Leadership

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What is This?

Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner: Tao and Leadership

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Abstract *Despite many thousands of theoretical and empirical studies, leadership remains a tantalizing enigma for Western thinkers and practitioners. This is perhaps the result of two interrelated presuppositions. First, our conceptions of leadership are rooted in a cultural framework, ultimately theological in origin, of hierarchy and control that emphasizes outside direction and separation. Second, Western language codes leadership as a noun and therefore as a separable object of study. Nouns are typically regarded as denoting physical objects, and therefore leadership tends on the whole to be reified and treated as if it can be dissected and examined much as one would examine any other object in the environment. In contrast the Eastern tradition of Taoism treats leadership, more specifically the use of power, as a fluid set of interrelations co-ordinated with a natural order as it is, emphasizing co-ordination, location and connection with environmental contexts, rather than modification of the environment in line with an intellectual idea of what we would prefer it to be. Whereas for the West leadership is about active and shaping control, for Taoism it is more about engagement, understanding and co-ordination. This article argues that this approach offers some timely and important insights that have been consistently overlooked or downplayed in Western theorizing.*

Keywords *language; power; relational models; Taoism*

> Those who know, do not speak;
> Those who speak, do not know.
>
> (Adapted from Feng & English, 1972: 56; Watts, 1962: 12)

Introduction

Leadership has always been something of an enigma for Western thinkers (Bass, 1981; Grint, 2000; Kelvin, 1970; Stogdill, 1974). Despite many thousands of studies there are still no generally agreed definitions, and the mountains of accumulated data and ideas seem to have brought us no nearer to a detailed understanding of what the concept means. This may be the result of two interrelated presuppositions. First, our conceptions of leadership are rooted in a cultural framework, ultimately theological

in origin, based on the inevitability and desirability of hierarchy and control. This presupposes that the natural and social order must be imposed and maintained from 'above' through active intervention and 'leading from the front' if we are to avoid the alternatives of chaos, disorder, dissolution, decay and death. Second, we treat leadership as a noun, a reifiable object or thing that can be dissected and examined much as one would with any other object in the environment such as a table, leading us to expect a relatively simple set of specifications for application. This is a consequence of the way in which we construct and understand nouns as indicating independently sovereign objects within the environment and around which the environment bends itself. Thus the typically western approach to leadership is to try to establish codified principles that may be written down for transmission to a relatively passive 'learner'. In contrast some aspects of Eastern thought, notably Taoism and Zen,[1] present a view of leadership, and more specifically the use of power, as a fluid set of interrelations co-ordinated with and within a natural order that is outside our immediate control but of which we are an intimate part. Whereas for the West leadership is about active and shaping control,[2] for Taoists it is about engagement and accommodation with circumstances *as they are*. This article suggests that the difference in emphasis embodied in Taoism may be helpful in our attempts to understand leadership by moving away from codes, prescriptions and specifications much more towards a located and responsive social skill developed through doing rather than thinking – an emphasis on internal 'knowing' and experience rather than on external instruction.

An article such as this is, however, inevitably paradoxical. Taoism emphasizes direct experience, eschewing intellectual theorizing and actively challenging the worth of language and other intellectualisms for aiding understanding. Thus the paper is really an attempt to examine the ineffable by means of the inscrutable; looking at a concept that has resisted easy definition by means of a tradition that repudiates words – as Alan Watts puts it, eating the menu instead of the meal (Watts, 1962: 13).[3]

On Taoism

In the west Taoism tends to be regarded as an exotic expression of other-worldly sentiment, with little or nothing to say about the so-called 'real world' of everyday experience. This impression is not much helped by its association with the hippy counter-culture of the 1960s, in which it became associated with rock music, poetry and marijuana. Yet for all the 'mystical' associations that westerners tend to attribute to it, it is deeply practical in orientation, approach and intentions, and in some ways is utterly prosaic. Furthermore, Taoism makes no strong metaphysical claims, embodying an approach rooted in practice, direct experience and integration rather than through the filter of our assumptions about what does or does not exist. By contrast the dominant western scientific traditions, for all their conceit of objectivity and rationalism,[4] embody at their heart metaphysical assumptions that presuppose the naturalness of hierarchical order, and have an approach to existence rooted in intellectual frameworks of control, direction and separation.[5]

Taoism is difficult to classify in terms of our accustomed categories of thought. While generally classified as either religion or philosophy, and despite the trappings of religion acquired in its later (some would say debased) developments, in its pure

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form it is strictly speaking neither a religion nor a systematic philosophy. Watts (1962) reports that it is regarded by its adherents as a 'Way of Liberation' which seeks to encourage apprehension of the world as it actually is by mounting a sustained radical challenge to all conventions, including its own.

In contrast both philosophy and religion rest not only in and on convention, but positively seek its development and maintenance. Philosophies and religions are conventionality made manifest, and even where they challenge existing convention they inevitably seek to replace it with another of their own (Chadwick, 1972; Christie-Murray, 1976; Cleary, 1986, 1991,1996; Grigg, 1994; Kuhn, 1970; Southern, 1970; Watts, 1962, 2000). Taoism does not trouble over much about maintaining exclusive distinctiveness (which makes it hard to study); it is perfectly possible, for example, to be a Taoist in practice *and* a Christian, or atheist, or scientist, without any fundamental contradiction (see, for example, Franck, 1976). The key is in the 'choicefulness' of the conviction and the manner in which it is held whether dogmatically or openly. Taoism is adamantly opposed to dogmatism which it regards not so much as hubristic error as simple foolishness (Ming-Dao, 1992).

