Topic: Is the Taoist ideal society a primitive, uncivilised one?

Was Lao Tzu aiming at just changing our views/perspectives when he wrote the Tao Te Ching or was he hoping for something more? Could it be that he was asking us to return to the Tao/Nature in terms of our perspectives and our way of life? Was he proposing that we live in a completely unstructured world? We will focus our discussion on the questions above and in trying to analyse them we will look at the following points: What a primitive uncivilised society is. Then we will go on to discuss the two modes that Lao Tzu wrote in - the realistic and the idealistic modes. Finally we will discuss whether Taoist society is necessarily a primitive uncivilised one. Under the last topic we shall go into a little detail discussing about structures, morality, government, hierarchies and nature, and how they relate to the teachings in the Tao Te Ching.

What is a primitive uncivilised society?

When we think of a primitive uncivilised society, our thoughts usually refer to the stone age people as primitive and uncivilised. However, it is not too hard to see that even the stone age people were (to a degree) civilised. I say this because their actions were not completely unpremeditated/nondeliberative/noncalculating and nonpurposeful[1]. For example, even in the stone age (as i understand it), by convention, the man was considered the head of a family and he used to go out to hunt in search for food for the rest of the family. As we can clearly see, there can be different gradations of *civilisation*. We might call one society more primitive and uncivilised than another if it did not have as many institutions, written laws/governments, and man made hierarchy or any other definite structures as another society. Later we shall discuss about how primitive and uncivilised (structure free) we should be according to Taoist philosophy.

The Two 'modes' of Lao Tzu

I feel that if we wish to understand the Tao Te Ching then we must first understand the two most fundamental modes the Tao Te Ching is written in. The two most fundamental modes being, the *realistic* mode and the *idealistic*[2] mode.

Lao Tzu writes a lot on what we must do and how we can do it, if we want to once again merge with the Tao[3]. "Therefore in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act. Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail."[4] Undoubtedly here the Lao Tzu is giving the ruler/sage some *concrete* advice they can/should follow. Lao Tzu is being *realistic* in the sense that he is telling the ruler what they should do. This *concrete* advice is what i conceive as being the realistic mode of Lao Tzu. It is also clear that most of the Tao Te Ching is written in a realistic mode by Lao Tzu.

When i refer to the *idealistic* mode of Lao Tzu, i refer to the passages where he does not attempt to advise others, but rather he tries to describe things such as the nature of the Tao. "The way is forever nameless. Though the uncarved block is small, No one in the world dare claim its allegiance"[5] is a clear example of the Lao Tzu attempting to put his 'insight' (which is basically ineffable) into words. Alternately, by *idealistic* we can also mean, something that the Lao Tzu would consider as ideal, but he knows that we cannot achieve the ideal unless we first know how to deal with and change the real.

If we are to understand the Tao Te Ching i feel we must be able to distinguish between the two modes and moreover, if we are to have any insight as to what Lao Tzu might have meant, we *must* be able to look *beyond* the words/language when Lao Tzu speaks in the idealistic mode (even though the idealistic passages are few and far between). In fact the Tao Te Ching starts by stating that "The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way".[6]

<u>Is the Taoist society a primitive uncivilised one?</u>

Just the word society implies some sort of a structure. As we say in Confucianism, reciprocity is a very basic concept and *must* be put into practice if any society is to exist at all. Reciprocity itself is a kind of structure, and if any structure exists in a society, it cannot be *absolutely* primitive and uncivilised. Some people might claim that if a law is not written then it does not advocate any kind of a definite structure, however even in modern day, most of our *structures* are implicitly accepted and are not written laws. For example, people go to work every week day, now, there is no written law that states that most people must do this, yet most people do! This is a very concrete structure built into our society. We can clearly see that it is possible for very complex structures to exist without any written laws, and hence the absence of written rules in a society does not mean it is primitive or uncivilised.

