Moral Rules and Moral Experience: a comparative analysis of Dewey and Laozi on morality

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ABSTRACT In this article, through a comparative analysis of Dewey’s and Laozi’s relevant accounts, I examine a pragmatic insight concerning moral rules and moral experience to the effect that (i) fixed and formulated moral rules should not be taken as the final absolute moral authority, and (ii) attention needs to be paid to the moral agent’s own moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations. The purpose of this paper is to enhance understanding the crucial points of the pragmatic insight and to look at how, in certain complementary ways, Dewey’s and Laozi’s distinct approaches could contribute to the pragmatic insight and learn from each other. I endeavour to show several points: (1) The pragmatic insight has its distinct metaphysical foundations in Dewey’s and Laozi’s accounts, whose combination could enhance each other’s visions and overcome each other’s limitations; (2) Both Dewey and Laozi reject some sharp dualism to look at the nature of moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations; in so doing, their distinct focuses on different aspects, or developing stages, of such moral experience could be complementarily coordinated into a whole; (3) Their characterisations of the pragmatic insight are also based upon their distinct but related naturalistic perspectives to human moral foundation; Laozi’s approach could provide some constructive insight for and due natural limitations on Dewey’s account.

John Dewey, a 20th-century pragmatist, explicitly presents two related dimensions of a pragmatic insight on morality: (i) fixed and formulated moral rules should not be taken as the final absolute moral authority, and (ii) attention needs to be paid to the moral agent’s own moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations. There are some visions in Laozi’s Daodejing which are kindred in spirit with the aforementioned pragmatic insight. Through a comparative examination of Dewey’s and Laozi’s relevant ideas in this connection, the goal of this paper is to enhance understanding the point of the pragmatic insight and to look at how in certain complementary ways Dewey’s and Laozi’s distinct approaches could constructively contribute to the pragmatic insight and substantively learn from each other for the sake of reflective progress. I intend to show: (1) The preceding pragmatic insight regarding morality has its distinct general metaphysical foundations, or world views, respectively in Dewey’s and Laozi’s accounts, whose combination could enhance each other’s visions and overcome each other’s limitations; (2) Both Dewey and Laozi reject some sharp dualism to look at the nature of moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations; in so doing, their characteristic ideas, focusing on different aspects, or developing stages, of such moral experience, could be coordinated into a whole in a
complementary way; (3) Their characterisations of the pragmatic insight are also based upon their distinct but related naturalistic perspectives to human moral foundation; Laos's approach could provide some constructive insight for and due natural limitations on Dewey's account.

My organisational strategy is this. In Section 1, I introduce Dewey's explicit characterisation of the pragmatic vision regarding morality and its certain foundation in his world view; I then discuss how Laozi visions in this connection are kindred in spirit with the pragmatic insight, through spelling out some of his teachings about the metaphysical *Dao* and how Laos's and Dewey's accounts could contribute to each other. In Section 2, I explain respectively how Dewey and Laozi look at the nature of moral experience that responds to the felt demands of concrete situations. Finally, in Section 3, I examine their distinct naturalistic perspectives to human moral foundation and explain how they would contribute to a complete understanding of the naturalistic foundation for human morality.

### 1. A Pragmatic Insight Regarding Morality: Distinct Metaphysical Foundations

In the field of ethical studies, theorists are contentious and divided by their deeply conflicting intuitions and goals. Nevertheless, there seems to be one common orientation shared by many accounts within an orthodox approach in ethics regarding the rightness of acts: they are rule-oriented. Their primary focus is on working out some fixed moral rules or principles that supposedly determine the rightness of acts, and some of those accounts consider those fixed moral rules or principles as being commanded from without. For example, in the case of divine command theory, such a moral rule is this: whatever God permits, prohibits, or commands is right, wrong, or obligatory respectively. In the case of ethical egoism, such a moral rule is this: one ought always to maximise one's own personal good as an end. In the case of Kantianism, such a moral principle is Kant’s categorical imperative to the effect that act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. In the case of (act) utilitarianism, such a moral rule is this: an act is right if and only if it produces at least as great a balance of good over bad in its consequences for all people affected as any other act available to the agent. The aforementioned orientation might be called ‘moral legalism’. In contrast, another way of thinking, though giving a role to moral rules and principles, maintains that the rightness of a moral agent’s acts depends crucially on those relevant particular elements in concrete situations in which she performs her acts. The latter orientation might be called ‘moral particularize’.

The kernel of the latter orientation is an insight on human morality that is considered to be pragmatic in character: no fixed rule reigns supreme as the final, absolute moral authority; moral judgements cannot ignore various felt demands of concrete situations. This strategic insight has been explicitly delivered by Dewey.

#### 1.1. Dewey: Instrumental Character of Formulated Moral Rules and Unique Character of Concrete Moral Situations

The preceding pragmatic insight in Dewey's philosophy is influenced by Charles Darwin's work on evolution. Darwin’s account criticises the static world view and replaces what Dewey calls its ‘assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final’ and
its ‘treatment of change and origin as signs of defect and unreality’ with a dynamic world view which is characterised in terms of change, growth, process, evolution and emergence. Dewey emphasises the impact of Darwin’s work on philosophy. For it is to redirect our thinking to reflect this evolutionary reality: our bodies and our minds have evolved, and our institutions and our values have evolved as well. Its primary impact, as Dewey sees it, lies in this: philosophy needs to abandon searching for ‘absolute origins and absolute finalities’ and instead to seek ‘specific values and the specific conditions that generate them’. This general pragmatic perspective regarding the direction of philosophical inquiry bears upon Dewey’s approach to morality, especially in regard to how to look at the relation between those formulated and fixed general moral rules and principles and particular and concrete situations.

Dewey’s approach in this connection seems to have two basic points, the negative one and the positive one. The negative point is highlighted by his following remarks:

A moral principle, such as that of chastity, of justice, of the Golden Rule, gives the agent a basis for looking at and examining a particular question that comes up. It holds before him against taking a short or partial view of the act. It economizes his thinking by supplying him with the main heads by reference to which to consider the bearings of his desires and purposes; it guides him in his thinking by suggesting to him the important considerations for which he should be on the lookout. A moral principle, then, is not a command to act or forbear acting in a given way: it is a tool for analyzing a special situation....