On the matter of the direct apprehension of reality beyond what has been called 'the veil of perception' (Jackson, 1977), we must pass over in silence the obvious objections from western philosophers and psychologists that this clearly begs the question of how it could be possible. This is an unsettled question and one of the primary driving forces for much of western philosophy in its own attempts to clarify the central questions of epistemology and the possibility of knowledge (see, for example, Edwards & Pap, 1973; Honderich & Burnyeat, 1979; Hospers, 1973; Russell, 1967). Here it is sufficient to note that the point of Taoist practice is the relatively uncontroversial claim that our habitual understandings and modes of thought, often little more than unexamined assumptions, have a tendency to hijack our ability to apprehend the world, interfere with our perceptions, and often lead us to see what we think we *ought* (or want) to see rather than what is actually *there*. As the *Lao Tsu* puts it:

> The five colours blind the eye.
> The five tones deafen the ear.
> The five flavours dull the taste.
> Racing and hunting madden the mind.
> Precious things lead one astray.
> Therefore, the sage is guided by what is felt, not what is seen.
> The sage lets go of that and chooses this.
>
> (Feng & English, 1972: 12)

This point is already well known in the west, and has been elaborated, *inter alia*, by Morgan in his important work on metaphors (Morgan, 1997). However, whereas we in the west try to refine our assumptions (to make them more 'accurate'), Taoism responds abruptly by trying to undermine and unseat them in order to lay bare direct experience.

The implications for leadership research are clear. Our attempts to capture the fundamentals of leadership are cluttered with assumptions and confusions around position and status, process and personality, behaviour and relationships. There are

several distinct and incommensurable traditions each laying claim to the label 'leadership' to denote its object of study (see for example, Bass, 1981; Cartwright & Zander, 1953, 1968; Grint, 1997, 2000; Prince, 1998; Quinn, 1984; Stogdill, 1974; Zaleznik, 1989). Taoism suggests that it might be a useful exercise to lay aside our cherished assumptions, to pause momentarily and to look at how people *actually* interrelate rather than pre-judging through the filter of pre-established models, much as advocated in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grasping the ungraspable

According to Taoism grasping the Tao in mere words is a futile undertaking, like trying to explain the experience of an orange to someone who has never encountered one (Cleary, 1998; Grigg, 1994; Reps & Senzaki, 1994; Shibayama, 1974; Watts, 1962, 1975, 1998, 2000). In one sense the ideas are pure simplicity, but apt to become complex and nebulous when expressed in words. The subject needs either an entire thesis or, preferably, no words at all but rather direct experiencing and wordless reflection. In the words of the *Tao Te Ching*:

> The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
> The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
> The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.
> Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
> Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.
>
> (Adapted from Feng & English, 1972: 1)[6]

This curious situation is not however unusual, and certainly not confined to Taoism. It is familiar to anyone who has seriously tried to study any aspect of social reality, including leadership. Stogdill's well known observation that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it has been echoed by many other writers before and since (Bass, 1981; Cartwright & Zander, 1953, 1968; Gibb, 1969; Grint, 1997, 2000; Hosking & Morley, 1985, 1991; Kelvin, 1970; Quinn, 1984; Stogdill, 1974). These writers express a level of frustration captured by Grint (2000: 1) when he declared:

> before I began to study leadership in a serious manner, my knowledge of it was complete. I knew basically all there was to know and I had already spent over a decade practising it. . . . I should have stopped then, because ever since . . . my understanding has decreased in direct proportion to my increased knowledge: in effect, the more I read, the more *contradictory* appeared the conclusions . . . Despite all my best efforts . . . the results refused to regurgitate any significant pattern except one banal truism: successful leaders are successful.

Interestingly Grint's words articulate, albeit obliquely, a particularly Taoist insight: when living leadership, he tells us, he *understood* it. His mistake was, perhaps, to try and capture that understanding in words, creating in the process something akin to a Zen koan, one of those apparently unanswerable questions designed deliberately to unseat our over-reliance on the intellect (Heine, 2002; Heine & Wright, 2000;

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Shibayama, 1974). In the circumstances this seems entirely appropriate, and has echoes in a comment made by Watts:

> It is not quite that the world is impermanent, but rather that the more one grasps at the world the more it changes. Reality in itself is neither permanent nor impermanent; it cannot be categorised. But when one tries to hold onto it change is everywhere apparent, since, like one's own shadow, the faster one pursues it, the faster it flees. (Watts, 1962: 66–67)

It would seem, then, that a blank sheet of paper or a piece of undyed silk might be more illuminating than words. But it is fortunate that the situation is not so desperate. As Grigg (1994) notes, one of the paradoxes of Taoism is that we only know of it at all because of words. Words, in this sense, are unavoidable and although certainly not entirely up to the job, they remain the primary tool of communication. Watts (1962) goes further and argues that the apparent inscrutability of Taoism is often overstated, that devotees:

> . . . neglect to tell the scientific enquirer many things that are still well within the possibilities of human speech and intellectual understanding. (Watts, 1962: 13)

More to the point, while direct experience forms the heart of Taoism, words are nevertheless one of the means of drawing people into that experience.

