s low-level needs into high-level needs, in order to achieve the noble realm of “walking with the Tao”. While criticizing desire, it also demonstrates Laozi’s questioning of the value of human beings as a unique existence. The intrinsic value of human beings lies in their rational constraints on their own desires, thus maintaining a clear and rational attitude towards external things. By understanding and exploring the natural essence of the Tao, one can lead one’s rational desires to be in a good state, striving to improve one’s own realm, and following the path of natural and free connection in understanding and practicing desires. Laozi’s concept of desire also reflects the special attention of Taoism to bioethics. Li Hongwen (2020) said: “The basic proposition or starting point of Taoist bioethics is that everything is based on respecting the interests and values of life.” (p. 224). It can be said that Laozi’s criticism of desire has always been based on the

maintenance and care for the existence of life. The ethical dimension of compassion not only has a profound “Dao-De” thinking, but also provides a meaningful “living world” for human “coexistence”.

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