But The moral quality of knowledge lies not in possession but in concern with increase. The essential evil of fixed standard and rules is that it tends to render men satisfied with the existing state of affairs and to take the ideas and judgments they already possess as adequate and final.

Dewey’s point in this passage is that no fixed rule or principle reigns supreme as the final, absolute moral authority, for a rule, as a tool, emerges inductively or conventionally from the consideration of past situations to analyse present or future situations. This tool is subject to modification with respect to present and future situations not only because it is supposed to be an instrumental guidance generalised from concrete situations but also because there are unique situations in which an appeal to the moral rule does not apply. In this way, a general moral rule is neither conceptually nor empirically prior to particular and concrete situations.

One might immediately challenge: if the right or wrong is not determined by the fixed moral rules, by what? It seems to Dewey that the right or wrong is ‘determined by the situation in its entirety, not by the rule as such’. Dewey’s point is that one needs to appeal to concrete situations to whose felt demands a moral agent’s own moral experience of approval or disapproval responds. In concrete situations, there are other significant elements than the given rule(s) or principle(s) alone to be considered: the particular features of the situations, consequences, the lessons of the past, the ends-in-view that guiding ideals suggest are worth pursuing, the goodness of certain acts (such as caring, considerateness, compassion and interpersonal love) and their associated thoughts, motives and intentions, etc. Those elements in concrete situations appear as the felt demands of concrete situations to which a moral agent’s own moral experience needs to respond in certain ways. This does not mean that a moral agent necessarily assesses the aforementioned elements in a very conscious way; they might spontaneously respond to the felt demands of concrete situations. The ultimate justification of
our moral judgements thus lies in moral experience that responds to the felt demands of concrete situations in their entirety.

In this way, Dewey explicitly and clearly presents the pragmatic insight under discussion in terms of his evolutionary view of world and his general pragmatic methodological guiding principle. Note that, as suggested in the preceding presentation, Dewey’s view here involves various significant issues concerning the metaphysical foundation of moral rules and principles, the nature of situated moral experience, the moral foundation in human nature, etc. What is focused upon in this part is the issue of the metaphysical foundation addressed in the pragmatic insight on morality under discussion.

Indeed, there seem to be several questions that one might raise to challenge Dewey’s view. First, though the world keeps changing and manoeuvres in dynamic process, is there still some unifying force that runs through all those ‘specific values and the specific conditions’ or ‘special situation’? If yes, then would there be something general or universal among those specific situations? For such a unifying force would reveal itself in concrete situations in certain uniform ways. Second, if the answers to the above two related questions are yes, could such a unifying force and its uniform ways be somehow captured or formulated in our thought and language? Third, if some formulated moral rules or principles do capture such a unifying force and its uniform ways to some extent, can we still say that those formulated rules or principles merely have its instrumental value and can be employed only as a tool? To my knowledge, Dewey does not explicitly answer those questions or, at least, those questions as explicitly phrased in the preceding ways. Nevertheless, based upon his line of thought in this connection, especially his Darwinian world-view orientation, we can still figure out his possible responses and so find out what challenges his version of the pragmatic insight under discussion would be facing. On the one hand, Dewey’s background of experimental science and his Darwinian evolutionary world view might let him stop short of metaphysical vision towards the aforementioned unifying force whose entirety seems beyond experimental verification or at least would suspend a metaphysical commitment to it. On the other hand, whether or not Dewey makes a metaphysical commitment to such a unifying force, he clearly renders any formulated rules or principles short of such metaphysically heavyweight import when he emphasises their instrumental character.

Now the challenges to Dewey’s version of the pragmatic insight are these. First, if there does exist some fundamental unifying force running through the world or universe, then, though no fixed and formulated rules reign supreme as final and absolute authority, one would have need to do justice to such a unifying force and its uniform ways in one’s account of the metaphysical foundation of the pragmatic insight. Second, in such an account, one would also need to provide an explanation of, at least some insight on, the relation between such a unifying force and its uniform ways if any, on the one hand, and any formulated rules or principles that are intended to capture them, on the other hand. Third, if some formulated moral rules or principles do somehow capture such a unifying force and its uniform ways to some extent, one’s account of the pragmatic insight needs to do justice to some value of those formulated rules or principles that would go beyond their mere instrumental value. Without meeting those challenges, an account of the pragmatic insight regarding morality cannot go far in the sense that it would be incomplete and, worse, go with some relativistic character. For those metaphysical concerns that are somehow related to the pragmatic point under discussion clearly go beyond what Darwin’s theory of evolution or any experimental scientific account could deal with on its own; they thus demand
some fundamental metaphysical insights beyond mere Darwinian evolutionary worldview or any account exclusively based upon experimental science. In this aspect, as I will show in the next sub-section, some of Laozi’s fundamental metaphysical insights in the *Daodejing* provide us certain guiding visions; these guiding visions are not just externally complementary to Dewey’s view in this regard in the sense that Laozi teaches and reminds us of something that Dewey’s approach goes short of without directly engaging with those metaphysical imports of Dewey’s approach; they would actually play a kind role of internally and more substantially complementing Dewey’s view regarding the metaphysical foundation of the pragmatic insight under discussion: they would provide something that would reflectively answer those challenges raised to Dewey’s approach and constructively contribute to a due metaphysical foundation which would prevent the pragmatic insight either from running into a certain kind of moral relativism or from indiscriminately rendering those moral rules or principles expressed in our language merely instrumental in nature.