Language and fluidity

The language of Taoism is ancient Chinese, which presents some problems for westerners.[7] Those writers and scholars who qualify as *bona fide* experts nearly always remark that Chinese is much more ambiguous than western languages, especially when written (e.g. Grigg, 1994; Watts, 1962, 1998). Such ambiguity is capable of conveying multiple and sometimes contradictory ideas simultaneously in a way that western languages typically do not (see, for example, Pound, 1936). This requires levels of interpretation beyond those found when translating western languages from one to another (Le Guin, 1997), thus validating and reinforcing the suspicions of language already noted. Unlike western languages ancient Chinese is a language of verbs not nouns. Moreover, there are no definite or indefinite articles, no active or passive voice, and no singular or plural, and nearly 'every word can be used as any part of speech' (Pound, 1936; Wing, 1997). Nouns are understood in terms of what they *do*, or what is *done* to or with them. Thus the language itself codes a Weltanschauung that is primarily process not object based, which is to say a world understood in terms of *change* and interrelationship rather than stasis and isolation. Thus a table, for example, is an object that is used as a table not necessarily a separable category of distinct objects. By contrast western languages are principally noun based, in which nouns are accorded primacy and seen as fundamental, independent and largely static. Although we can perfectly well understand the principle that all objects change over time, nevertheless western languages have a tendency to reinforce stasis and separation as the background against which change is understood; for the Chinese change *is* the background. Essentially the difference is between seeing the world as a photograph or as a movie.[8]

The point is well illustrated by an old Zen question: what happens to your fist

when you open your fingers; what happens to your lap when you stand up? (Watts, 1962). In both cases the answer is nothing. Both fist and lap, which in western language are independent objects, are, in Chinese, disguised *events*. A fist is an event denoting a particular configuration of hand and fingers; a lap is an event denoting a particular arrangement of legs and body. Opening the hand or standing up rearrange the elements into a different event. Here we might consider the question of leadership and ponder what difference it might make if we move from an object-oriented approach to one in which we conceptualize leadership as a series of events between those social objects we call people. At least we would begin to move away from object specification, with concealed prescription, into a more fluid, process-oriented *descriptive* rather than analytical mode (see, for example, Hosking, 1997; Wood, 2003); a move from measurement oriented technician towards historian, or clinician, considering relatively unique events which *may* or *may not* be exemplars of more general patterns. The point is that we may find that some of our conceptual knots become easier if we accept at the outset that some of what we call leadership may actually be unique to a particular set of circumstances and events rather than something that may be generalized unproblematically to the world at large.

It is clear that a language that codes process and interrelation so fundamentally in this way is likely to create at the outset a predisposition to see relationship rather than separation, and change rather than stasis. This, then, also creates a predisposition to see the world much more in terms of fluid boundaries, both between natural phenomena and between people and their worlds. In this sense Chinese is a more ecologically oriented language than western languages. Of course this should not be overstated. It is also clear that the Chinese are as capable of setting up and maintaining rigid structures of thought, conduct and governance as we are in the west (Cotterell, 1995; Roberts, 1999). Nevertheless, even in the native rationalist traditions of China, such as Confucianism and especially Legalism, boundary fluidity is evident in the way that poetry, painting and calligraphy, for example, are regarded as legitimate forms of expression in, say, politics and science, in a way that seems startling to western observers.

Such permeability between boundaries challenges and reduces the objectivism of the subject-object dichotomy that is so fundamental to western science. This is not to suggest, however, that western science is wrong in some sense, and that the fluidity of Chinese indicates something more 'right'. But insofar as thought is driven by or constrained by language (perhaps a moot point) these different language structures suggest different structures or processes of thought. Whereas western languages tend to reinforce the idea of subjects viewing objects, Chinese linguistic forms tend to encourage the idea of inclusiveness; not subjects observing objects, but participants in a mutual ongoing process.

The linearity of western languages also tends to reinforce the assumption that because the objects of enquiry are somehow separable from the processes of observation, things can be known about the object in an objective manner that allows constructions of correctness and incorrectness of knowledge. The less linear and more process-oriented structures of Chinese, certainly as deployed in Taoism, reduces these assumptions to the point where it is simply accepted that some things cannot be known, some things are not worth knowing, and too often that we may be asking the wrong questions, confronting us with the 'utter uselessness of knowing the right

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answer to the wrong question' (Le Guin, 1969: 106). Since the observer and the observed are part of the same stream of experience, there are aspects of that stream that are simply unknowable – a finger tip cannot feel itself; an eye cannot observe itself (Wittgenstein, 1958). Nevertheless, the seeing and the touching can be known.