On Taoism and Structure

The *spoken/written realistic* thoughts of Lao Tzu are undoubtedly promoting a certain kind of structure. “I have three treasures, Which I hold and cherish. The first is known as compassion, The second is known as frugality, The third is known as not daring to take the lead in the empire ...”[7] Clearly Lao Tzu is promoting a *structure* in which compassion, frugality and modesty are treasured. These three seem to be very basic values that Lao Tzu hopes everyone will aim towards. Now, it is very easy for us to conclude that since Lao Tzu seems to be promoting certain values, he is obviously not rejecting *all* structures, but rather he is only rejecting the present (in his time) structures and hence a Taoist society is not a primitive and uncivilised one. The above i feel is a great fallacy. Here once again we must be very clear about the two modes (realistic and idealistic) if we are to understand Lao Tzu. I feel that Lao Tzu is promoting a structure because he feels it is necessary to “build a hammer to break the box”. After the box (the current structures) has been broken by the hammer (the structure that Lao Tzu is promoting) the hammer too must be thrown away as useless. So basically, the structures Lao Tzu is promoting (all the *realistic* phrases in the Tao Te Ching) are *only* useful to break the current structures and then must themselves be discarded if we are to achieve the *ideals* of Lao Tzu. This once again is very clearly portrayed by the very first passage in the Tao Te Ching: “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way, The name that can be named is not the constant name.”[8] Clearly Lao Tzu is saying that the structures he is proposing are not the *real* Tao, but rather are a *means* to get to the *completely unstructured* ‘Tao’!

On Taoism, Morality and Government

“Hence when the way was lost there was virtue ...”[9] This passage clearly shows that morality arose only when ‘The Way’/‘The Tao’ was lost, when the way prevailed there was no need for the concept of virtue. As soon as we have good (virtue) we must also have bad, thus states the concept of the opposites. Hence in the Tao Te Ching we find passages such as “Exterminate the sage, discard the wise, And the people will benefit a hundredfold ...”[10] By “exterminate the sage” Lao Tzu does not mean that we should exterminate all the sages but rather what we should exterminate the concept of sageliness because as soon as we exterminate the concept of virtue (or the sage - to whom we attribute virtue) we will also automatically exterminate the concept of non-virtue and by doing this we can really be virtuous. “A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue.”[11] The term virtue being used here has two meanings. The first meaning of virtue is meant to mean the artificially structured/constructed morality that humans have built up. The other meaning of virtue is an unconstructed/unstructured entity that is *natural*. Hence we may read the passage again as follows: “A man of highest virtue [a man who is ‘unconditioned’; a man who is wholly part of the Tao] does not keep to virtue [is not restricted by the human constructs of morality] and that is why he has virtue [that is why he is totally *natural* and *unstructured* and can be said to be truly part of the Tao]”[12] Similarly “A man of lowest virtue [a man who has ‘lost’ ‘The Way’] never strays from virtue [tries always to satisfy the human constructs of morality and goodness] and that is why he is without virtue [and that is why he is not spontaneous/intuitive/natural]”[13]

I feel one of the most foremost goals of Lao Tzu was (initially) trying to achieve was, a harmonious society *without* a government. Time and again he asks the rulers to not interfere with the people because he knows that if he asked them to give up their positions altogether they would not heed his advise at all, and so Lao Tzu asked the sages to fall back to ‘non-action’ as this is the first step to abolishing the government. As is clear, this was the first realistic step to achieving the ideal goal of everything *returning* to the Tao (not the Tao that is talked about in the text, but the Tao that cannot be named!). In fact, not just the governments, but all institutions are like a box which needs to be broken by the hammer (the *realistic* structured Tao mentioned in most of the text) and then the hammer itself discarded so that we can become part of the *idealistic* Tao.

What about Hierarchies and Structures in Nature?

One may well ask: “How can Taoism ask us to return to the unstructured ways of Nature (the Tao) when even in nature there are structures such as the food chain?