1.2. Laozi: Dao in Language-Engagement and Genuine Dao

If Dewey in the classical American pragmatic tradition explicitly elucidates the pragmatic insight by giving a rational analysis of why fixed and formulated (moral) principles cannot be taken as final (moral) authority on the basis of the evolutionary world-view and in more or less scientific terms, Laozi in the classical Chinese philosophical tradition captures the same pragmatic insight through his visions on the dialectical relation of the fundamental metaphysical *Dao* of the universe to its language expressions. Through, directly and explicitly or indirectly and tacitly, meeting the three challenges aforementioned, Laozi’s approach reveals something important regarding the pragmatic insight, that is, the pragmatic insight is compatible with, and is reinforced by, the human being’s persistent pursue after some eternal and ultimate values and their finite formulated expressions. In the following, I will make points through briefly explaining one of Laozi’s most fundamental insights in this aspect, which is succinctly suggested in the opening message of the *Daodejing*.8

One of Laozi’s most fascinating teachings in his *Daodejing* is its first six-character aphorism in chapter 1 which, according to one prevailing standard translation-interpretation, is paraphrased as follows:  

The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way.9

or

The *Dao* that can be told of [in language] is not the eternal *Dao*.10

One thing is clear. Laozi explicitly maintains that there is the eternal or constant *Dao* as the ultimate unifying force evolving and operating throughout the universe, which might as well be called ‘the metaphysical *Dao*,’ but, how to capture this constant and eternal *Dao*? Is any language engagement with the ultimate concern like the eternal *Dao* doomed to fail to capture the genuine *Dao*?11 According to one standard paraphrase, the cited passage is considered to reveal one fundamental insight which appears to be strikingly similar to that of Wittgenstein’s idea about the spoken and the unspoken that is sometimes delivered this way: Language expressions or formulations cannot really capture what those expressions or formulations aim to say; the genuine *Dao* has to be captured in a way that is beyond language. It is often said that, in Laozi’s case, contemplation of the *Dao* in silence requires sharply distinguishing the eternal *Dao* from
what can be formulated or captured in (or by) language. In other words, the genuine \textit{Dao} is fundamentally and intrinsically different from ‘the \textit{Dao} that can be formulated’, for the two are simply opposed to each other. I think that this interpretation fails to comprehensively capture what is actually delivered by the opening message of the \textit{Daodejing}. Indeed, Laozi teaches that one needs to contemplate the eternal \textit{Dao} without the dominance of the fixed formulation of \textit{Dao} so as to reach the vantage-point from which one can achieve one’s comprehensive understanding of the eternal \textit{Dao}. What is also interesting and significant is to elaborate Laozi’s insight about why various formulated and fixed (moral) principles are rather limited and cannot exhaust the eternal \textit{Dao}. Does he think that, as what the standard interpretation literally means, the \textit{Dao} that can be spoken of is not genuine \textit{Dao}? In what sense? Does he reject any language expression and characterisation, or language engagement, of the eternal \textit{Dao}? Indeed, the \textit{Dao}, or the fundamental unifying force that runs through the universe and its Way in which all things pursue their courses, is subject to eternal change and dynamically evolves in the universe; any attempt to identify the eternal \textit{Dao} with some formulation in terms of finite and fixed words or speech thus cannot exhaust the eternal \textit{Dao}. However, that does not amount to saying that the eternal \textit{Dao} cannot be (partially or somehow) captured in terms of language or cannot be reached in language. Laozi himself endeavors to characterise or, more generally speaking, reach the eternal or genuine \textit{Dao} in a variety of language engagement throughout 81 chapters of the \textit{Daodejing}.\textsuperscript{12} It is evident from Laozi’s own language engagement in the classic that Laozi does not consider a language engagement with the eternal \textit{Dao} as a sin. Rather, because the eternal \textit{Dao} manifests or reveals itself in all things in various concrete, or, one can say, finite, situations; the \textit{Dao} can be partially captured in terms of (finite) language related to (finite) concrete situations. Indeed, to capture the \textit{Dao}, a moral agent needs to focus on her felt demands of concrete situations where the genuine \textit{Dao} manifests itself; she thus can contemplate her local and concrete situations and felt demands in terms of language. Due to all this as well as due to the syntactic and semantic structure of the Chinese original of the opening sentence of the \textit{Daodejing} which clearly consists of two statements (one affirmative while the other negative),\textsuperscript{13} a more suitable paraphrase of the first six-character opening statement would be this:

\begin{quote}
The \textit{Dao} can be reached [in language], but the \textit{Dao} that has been character-\textit{ized} is not identical with, or cannot exhaust, the eternal [constant] \textit{Dao}.
\end{quote}

Here Laozi suggests a two-sided guiding vision regarding the ultimate concern and its language engagement, which consists of a positive finite point of view and a negative transcendental point of view. On the one hand, in the first assertive claim of the opening statement, Laozi positively affirms the possibility and adequacy of the language engagement with the \textit{Dao}: any part or dimension of the \textit{Dao} can be somehow talked about or reached in language, though any of such talks is finite in character in the sense that what it reaches is one finite part or dimension of the \textit{Dao}. That is, the \textit{Dao} still can be told even if being told in a finite point of view: (i) the finite point of view might be reasonable to the extent that it is true when it does capture a certain aspect or dimension or layer of the genuine \textit{Dao}; (ii) it would be true when it does not claim its finite characterisation of one part or aspect of the \textit{Dao} as exclusively or exhaustively true while render false others that capture the other parts of the same entire \textit{Dao}; (iii) different or even opposite finite points of view can be held about one and the same thing, when they capture various aspects or development stages of the
same thing. On the other hand, in the second (negative) claim, Laozi alerts us to the limitation of the finite point of view and emphasises the transcendental character of the Dao as the ultimate concern; for any finite language-engagement of the Dao cannot exhaust the entirety of the eternal and constant Dao. This point of view is transcendental because it transcends the finite point of view so as to capture the Dao of things in a holistic way and to realise the limitations of the finite point of view. In this way, in the opening statement, Laozi takes both positive and negative looks at the finite point of view.

In my preceding interpretative elaboration of the opening statement of Laozi’s Daodejing in view of his whole ideas in the classic, one can see that the two points of the pragmatic insight on morality as Dewey explicitly delivered are also captured in Laozi’s distinct way: (1) Any formulated rules or principles in terms of finite language cannot exhaust the eternal and constant Dao that evolves itself in ever-changing process and thus cannot reign supreme as the indiscriminate final authority in all relevant concrete situations; (2) Since the eternal Dao reveals itself in all things in various concrete situations, to capture the Dao, a moral agent needs to primarily focus on the felt demands of concrete situations where the genuine Dao manifests itself.