Theological matters

Differences in cultural background are important. *All* thought, even when fundamentally atheist, is inescapably located within and derived from a cultural context, including theological assumptions about the nature of the universe and our relation to it. For the west, central to these assumptions is the notion of a Creator God and the idea of real transcendental beings who are more powerful than we are, and who are basically in charge. This inevitably suggests the naturalness of hierarchy in social, political and intellectual matters, which historically took the form of the Great Chain of Being (Wooton, 1986). In turn this suggests and emphasizes separation and difference,[9] especially between leaders and followers. David Wooton, in his examination of divine right and democracy in 17th century England, makes several important points about this; of the Great Chain of Being he says:

> According to this theory the universe consisted of a series of hierarchies. In heaven there was God and below him a descending series of angelic beings. . . . In the animal kingdom the king of beasts, the lion, stood atop a descending series of beasts. In the political order the king ruled over a descending series of authorities reaching down to village constables and church wardens. . . . Everywhere, order was associated with hierarchy, and each ordered system was comparable so that a network of correspondences could be drawn, establishing a more than metaphorical link between God, the sun, the king, the head and the lion. (Wooton, 1986: 28)

Elsewhere he makes the following point:

> When questions of order arose, people in seventeenth-century England immediately thought in Biblical terms. Political authority and private property, they were told from the pulpits, had been established as a result of the Fall. Because men were sinful order had to be imposed upon them, and all authority must be accepted as divinely ordained. (Wooton, 1986: 27)

Although drawn from a 17th century context, these sentiments still have some sway over our thinking. In the supposed hierarchy of knowledge, for example, scientific knowledge is taken to be somehow superior to say, poetry, as a means of representing and understanding the universe. Furthermore, the encouragement of notions of separation and differential worth, particularly in Christian theology, underpins a tendency to view the universe as an object which we can operate on *as if we were not a part of it*; that we are, in Biblical terms, given (permission to have) dominion over the beasts of the fields (Gen. 1:26, 1:28). Yet hierarchy is primarily a theological concept acting as a constraining but relatively untested assumption, evident in the widespread (but uncritical) claim that 'someone must be in charge', otherwise called the inevitability thesis (Prince, 1988).

This, of course, should not be overstated when considering Chinese thought as a

contrast. The Chinese have their gods too, many of them, and also a history of hierarchical (and often quite brutal) structures of their own. Like all cultures throughout history they have been quite as capable of exploitation and separation as the west (Cotterell, 1995; Roberts, 1999). So it is important to emphasize that Taoism is, after all, only *one* of the strands of Chinese thought. However, although the Chinese have whole pantheons of gods, their attitude towards them is much less deferential than in the west. The gods may be *revered*, respected, avoided or ignored, but they are not *worshipped*, and their 'doings' are not considered as adequate models for human conduct. And although the Chinese have an 'Emperor of the Gods' (Shang Ti, or Lord on High), they do not have a creator god in the western sense (Walters, 1995).

Taoism, although it acquired a complex pantheon of gods in its later developments, in its pure form has no gods at all; they are simply not necessary. The same is also true of the other great Chinese tradition, Confucianism. Furthermore, those gods that are recognized tend, on the whole, to be simple personifications of natural processes or abstract principles (Walters, 1995). Thus there is a sense in which the Chinese locate themselves pragmatically in a universe of which they are fully a part. Although, like naughty children, the gods may make life difficult from time to time, they are not in charge. They are part of the same totality of which we too are a part – not separable in any meaningful sense. Not subject and object, but life embedded in a natural order. Some people have seen in this as an example of pantheism, but that is to miss the point.[10] The notion of the totality is not a deity. It is, indeed, unknowable in an intellectual sense. It is, simply, the Tao; the Way.

The most important consequence of these differences in linguistic and cultural approaches is that while the west tends to focus on the principle of control, which is a natural consequence of the subject-object dichotomy, Chinese thought in general, but Taoism in particular, tends more towards the idea of integration and co-ordination with, and in, an inclusive frame of reference that is simply called the Tao, because there is no other word for it. Part of this is the simple acknowledgement that power is asymmetrically distributed – not that someone must be in charge, but simply that some people have more power than others.

On knowledge and knowing

Taoist practice aims to make manifest in consciousness the nature of reality stripped of intellectual baggage. Lao Tsu says, 'Give up learning and put an end to all your troubles' (adapted from Feng & English, 1972: 20). This seems a startling statement for western intellectuals. At the risk of parody, western thought seeks in the main to capture reality within its own intellectual frameworks, forever cataloguing and categorizing phenomena, and thus increasing the baggage which Taoism seeks to discard. The belief (or hope) is that once such frameworks are generally agreed, we can then refine them until we arrive at the (or a) 'right' answer. Furthermore, these frameworks are frequently more than simple description, often embodying covert and ideological prescription, and characterized by the express ambition to achieve 'prediction and control' (see, for example, Kuhn, 1970; Quine, 1995). These are then offered outwards as a generalized set of principles applicable to all circumstances, in effect describing (and constraining) people's experiences, observed from without, and then offering them back to those same people, but in its own terms. From a Taoist perspec-

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tive this is a peculiar undertaking, no less strange than telling the clouds and rain how to behave. Why not let people do their own experiencing? Thus Taoist practice encourages individuals' own awareness of their experiences in such a way that understanding is direct, grounded and existential (Heine, 2002; Shibayama, 1974; Watts, 2000).