Firstly, it is a myth that all animals can be placed in a hierarchical structure called the food chain. The ‘food chain’ is nothing more than a catchy phrase that modern humans have constructed. The American Indians (as far as i understand) say that the ‘circle of life’ exists in nature, not a ‘food chain’ at all. The Taoists would probably see it as a natural dynamic equilibrium or a natural dynamic balance between the opposites in nature, not as a ‘food chain’ at all. In fact all of the things/entities we see in nature as structures are not really structures, its just that we cut down and break up things in order to try to understand them and hence we superimpose our conceptions of structure onto nature. “Only when it is cut are there names. As soon as there are names. One ought to know that it is time to stop.”[14] Some people might ask: “In nature, some animals kill other animals for food, is this non-violent, non-action?” In order to answer this question we must first understand what the terms mean. By non-action (wu-wei) we *do not* mean *no action* but rather *action* that is unpremeditated, nondeliberative, and noncalculating[15]. Also, something can only be violent if it is done with “great force”[16]. However we are talking about action that is spontaneous/intuitive and as a result is not violent and is wu-wei (non-action).

Some people also claim that the Tao Te Ching states that humans have a *choice* whether they want to follow the Tao or not whereas animals and other species do not have such a choice. Admittedly humans do have a choice but *nowhere*, absolutely nowhere does the Tao Te Ching state that animals do not have a choice. I fact i would argue that animals are much smarter than humans because they have chosen not to deviate from ‘The Way’ but that would be a different topic! Admittedly Lao Tzu is dealing very much with the human problems, but as stated earlier, i think *most* of the Tao Te Ching is written in a realistic mode (so that humans may follow it to break does human constructs) rather than in an idealistic or descriptive mode because the Tao in many ways transcends language because it is one and the same for everything, or rather everything is part of the Tao.

About the point if it is okay to eat animals. Like stated earlier we need the hammer to break the box, likewise i feel we need to have compassion and that it is *not* okay to eat animals. We need these structures only to help us break the bigger structures. For example, the Buddha was a vegetarian but after he became enlightened, it no longer made any difference what he ate yet being a vegetarian was a very important and essential part of the enlightenment *process*. Lots of people try to *abuse* the above example by trying to justify it to their habits of meat-eating however i emphasise again that being a vegetarian was a very important and an essential part of the Buddha becoming enlightened. Only *after* he became enlightened did it not matter what he did or did not eat because everything was one and the same to him. Similarly in Taoism, the hammer (the constructs Lao Tzu is proposing - such as: “Know the male, but keep to the role of the female”[17] or non-action etc.) is only necessary to break the bigger box and then even the hammer must be thrown away.

Once we can clearly distinguish between the two modes that Lao Tzu speaks in we can go on to interpret the Tao Te Ching and realise which passages are realistic and which are idealistic. Also, as has been shown above, the realistic mode of Lao Tzu is proposing a structure to help break down other structures but if we get too caught up in its structure then too we will have 'lost the way'.

To sum it up, basically, a Taoist society would have to be fairly primitive and uncivilised however an *ideal* Taoist society will have to be one with absolutely no structures and would be what we might call 'prior to primitiveness and civilisation'.

Notes

1. Phil2519 Course notes - 1995 Session 2, p120 (little page 188), Last paragraph.

2. I am not using this term in the same sense as philosophers commonly use it. By *idealistic* i simply mean ideal/perfect; and it does not have anything to do with the group of people philosophers call 'the idealists'.

3. I will assume that the reader understands what is meant by, "We are all part of the Tao and yet at the same time we seem to have lost The Way/The Tao".

4. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 9 &10. (Please note: the 'number' given above is the 'verse number' as labelled by D.C.Lau and *not* the chapter number.

5. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 72. Please note: The rest of the passage does switch into a semi-realistic mode, but i feel the secret of interpretation lies in being able to distinguish the two parts.

6. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 1.

7. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 164.

8. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 1.

9. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 83.

10. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 43.

11. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 82.

12. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 82.

13. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 82.

14. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 72 (p91).

15. Phil2519 Course notes - 1995 Session 2, p120 (little page 188), Last paragraph.

16. Webster Dictionary - definition of ‘violent’.

17. Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (Penguin) - Translated by D.C.Lau, 1963, Number 63.

18. It is interesting to note that *opposites* as conceived as being contained within the tao - the *Tao* itself, does not have any opposite.