Now one interesting question is this: could Laozi’s insight in this connection meet the three challenges raised to Dewey’s version so as to contribute to and enhance our understanding of the pragmatic insight on morality under discussion? In my opinion, the answer is yes, though some interpretative work is needed to elaborate Laozi’s relevant points. Laozi makes three significant points through his dialectical transcendental approach. First, rejecting fixed and formulated (moral) rules as final (moral) authority amounts neither to denying the existence of the fundamental unifying force nor to discarding the pursuit of the eternal Dao that runs through all the things in the universe; it is still our mission to pursue the ultimate principle, the eternal Dao, which reveals itself in its dynamic and evolving process.

Second, as the first affirmative statement of the opening statement of the Daodejing teaches us, the eternal genuine Dao can be captured or somehow reached in finite language expressions (in the sense and to the extent explained before); so those ‘formulated’ moral rules and principles – indeed, any language expression, you can say, is a kind of formulated thing – could partially or to some extent capture the genuine Dao, though that does not amount to saying that all of them do capture the genuine Dao, much less to saying that any of them could exhaust the eternal Dao. For the eternal Dao dynamically manifests itself through various individual things in various concrete situations; and so, when one captures something uniform through a certain pattern of concrete situations and expressed it in language, what has been captured could be some part or aspect of the genuine Dao that reveals itself in those situations, and, if so, what has been captured would be the Dao in language-engagement. The point is that the genuine Dao and the Dao in language-engagement cannot be sharply and dualistically separated and distinguished.

Third, because the genuine and constant Dao can be reached in language, as Laozi positively affirms, that is, those formulated (moral) rules in terms of language could, to some extent, somehow capture parts or dimensions or layers of the genuine Dao, those formulated rules that do more or less capture the genuine Dao would have their intrinsic value that goes beyond their mere instrumental value.

Furthermore, from Laozi’s point of view, since the eternal Dao is doomed to dynamically manifest itself through various individual things in various concrete situations, one who pursues the Dao thus needs to pay one’s attention to individual things,
being sensitive to concrete situations. Naturally, in moral contexts, the moral agent’s attention always needs to be paid to her own inner moral experience that responds to the felt demands of concrete situations. Note that, besides from the metaphysical perspective, Laozi actually also captures this dimension of the pragmatic insight from another perspective which will be explored in the next part.

The preceding discussion shows how, and in what sense, some of Laozi’s fundamental metaphysical insights in the *Daodejing* provide us some guiding visions. One can also see how those visions are not just externally complementary to Dewey’s view in the sense that Laozi merely teaches us something that Dewey’s approach goes short of, without directly engaging with those metaphysical imports of Dewey’s account. As a matter of fact, they internally or more substantially complement Dewey’s view regarding the metaphysical foundation of the pragmatic insight: they provide something that would reflectively answer those challenges to Dewey’s approach and they constructively contribute to a due metaphysical foundation which would prevent the pragmatic insight either from running into moral relativism or from indiscriminately rendering those moral rules or principles expressed in our language merely instrumental in nature.

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In brief, converging from their distinct metaphysical perspectives, Dewey and Laozi deliver the same kind of pragmatic message on morality to the effect that no pre-set and fixed moral rules or principles should be taken as the final absolute moral authority but, instead, attention needs to be paid to the moral agent’s own moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations. However, this pragmatic insight is based upon Dewey’s and Laozi’s distinct metaphysical guiding visions or world views. An interesting question is whether two visions could complement and so enhance each other. On the one hand, Laozi’s naturalistic cosmic-metaphysical world view is essentially consistent with evolutionary world view to the extent that both consider nature or universe as changing, growing, processing, and evolving on its own course. At least as far as those parts of the universe that are reached by human experience are concerned, our understanding of Laozi’s Daoist cosmic-metaphysical world view, on the one hand, could be supplemented by Dewey’s evolutionary world view in its more or less scientific terms. On the other hand, as far as fundamental metaphysical vision is concerned, Dewey’s evolutionary world view could be enhanced and substantively complemented by Laozi’s Daoist cosmic-metaphysical world view which transcends what our experience, understood in its narrow sense, has so far reached. Moreover, Dewey’s clear and detailed analysis of how moral rules could play their *instrumental* role can handily come to one’s aid in one’s actual applications of moral rules in concrete situations, while Laozi’s teachings on the dialectic relation between the *Dao* in language-engagement and the genuine *Dao* would let us keep an eye on, and bear in mind, something that a moral rules and principle might deliver beyond its mere instrumental value.

### 2. The Nature of Situated Moral Experience: Against Sharp Dualism

From the preceding discussion, we have seen that, from their distinct metaphysical perspectives, both thinkers, directly or somehow indirectly, render the final moral authority in concrete situations to one’s own inner moral experience which responds to the felt demands of concrete situations and out of which one makes moral decisions.
What, then, is the nature of this moral experience? As mentioned before, our moral experience in concrete situations might be spontaneous without intellectual calculation but could be still somehow reflective. There has been the controversy about the nature of our habitual spontaneous moral sense: Is such moral experience a cognitive intuition of some objective moral quality of the situation or an emotive feeling of approvals and disapprovals occasioned by what one perceives about the situation? At this point, both Dewey and Laozi look at the nature of moral experience in a dynamic way to reject a sharp dualism, but, on the other hand, they present themselves in distinctive ways and focus on different stages of moral experience; their different approaches can be considered as complementary to each other.