The conceptual tangles and contradictions in leadership that seem to be an inevitable part of the models derived from the empirical and quasi-empirical methods of the western tradition often cause more confusion than clarity when people try to apply them (Bass, 1981; Grint, 2000; Kelvin, 1970; Stogdill, 1974). In contrast an approach derived from the theoretical naivete (but conceptual sophistication) of Taoism generates powerful insights that are often difficult to express in words. Part of the key here, perhaps, is to consider leadership *not* as a set of intellectual principles, but much more as a set of experientially located and responsive relational skills-in-process (Brown & Hosking, 1984; Hosking, 1997; Hosking & Morley, 1985; Wood, 2003).

This is not to decry what I am calling the western tradition, merely to note that our commitment to building consistent intellectual structures at the expense of direct experience often presents us with intractable tangles, paradoxes and contradictions which cannot always be resolved using methods that created the tangles in the first place. The fundamental issue was rather well summarized by Bateson:

> The division of the universe into parts and wholes is convenient and may be necessary; but no necessity determines how it shall be done. (Bateson, 1979: 47)

In some areas of enquiry, however, and leadership certainly seems to be one of these, there seems to be a stubborn adherence to an old-fashioned objectivism, particularly in the persistence of the subject–object dichotomy. This inevitably excludes the felt and experienced realities of power, influence and involvement in the leadership relation, and this has generated some of the more intractable problems we face when studying leadership. If our models are to have any value they *must* speak to and from experience, even if this seems messy and inchoate at times. Unfortunately, many of the models from the formal study of leadership seem not to reflect 'reality' so much as force it onto the Procrustean Bed of theoretical, methodological and often simply political convenience.

Some notes on leadership

A principal example of this is that even despite developments in theory, in practice the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' are persistently discussed as if they were simply functions of the individual whom we call a leader and *his or her position within a hierarchical structure.* This is clearly because most studies of 'leadership' concern themselves with organizational contexts and the undeniable fact that for the most part these are hierarchically ordered. But there is a subtext here, a set of implicit assumptions that are seldom articulated. Put bluntly, it is the view that the only 'leaders' of importance are those appointed to position; that such people are essential to preserve order (or avoid disorder); that they are aligned with what are called 'organizational goals'; and that it is their job to align everyone else with these goals, even if they are

morally questionable.[11] In this view the key point of leadership is to get everyone else (the non-leaders) to do what the 'leader' wants. That is to say command and control.

This practically divorces 'leaders' and 'leadership' from all context, especially that part of the context we call 'followers' who are thus expected to be relatively passive tools in the process – human resources, in the same way that computers are physical resources (Prince, 1988, 1998a). So, for example, although the distinction between appointment to position (being in charge, or headship) and leadership (or emergent leadership) was identified early in the history of leadership studies (e.g. Cartwright & Zander, 1953, 1968; Gibb, 1969; Hollander, 1964), many theorists and practitioners still treat labels of position such as 'manager' as if they were synonyms for 'leader' (see, for example, Beck & Yeager, 1994; Broussine et al., 2002; Graumann and Moscovici, 1986; Hunt, 1991; Northouse, 1997; Sweeting & Ball, 2002; Syrett & Hogg, 1992; Yetton, 1984; Zaleznik, 1989). This conflates position and process conceptually in a very unhelpful way.

The frequent attempt to codify leadership into sets of formalized general principles, rules and procedures, is, in a sense, a form of reverse engineering; observing the object called leadership, disassembling it into its component parts, and then attempting to assemble a simulacrum. But in practice these attempts create piles of unrelated data and observations with no genuine theoretical underpinnings (Bass, 1981; Cartwright & Zander, 1953, 1968; Grint, 1997, 2000; Prince, 1998a; Quinn, 1984; Stogdill, 1974). Meanwhile the prescriptions and rules pile up, become extremely complex to apply when contextual factors are taken into account, and in the end become self-subverting and wasteful as they become an end in themselves, diverting attention and energy away from the immediacy of the here and now. Instead of being concerned with what needs to be done in any particular and fluid set of circumstances, attention is diverted to how they allegedly *should* be done according to some model or other. And where there is an abundance of rules, there is a need for an abundance of commentary and explanatory material to help us understand them. But such 'help' is often an enormous impediment. Rule systems create their own contradictions, and it can take time and a great deal of human ingenuity to untangle them, even when we have created them ourselves. This in turn renders spontaneity impossible, and ultimately subverts that creativity that is a necessary part of *lived* experience. Sometimes it is better to make judgements without the aid of rules and just respond to the circumstances:

> The more laws and restrictions there are,
> The poorer people become.
> The sharper men's weapons,
> The more trouble in the land.
> The more ingenious and clever men are,
> The more strange things happen.
> The more rules and regulations,
> The more thieves and robbers.

<div align="right">(Adapted from Feng & English, 1972, ch. 57)</div>

One unfortunate consequence of the exclusive focus on 'leaders' is that important considerations of process, specifically cognitive, social and political process,

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between those labelled as leaders and those labelled followers are practically ignored (Calas & Smircich, 1997; Gemmill & Oakley, 1997; Hosking, 1997; Hosking & Morley, 1991; Prince, 1998a). In other words how people think, react and feel to what the 'leader' is up to is left out; it is as if the entire field of physical and social inter-relationships has been erased, or worse subordinated, to that single individual we label 'the leader' – the person in charge. Thus, the 'leader' stands supreme, isolated and naked in the social field, the only point of any interest. This, however, is to overlook large areas of work in leadership process. It overlooks, for example, the insight that leadership may be distributed throughout the entire membership of a group, rather than necessarily being focussed on a single individual (Bales, 1952, 1953, 1956, 1958, 1965; Bass, 1949; Belbin, 1981; Brown & Hosking, 1984; Cartwright & Zander, 1953, 1968; Gibb, 1958, 1969). It also ignores the importance of the attributional processes that 'followers' typically display (e.g. Calder, 1977; Hollander, 1964; Hollander & Julian, 1970, 1978; Hollander & Webb, 1955; Prince, 1998b). Instead the followers become, as it were, simply passive objects in an environment in which only the 'leader' is a subject. Yet, when followership rather than leadership is examined, it becomes clear that followership is an active outcome of *choice*, that followers choose to follow, rather than a simple given of a leader's position (Hollander, 1964; Hollander & Julian, 1970, 1978; Hollander & Webb, 1955; Prince, 1988, 1998b). Followers are an *active* part of the overall field or social system, and the leader, however identified, is simply just another part.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, the conflation of 'leader' with any of the available position labels, makes the definition of 'leadership' and 'leader' completely superfluous – all one needs is a specification of position within a hierarchy, and all else follows. Except of course that it doesn't, because we should still have to explain why some leaders by such a definition come to be regarded as fools, idiots, incompetents and charlatans.

It is important to note that even when the distinction between position and process is recognized, and some attempt made to incorporate it, because the very idea of leadership seems to be inherently conflicted muddle and confusion seem inevitable. Taoism cuts the Gordian Knot by ignoring the distinction and simply acknowledging disparities and asymmetries in power, thus refocusing the issue on the *wise* use of power. Thus, from the *Tao Te Ching* we read:

> Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of Tao,
> Counsel him [or her] not to use force to conquer the universe
> For this would only cause resistance.
> Thorn bushes spring up wherever an army has passed.
> Lean years follow in the wake of a great war.
> Just do what needs to be done.
> Never take advantage of power.
> Achieve results,
> But never glory in them.
> Achieve results,
> But never boast.
> Achieve results,
> But never be proud.

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> Achieve results,
> Because this is the natural way.
> Achieve results,
> But not through violence.
> Force is followed by loss of strength.
> This is not the way of Tao.
> That which goes against the Tao comes to an early end.
>
> (Feng & English, 1972: 30)

Flexibility, awareness and connectedness are the key words here, not crude rules of conduct.

> When the country is ruled with a light hand
> The people are simple.
> When the country is ruled with severity,
> The people are cunning.
> Happiness is rooted in misery.
> Misery lurks beneath happiness.
>
> (Adapted from Feng & English, 1973: ch. 58)

Non-doing doing

Taoism advocates several principles of practice, of which there are too many to examine here. Nevertheless there are four which deserve some mention: *Wu-wei*, or non-doing; *Wu-shin*, or being unadorned and natural; *Wu-nien*, or no thought; and *Wu-hsin*, or no mind (Grigg, 1994). Each of these arise from, and in turn generate, the ability to meet the world without preconceptions. For questions of leadership these point to two things: first, the principle of meeting the world without preconceptions, which has already been mentioned; second, the important point that to achieve things it is not always necessary, or even desirable, to try and control events directly:

> The Tao abides in non-action,
> Yet nothing is left undone.
> If kings and lords observed this,
> The ten thousand things would develop naturally.
> If they still desired to act,
> They would return to the simplicity of formless substance.
> Without form there is no desire.
> Without desire there is tranquillity.
> And in this way all things would be at peace.
>
> (Adapted from Feng & English, 1972: 37)

Wu-wei is the most important of the principles, generally translated as non-action or non-doing. It is sometimes thought of as a form of *laissez-faire* indolence in the west, but this is mistaken; *wu-wei* is not about *inaction* but action *without effort*, an idea perhaps immediately at odds with the hair shirtism of the Protestant work ethic. But, when one is fully connected with the ebb and flow of what is happening in the environment, then action can become spontaneously appropriate to the prevailing

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circumstances. This spontaneity, which Taoists call *tsu-jan* (spontaneous arising or self so-ness), is the goal of Taoist practice. But it requires deep understanding, knowledge of and openness to change as it *actually* occurs, not as we think it *ought* to occur, overcoming those intellectual structures that function, as it were, as phantoms that we have created for ourselves.