2.1. Dewey: A Difference That Does Not Make a Difference

Pragmatists would say that this issue is undecidable and presents a difference that does not make a difference. This pragmatic methodological point is illustrated by William James’s ‘homey’ example of the squirrel on the trunk of the tree.\textsuperscript{14} A man tried to get a look at a squirrel on the far side of the trunk of a tree. While the man moved around the tree, the squirrel moved also, always keeping to the opposite side. There is the controversy over whether the man goes around the squirrel. From one perspective he does not: if by that you mean that first he is in front of the squirrel, then to the side of it, then behind it, and finally in front again; for the squirrel sees to it that the man never gets behind it. From another perspective he does: if we mean that he is first to the north of the squirrel, then to the east, then to the south and then to the west, because he is going around the tree and the squirrel is on the tree. Once the meaning of ‘going around’ is clarified, there seems no more controversy. From this pragmatic methodological point of view, Dewey gives a careful analysis of the nature of our initial (habitual) spontaneous moral experience.\textsuperscript{15} On the one hand, Dewey emphasises its emotional and sensitive aspect. He takes sympathetic emotion as example and explains its role in our spontaneous moral sense:

A person entirely lacking in sympathetic response might have a keen calculating intellect, but he would have no spontaneous sense of the claims of others for satisfaction of their desires.... It is sympathy which carries thought out beyond the self and which extends its scope till it approaches the universal as its limit. It is sympathy which saves consideration of consequences from degenerating into mere calculation.\textsuperscript{16}

On the other hand, Dewey underscores the cognitive or even reflective elements of our initial spontaneous approvals and disapprovals. First, ‘[o]ur immediate responses of approval and reprobation may well be termed intuitive. They are not based upon any thought-out reason or ground. We just admire and resent, are attracted and repelled.’\textsuperscript{17} Second, however, such a habitual intuitive moral sense results to a large extent from past experience and previous conscious thinking. Dewey writes:

The result of prior experience, including previous conscious thinking, get taken up into direct habits, and express themselves in direct appraisals of value. Most of our moral judgments are intuitive, but this fact is not a proof of the existence of a separate faculty of moral insight, but is the result of past experience funded into direct outlook upon the scene of life.\textsuperscript{18}

The multiple nature of our initial habitual moral experience explains why what one
person reports as an intuition of rightness may be precisely what another reports as an emotion of approval, with equal plausibility and why even the same one person reports the same moral experience both as a cognitive intuition of rightness and as an emotion of approval.

However, Dewey clearly realises the limitations of a moral agent’s initial (habitual) spontaneous approvals and disapprovals. First, ‘They are often the result of an education which was misdirected’; second, ‘They do not work with equal sureness in the case in which the new and unfamiliar enters in’; third, ‘nothing is more immediate and seemingly sure of itself than inveterate prejudice”.19 That is why Dewey places more emphasis on the conscious deliberation of our intuitive habitual moral experience into reflective moral approvals and disapprovals. The reason is this:

the former tends to rest upon the plane of achieved goods, while the latter is on the outlook for something better. The truly conscientious person not only uses a standard in judging, but is concerned to revise and improve his standard…. Only by thoughtfulness does one become sensitive to the far-reaching implications of an act; apart from continual reflection we are at best sensitive only to the value of special and limited ends.20

Nevertheless, here again Dewey takes the same pragmatic methodological perspective to look at the nature of our moral deliberation: ‘...as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad. Deliberation is dramatic and active, not mathematical and impersonal, and hence it has the intuitive, the direct factor in it.’21

While emphasising the conscious deliberation of our moral experience, Dewey is careful enough to alert us against what he calls ‘overconscientiousness’ in contrast to genuine conscientiousness: overconscientiousness ‘signifies constant anxiety as to whether one is really good or not, a moral “self-consciousness” which spells embarrassment, constraint in action, morbid fear’,22 while genuine conscientiousness ‘is intelligent attention and care to the quality of an act in view of its consequences for general happiness; it is not anxious solicitude for one’s own virtuous state’.23 Dewey takes overconscientiousness to be not far from vice. For going too far is as bad as not going far enough.

If this warning against moral overconscientiousness can be viewed as one ending chapter of Dewey’s discussion of the process of moral experience, such a warning in Laozi’s philosophy constitutes a prelude to his insightful teachings regarding moral cultivation. If Dewey’s concern here is mainly with a moral agent’s overconscientiousness over her own virtuous state, Laozi is also concerned with the case of imposing non-spontaneous moral discipline to someone else in a harsh way.

2.2. Laozi: Spontaneous Virtue that Repeats Itself at a Higher Level

Laozi’s teachings regarding morality, so to speak, focus on two directions of post-deliberation development of morality: one is to negatively develop into what Dewey calls ‘overconscientiousness’ or part of what Laozi means by ‘xia-de’ (inferior virtue); the other is to positively develop into what Laozi calls ‘shang-de’ (superior virtue).

By his discernment of the deep damage resulting from imposing those fixed and formulated moral rules to oneself or somebody else in a harsh way, Laozi stresses a virtuous person’s own natural and spontaneous morality experienced within. He would say that a humane person, say, loves and treats her neighbour well neither because she
is consciously aware that it is the right thing that one ought to do nor because she wants to follow some fixed moral rule, but because she just feels like it in concrete situations. One might object that, although the spontaneous goodness sounds more attractive than the self-conscious and disciplined goodness, hard facts of life are that we are not living a world full of saints and that we are actually partly good and partly evil; so we have to seek imposing the definite and fixed moral rules the hard way and enforce disciplined cultivation. Laozi would not ignore the importance of a moral agent’s contemplative, observing moments when she contemplates how the Dao operates in nature, including how people who flow with the Dao live and act. However, by emphasising spontaneous morality, Laozi intends to highlight its value for its own sake and to counterbalance the tendency in the opposite direction in his times. Laozi’s point is thus not to reject contemplative and disciplined cultivation but emphasise that kindness or good as the end within cannot be taught by imposing the fixed moral rules as the means without. One of the central messages of the Laozi style Daoism regarding morality is this: when the fixed and formulated moral rules or commands are enforced upon people from outside, they are often counter-productive in the way that they might spoil or even destroy the people who have more or less spontaneous morality within.