These apparently difficult concepts are actually familiar to anyone who has learned to ride a bicycle, drive a car, or swim. If we attempt to learn how to ride a bicycle by reading books we will *never* learn – there simply is no substitute for getting on a bike, falling off a few times, and trying again. In other words being *in the moment.* Eventually we will get the hang of it, and the less we *try* the better we become (Shaw, 1988). But if we try to explain *how* to another person, our tongues become tied in a profound inarticulacy. To illustrate the point we may return to the comments of Keith Grint quoted earlier: 'before I began to study leadership in a serious manner, my knowledge of it was complete' (Grint, 2000: 1). There is an important sense, also, in which the concluding comments of that passage also find a coherence in this context: 'Despite all my best efforts . . . the results refused to regurgitate any significant pattern except one banal truism: successful leaders are successful' (Grint, 2000: 1). We may suggest that successful leaders are successful because they are spontaneously attuned to the nuances of local circumstances, not burdened by concerns about what is or is not the right 'rule' to apply.

Taken together these principles point to the important benefits of *non-interference* as an essential quality of leadership. Leadership does not *always* require active direction of people, but may sometimes best be accomplished by leaving people to get on with it:

> In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
> In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.
> Less and less is done
> Until non-action is achieved.
> When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
> The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
> It cannot be ruled by interfering.
>
> (Feng & English, 1972: 48)

In terms of leadership this becomes:

> True leaders are hardly known to their followers.
> Next best are leaders who are loved.
> Next those who are feared.
> And the worst are those they despise.
> To give no trust
> Is to get no trust.
> When the work is done well,
> The people say:
> 'We did it ourselves'.
>
> (Adapted from Le Guin, 1997: 17)

This same passage has been rendered in another translation with a different emphasis:

There are four types of leaders:
The best leader is indistinguishable
from the will of those who selected her.
The next best leader enjoys the love
and praise of the people.
The poor leader rules through coercion and fear.
And the worst leader is a tyrant despised
by the multitudes who are victims of his power.
What a world of difference among these leaders!
In the last two types, what is done
is without sincerity or trust – only coercion.
In the second type, there is harmony
between the leader and the people.
In the first type, whatever is done happens
so naturally that no-one presumes to take the credit!

(Dale, 2002: 35)

An interesting example of this in practice, which seems to have dropped out of the leadership literature, is to be found in Whyte's classic study of street corner society (Whyte, 1943, 1952).[12]

Challenging convention

Taoism lays a strong emphasis on peaceful and harmonious social relations devoid of those kinds of pointless and damaging power games so evident in political circles. But the focus of attention is the *experienced* life, and in the crudest sense the focus is on the *ordinary* aspects of living without any regard whatsoever for how we label the experience, or, indeed, for whether we use or even understand the current faddish labels for describing it (see Grigg, 1994). Hence it constantly challenges the conventional. But the importance of this is not to overturn convention. Rather it is that while we can perfectly well continue to use our conventional modes of thought, and indeed must do so if we are to communicate with one another, we will fall into 'error' if we convince ourselves that they are somehow 'the *truth*'. But 'error' here does not have the ethical implication that it does for us in the west; it simply means creating unnecessary difficulties for ourselves and others. In some ways this challenge to convention is an appeal to that scepticism which itself is at the heart of western science; a willingness to question everything (see, for example, Nagel, 1979), and an openness to what is *there* is exemplified in the western tradition by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

To transcend the conventional is to see it for what it is, putting ourselves in a position to act spontaneously and creatively in accord with the currents of life that surround us. In the process, we liberate ourselves from artificial constraints, see possibilities that those constraints blind us to, learn what can be done, and when is the best time to act.

One of the most important consequences of this, apart from the refocusing of attention back onto the ordinary, is that Taoism embraces and encourages, even if it doesn't always emphasize, irreverent humour and playfulness (see, for example, Feng & English, 1974; Palmer & Breuilly, 1996; Wong, 2001), taking great delight

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in paradox and contradiction and standing in stark contrast to the po-faced serious-ness of most of our attempts to understand humanity. When reading Taoist texts one is as likely to encounter a joke as a considered commentary (see, for example, Ming-Dao, 1992; Palmer & Breuilly, 1996), a feature that is often infuriating to western scholars. But the jokes are never flippant. Their importance follows both from the realization that what is conventional should not be taken too seriously, but also from the realization that humour itself can generate insight and thus, in Taoist terms, that 'awakening', that can liberate us from the conventional. In some ways this recapitu-lates one of George Orwell's aphorisms that every joke is a small revolution. But, again, the point is not to *overturn* the conventional:

> To be free from convention is not to spurn it but not to be deceived by it. It is to be able to use it as an instrument rather than be used by it. (Watts, 1962: 31)

This suggests that a willingness to step outside the rules may be an important feature of leadership. It is interesting to note in this context that many of the individuals recognized as 'great' leaders in military history were also known to be incorrigibly eccentric (for some examples see Cronin, 1971; D'Este, 1996; Dixon, 1979; Fraser, 1981; Keegan, 1987; Van Der Vat, 1991).