In this way, as far as their characterisations of moral cultivation are concerned, what distinguishes Laozi from Dewey seems to be this: while Dewey contributes himself to his careful rational analysis of moral psychology from the initial habitual moral experience to the deliberate conscientiousness, Laozi intends to capture a dialectical negation-of-negation development of moral cultivation from the initial instinctive moral sense to moral deliberation and then eventually into what Laozi most values and calls ‘superior virtue’, i.e. a high level of spontaneous morality experienced within. According to Laozi, a person of superior virtue just does her moral action without consciously or deliberately pondering her virtue on the scene and she seems to just like it out of her spontaneous morality within. However, different both from the initial instinctive moral sense and from the initial habitual spontaneous approvals and disapprovals, this higher level of spontaneous morality experienced within a moral agent of superior virtue results from her long-standing diachronic reflective cultivation. It crystallises the spiral development of moral experience of a moral agent from the initial instinctive moral sensibility, whose naturalness and spontaneity Laozi often highlights by the moral image of infants, to the reflective moral deliberation (through the initial habitual approvals and disapprovals) and then eventually to the high level of spontaneous morality. This is a dialectical process of the negation of negation. On the one hand, the spontaneous nature of the initial spontaneous morality repeats itself at the higher level of spontaneous morality; on the other hand, although the reflective intellectual element of moral cultivation seems to disappear at the dominant or conscious level, it is still embedded at the recessive level and reveals itself tacitly. For this reason, the spontaneous intuition of morality in the case of superior virtue might be considered as reflective or ‘intellectual’ in nature. In this way, first, one would feel no wonder why Laozi often eulogises the moral state of infants: Laozi does not intend to incite us to turn ourselves into infants – that is clearly physically and, arguably, mentally impossible; his point is to encourage us to nurture our moral characters up to a vantage-point from which we become so good persons that we have morality experienced spontaneously within – a repetition of infants’ spontaneous moral sense at a higher level. Second, the dialectical nature of our moral experience as characterised in Laozi’s account explains why, once reflecting the nature of her moral experience, a moral agent of superior virtue might tend to report it both as intellectual intuition of rightness and
as spontaneous feeling of approval; there would be no wonder why what one person reports as an intuition of rightness may be precisely what another reports as an emotion of approval, with equal plausibility.

Understanding Laozi’s dialectical way to characterise moral experience, one can easily comprehend another of his ways of transcending a sharp dualism regarding morality. One of Laozi’s deepest insights regarding morality is expressed in chapter 38 of the *Daodejing*.

The person of superior virtue is not conscious of his virtue, thus he really has virtue.
The person of inferior virtue never loses sight of his virtue, thus he loses his virtue.
The person of superior virtue takes no action and acts without motive.
The person of inferior takes action and acts with motives.

... Therefore when *Dao* is lost, only then does the doctrine of virtue arise. When virtue is lost, only then does the doctrine of humanity arise. When humanity is lost, only then does the doctrine of rightousness arise. When righteousness is lost, only then does the doctrine of propriety arise.26

It seems to Laozi that, in contrast to a person of inferior virtue who, due to forgetting the genuine *Dao*, focuses merely on conventional and formulated moral rules and imposes them upon herself overconscientiously or also upon others in a harsh way, a person of superior virtue just does her moral action or cultivate her moral character neither with those setbacks in the initial habitual moral sense nor with solicitude for her own virtuous state, even nor with being conscious of her virtue. As Laozi sees it, she does it not because she experiences it as right (neither because she intuits it as right nor because feels it as right); she just likes it and just does moral things out of her higher level of spontaneous morality within. In this aspect, Laozi’s approach also hits the point of opposing sharp dualisms: a moral agent’s higher level of spontaneous morality within simply transcends the sharp dualism between good and evil which is stipulated by the artificial or conventional doctrine of morality and imposed from outside.27 Clearly, Laozi’s transcendental insight here is fundamentally different from the so-called moral nihilism: the former is the transcendance from above so as to capture superior virtue, while the latter is the transcendence from below so as to abolish distinction of right and wrong.

From the preceding discussion, we can see that the two different approaches share the same methodological spirit in this regard: they look at the nature of their moral experience or moral knowledge in concrete situations from some dialectical point of view and they oppose sharp dualism in one or another form. On the other hand, the two approaches capture and present the methodological insight with their different focuses and in their distinctive but complementary ways as explained above.

3. Naturalistic Perspectives to Foundation of Human Morality: Humanistic Naturalistic vs Naturalized Humanistic Approaches

So far we have seen that, in their distinctive ways, both Dewey’s and Laozi’s approaches render the final moral authority in concrete situations to people’s own particular moral experience. However, our moral experience in concrete situations is particular in
nature. It seems that our particular moral experience on the scene, whether it is reflective one or spontaneous one, should be somehow based upon a certain moral foundation. The term ‘moral foundation’ here is primarily meant something that renders our relevant particular experience in concrete moral situations morally worthy. Because the moral foundation understood this way actually provides a general criterion of moral worth, the term ‘moral foundation’ is secondarily meant something that is entitled to serve as a general criterion of moral worth. Now the issue is this: is there such a moral foundation? Is there some general capacity in moral agents that somehow provides basic moral discernment which would underlie their particular moral experience in various concrete situations?

3.1. Intrinsic Foundation of Human Morality

It seems that both Dewey and Laozi take a kind of humanistically and naturalistically oriented approach to the issue which attempts to establish a moral foundation within natural human beings rather than without. That is, both essentially consider such a moral foundation as a certain general natural capacity within moral agents which renders their particular relevant experience in concrete moral situations morally worthy.

As said before, Dewey thinks that basic human needs are innate and human nature will not quickly change. Among those basic human needs, some emotional needs like sympathy and pity are considered as initial instincts for moral discernment which exist universally in every human being. In the Daodejing, Laozi highlights, and repeatedly refers to, the native and spontaneous nature of the virtuous state of infants who are in their initial stage of living process. Such an initial native stock of instincts for moral discernment is often viewed as human moral conscience. In this way, both Dewey and Laozi seem to emphasise that human beings have certain native instincts or potentials or tendencies for moral discernment; both deem that the moral agent’s moral experience in concrete situations eventually has a certain natural grounding in human nature and human needs.

However, I intend to emphasise two things on the issue. First, from both Dewey’s and Laozi’s points of view, such initial native instincts for moral discernment in human nature are not thing-like capacities; rather, in more accurate terms, they are kinds of tendencies or potentials that are subject to change. For, as Dewey emphasises, a human being, once born, does not live in a vacuum but develops in a social environment; those initial native instincts for moral discernment, from the very beginning, are subject to change, modification and development. That is exactly the sense in which Dewey also emphasises that human nature is changeable. Indeed, one might be puzzled about Dewey’s seemingly inconsistent claims as follows: on the one hand, he emphasises the existence of unchangeable elements in human nature; on the other hand, he rejects the theory that human nature is unchangeable. Nevertheless, such impression of seemingly inconsistency would be dissolved once we take a further look. What Dewey considers to be unchangeable regarding human nature is the very existence of some basic human needs and instincts, while what he considers as changeable are the forms and quantity through which those human needs and instincts represent themselves in social environment – or the ‘channel of expression’ of them in human society; in other words, what native human nature is up to is ‘[its] modification … in formation of those new ways of thinking, of feeling, of desiring, and of believing that are foreign to raw human nature’.28

Second, one needs to be careful not to superficially identify either Dewey’s or Laozi’s
naturalistic accounts of original human nature with those theorists who, from other perspectives, explicitly claim that human nature is born good. Unlike those almost contemporary Confucians like Mencius and Xunzi, Laozi never explicitly claims that human nature are born good or bad. He just repeatedly refers people to the virtuous state of infants. Laozi’s way in this regard is philosophically insightful. When one claims that human nature is originally good or bad, one has a pre-set pattern of good or bad and then uses it as a ready-made criterion of moral worth to measure the original nature of human being. One might object this way: those theorists at first also use some natural terms to identify certain natural traits in human nature; for example, Mencius characterises the original human nature in such natural terms like ‘ce-yin-zhi-xin’ (the heart of compassion) and ‘xiu-e-zhi-xin’ (the hearts of shame); does not Dewey also explicitly use those terms like ‘sympathy’ and ‘pity’ to identify their corresponding natural traits? Let us consider Mencius’ case. Mencius at first sets up his definite conceptions of four human excellencies: ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness), li (propriety) and zhi (intelligent awareness), and then uses those pre-set normative values to respectively characterise the natures of four original human traits – the hearts of compassion, the heart of shame, the heart of courtesy and modesty, and the heart of right and wrong. It seems that, from Mencius’ point of view, it is such pre-set normative values per se that make the natural traits under his consideration have moral value, rather than the contrary. When Mencius uses those terms like ‘xiu-e-zhi-xin’ (the hearts of shame), in my opinion, he does not use them as genuine natural terms to refer to natural traits per se but as pseudo-natural terms to refer to some hybrid combination of natural traits with certain pre-set values. However, in Dewey’s case, such terms as ‘sympathy’ and ‘pity’ are used as genuine natural terms to refer to those natural and instinctive tendencies themselves. Interesting enough, Laozi goes farther even than Dewey in this direction: he simply does not mention any moral traits, even those natural instincts like sympathy and pity. It seems that, from Laozi’s point of view, when one refers to those morally favourable traits in terms of those ready-made moral terms, one would conceptualise them into a moral appraisal system; in so doing, one would be at the risk of formulating them into intellectual doctrine and forgetting the genuine Dao. Laozi thus alerts us: ‘When the great Dao declined, the doctrine of humanity and righteousness arose. When formulated knowledge and wisdom appeared, there emerged great hypocrisy.’ In this way, if you press Laozi to tell you what exactly those original moral traits are, Laozi might simply smile to you and refer you to the natural states of infants and water.

3.2. Dewey: A Humanistic Naturalistic Approach

Again, what is interesting lies also in Dewey’s and Laozi’s distinctive ways to present or capture the shared strategic point and their contributions to a complete account. Though both approaches can be characterised in terms of humanistic and naturalistic orientation for the aforementioned reason, Dewy and Laozi, as a matter of fact, put humanistic and naturalistic in different explanatory orders. In Dewey’s case, it is a humanistically oriented naturalistic approach; that is, the naturalistic character of Dewey’s approach is eventually explained in terms of his more or less anthropocentric humanism. However, in Laozi’s case, it is a naturalistically oriented humanistic approach; that is, the humanistic character is eventually explained in terms of his naturalistic metaphysics. For this reason, I use the terms ‘a humanistic naturalistic approach’ and ‘a naturalistic humanistic approach’ respectively as the sub-titles of this
and the following sub-sections to highlight the distinctive characteristics of Dewey’s and Laozi’s approaches as well as their shared strategic perspective in this regard.

Though emphasising the moral agent’s moral experience that responds to the felt demands of concrete situations, Dewey attempts to use growth as a general criterion of moral worth. Dewey writes ‘the process of growth, of improvement and progress, rather than the static outcome and result, becomes the significant thing’; no fixed goal, no matter how perfect it is, can be the final end; ‘Growth itself is the only moral “end”’. Dewey’s view is based upon his understanding of human nature and of human needs. It seems to Dewey that, although human life is highly plastic, there is a basic identity of human nature that is characterised by innate human needs. By ‘human needs’ Dewey means ‘the inherent demands that men make because of their constitution’.

There are such physical human needs as ones for food and drink and for moving around; there are human needs that are not so directly physical: for example, the needs for companionship, for bringing one’s powers to bear upon surrounding conditions, for some sort of aesthetic expression and satisfaction; there are emotional needs for (giving) sympathy and pity, etc. According to Dewey, those basic needs are innate in human beings and, to this extent, human nature characterised by them does not change. It seems to Dewey that ‘there is nothing intrinsically bad about raw impulse and desire [in human needs]’; the task of moral theory is to frame a theory of Good ‘which satisfies want, craving, which fulfills or makes complete the need which stirs to action’ in such a way as to ‘meet the demands of impartial and far-sighted thought as well as satisfy the urgencies of desire’. Dewey thus gives a humanistic and naturalistic conception of ethical obligation in this sense: ethical obligation is eventually to meet human being’s natural needs rather than to obey the Commands from the Divine God or from the Absolute Imperatives or to achieve some ideals that is considered to be human being’s destiny but has nothing to do with human needs. In this way, Human growth as the process of addressing human life’s problems and fulfilling human needs is considered by Dewey as a general criterion of moral worth.

3.3. Laozi: A Naturalized Humanistic Approach

In contrast to Dewey’s growth criterion of moral worth, Laozi suggests wu-wei (meaning non-action or taking no action) as his criterion of moral worth. At first blush, two criteria of moral worth appear to be simply contrary: the former seems to be active, positive and keeping-forging-ahead, while the latter passive, negative and flinching-back. Note that Laozi’s ‘wu-wei’ does not mean literally inactivity but rather taking no action that violates or is contrary to being natural or the Dao. Wu-wei might well be expressed in another way: through taking no action that violates being natural, a person of wu-wei is to actively flow with the Dao with a keeping-forging-ahead attitude so as to achieve positive consequence. As Laozi emphasizes, ‘The Dao-following person takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone’. In this way, as far as their concerns with human natural needs are concerned, Laozi’s wu-wei and Dewey’s growth tend to be the two sides of one coin. For, in Laozi’s line of thought, living with Dao without violating natural involves meeting those human natural needs rather than taking care of any Divine Commands or Absolute Imperatives. To this extent, Laozi’s approach is also in the humanistic track.

Nevertheless, Laozi’s conception of wu-wei as a criterion of moral worth takes a broader perspective to look at the nature of human morality and the place of human being in the universe. Although Dewey provides a very reasonable account of the
relation between the task of moral theory and human needs, and although he gives a rational analysis on the basis of full and quite accurate empirical evidence, his theory seems to be more or less anthropocentric regarding morality. For example, although he provides a Darwinian grounding for his account of the human organism, Dewey extends moral concern neither to other animals nor to our surrounding environment qua environment nor to the planetary system. Surely, in the Daodejing, Laozi offers no defense of animal rights either; Laozi also focuses on human morality. However, the metaphysical foundation of Laozi’s humanistic account is his naturalistic Daoism. Laozi’s naturalistic Daoism not only takes the human being as a part of the whole organic universe; it also emphasizes that the evolving ways of all things in the universe are fundamentally the manifestations of the same metaphysical Dao as the fundamental unifying force that Nature possesses on its own. Laozi says: ‘Humans are modeled on earth. Earth is modeled on heaven. Heaven is modeled on the Dao. The Dao is modeled on Nature.’

In this way, it is always one of the central concerns in Laozi’s philosophy to keep the harmonious evolution among all things (the human being, the other animals, earth and heaven) in the universe and to contemplate the fundamental Dao that operates throughout the universe. In Laozi’s account, the humanistic morality is thus eventually based upon naturalistic metaphysical foundation. In contrast, in spite of his naturalistic grounding of the human organism, Dewey’s approach is essentially human-centred. Although it is still more or less controversial whether or not it is adequate to extend moral concerns to non-human-beings and to what extent consideration of environment should be taken into moral account, Laozi’s teachings in this aspect seem to be insightful when the human being is considered as essentially part of the whole universe and in a correlative relation with the other things in the universe. The reason why Laozi’s view in this regard is morally relevant and constructive insight, rather than mere fancy guess-work, is that the human being, as a matter of fact, is part of the universe and that all those natural things like the human being, its living environment and the other animals, as a matter of fact, are correlated into an organic whole. So, when, according to Dewey, ethical obligation is considered to meet human being’s natural needs rather than to obey the Commands from the Divine God or from the Absolute Imperatives or to achieve some ideals that have nothing to do with human needs, and when human growth is considered as one general criterion of moral worth, such human needs and human growth per se need to be sensitive to their natural limitations based upon the due status and function of the human being in the organic universe. An account of human needs and human growth needs to be guided by the insight that the human being is one natural, organic part of, rather than reigns over, its environment and the whole universe. In this way, one can see how Laozi’s view could constructively complement and enhance Dewey’s account through guiding insight and due natural limitations.

4. A Summary

In this article, from a comparative perspective, I have examined a pragmatic insight on morality whose two related dimensions are these: (i) fixed and formulated moral rules should not be taken as the final absolute moral authority; (ii) attention needs to be paid to the moral agent’s own moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations. This pragmatic insight on morality was explicitly presented by John Dewey in contemporary pragmatism; and it was heralded by Laozi to the extent that
there are some visions in Laozi’s *Daodejing* which are kindred in spirit with this pragmatic insight; however, both approaches deliver the pragmatic insight in their distinct ways which would contribute to a complete account of human morality.

The purpose of this paper is to enhance understanding the crucial points of the pragmatic insight through identifying their distinct ways and explaining how they could be constructively complementary and substantively learn from each other. I have endeavoured to show several points. (1) The preceding pragmatic insight regarding morality has its distinct general metaphysical foundations, or world views, respectively in Dewey’s and Laozi’s accounts, whose combination could enhance each other’s visions and overcome each other’s limitations in those ways as explained in the first section. (2) Both Dewey and Laozi reject some sharp dualism to look at the nature of moral experience that responds to the felt demands in concrete situations; in so doing, their characteristic ideas, focusing on different aspects, or developing stages, of such moral experience, could be complementarily coordinated into a whole. (3) Their characterisations of the pragmatic insight are also based upon their distinct but related naturalistic perspectives to human moral foundation, what I call Dewey’s ‘humanistic naturalistic’ one and Laozi’s ‘naturalized humanistic’ one; Laozi’s approach could provide some constructive insight for, and due natural limitations on, Dewey’s two crucial conceptions, human needs and human growth, in his account.  

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NOTES


[7] Cf., Holmes’s (Holmes, op.cit., note 2) elaboration of Dewey’s positive point in his last chapter.


[11] By ‘language engagement with the ultimate concern’ I mean any reflective endeavour to capture (characterise or somehow reach) what is ultimately concerned about through our language.

[12] There is some important difference between the phrases ‘being reached’ and ‘being (descriptively) characterised’: the former is to cover a variety of ways to talked about the *Dao* through language engagement, far more than what the latter denotes. For example, among others, rigid designation falls under the former but not under the latter.
For my detailed discussion of the semantic and syntactic structure of the opening sentence, see Mou, op. cit., note 8.


Note that the initial instinctive moral sense is different from the initial habitual moral sense: the former is more or less native and original, while the latter is acquired from socio-environment as well as from the initial instinctive moral sense.

The Daodejing, ch. 38.

The translation, with my minor revision, comes from Chan, op. cit., note 10, p. 158.

Also cf., the Daodejing, chs 18 and 20.


The Daodejing, ch. 18.


Dewey & Tufts, op. cit., note 15, p. 201.

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