The end

Taoism has a dispassionate compassion for the human race, especially in relation to its attempts to free itself. At its heart is a deep and genuine humanism that puts faith and simple trust in human beings. From this, it follows that wherever possible Taoists are apt to take the view that it is best to leave well alone – don't interfere and try to control because it will, in the end, work out as it should. This contrasts sharply with the western emphasis on hierarchy and control, and the often unspoken assumption that everything can be understood, written down and then controlled to the minutest degree. Yet our own history demonstrates starkly the folly of this thinking. Tyrants are sooner or later all deposed. The various Reichs and empires of the world eventu-ally fade away, some to be forgotten completely, others to be remembered only in that peculiar state of amnesia that remembers all the wrong lessons, and overlooks what was obvious all along – ultimate control is impossible. Like all natural phenom-ena, human social institutions, such as governments and organisations, ebb and flow, are born and die. The Eternal Reich is a fool's dream. And yet we often talk about leadership in precisely those terms which suggest that ultimate control is possible, that only wicked empires fall. As a consequence many of our theories of leadership seem harsh and unsympathetic to those who are not among those we label leaders.

Taoism cannot square the circle of prediction and control, but it does offer some telling insights from the dawn of human thought. It reminds us of the ways in which our own intellectualizing can blind us to what seems obvious once we look closer. It also reminds us that adaptation to circumstances is better than simply pushing ahead aggressively whatever the situation; that gentleness can often achieve much more than force; that leading is not always about directing others, but is often about guidance and reflection, and often about leaving well alone. Certainly Taoism high-lights the importance of understanding others – the importance of attending to what is there with presence and, it must be said, with integrity.

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In general our western concepts of leadership are essentially task oriented; Taoist conceptions are process oriented. They appear, appropriately enough, as Yin and Yang to one another, and recapitulate the fundamental dichotomy between the task and social-emotional functions that has long been identified as an aspect of leadership (see, for example, Bales, 1965). There is some irony in this. Although in the west we recognize the distinction, priority is still given to task and instrumental values (Prince & Pritchett, 2003). As a consequence our primary models still present leadership as the heroic exercise of power, and in our working lives we have lived with a form of aggressive muscular management presenting (or flattering) itself as leadership for well over 20 years under that most iniquitous of slogans 'Management's right to manage' – the current version of the Divine Right of Kings. And everywhere it is beginning to fail as the principle of *hsiang-sheng* – mutual arising – begins to unfold, and reactions to global capitalism begin to crystallize.

Perhaps now is the time to reinvestigate the importance of process and bring it into the *core* of our leadership models, of gentleness and relatedness in matters of leadership, to take to heart the lessons of flowing water, to set aside some of our assumptions about leadership and hierarchy and our obsessions with generally agreed, correct and universally applicable definitions.[13] Indeed, perhaps we should set aside momentarily our cherished models and heroes of leadership altogether, and look again with fresh eyes attuned to experience, basking in the less structured but more congenial flow of existence. We need to learn to relax, to let what can't be defined hang in the air, and enjoy the paradox while we try to grasp holistically the truths that elude us. As Alan Watts put it:

> I have associated and studied with the 'objective observers' and am convinced that, for all their virtues, they invariably miss the point and eat the menu instead of the dinner. I have also been on the inside of a traditional hierarchy . . . and am equally convinced that from this position one does not know what dinner is being eaten. In such a position one becomes technically 'idiotic', which is to say, out of communication with those who do not belong to the fold. (Watts, 1962: 13)

Maybe it is time to ask ourselves if we, too, are simply eating the menu rather than the dinner.

Notes

1. While Taoism is the focus of this paper I draw from both traditions at different points. There are thus some points that need to be made clear which, because of limited space, cannot be elaborated in the body of the text. When I refer to Zen it needs to be understood that I am not referring to Zen *Buddhism*. Although it is true that in practice Zenists tend to be Buddhists, they are nevertheless drawing from two distinct traditions that first came together in China as Ch'an when Buddhism encountered and cross fertilized with Taoism around 520 CE (Grigg, 1994). The syncretic Ch'an then made its way to Japan where it once again encountered Buddhism and the native religious tradition of Shinto, and once again forged a new syncretic doctrine that became Zen Buddhism. However, in many ways the strands remain distinct. Buddhism is a religious doctrine whereas Zen, in its pure form, remains the non-religious 'way of liberation' that it derives from Taoism. Most expert commentators seem to agree that in this sense Zen is

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identical to Taoism, and I have therefore felt free to use some Zen literature to make my arguments (e.g. Grigg, 1994; Shibayama, 1974; Watts, 1972). However, because I am not an expert I would not want to press this claim too far, and attempting to justify it further here would require a much longer article.

2. It is difficult to maintain elegance and precision in discussing the differences between Eastern and Western thought. Clearly not all western thought is rationalistic, scientistic and empiricist, and nor is all eastern thought fluid, subtle and embracing. Nevertheless it is clear also that on the whole the west has relied, and continues to rely, on rationalistic frameworks of thought, whereas in the east there is a more ready acceptance of fluidity in thinking. If I sometimes appear to be setting up parodies, it is simply because I do not have the space to explain all the counterexamples and qualifications.

3. The further I got into writing this article the more I began to realize how big the subject actually is and how inadequate a single article is to the purpose. Second, and related to this point, although I have read, contemplated and tried to live my life by Taoist precepts for the whole of my adult life, I cannot claim to be an 'expert'; indeed I would be hard put to try and explain what an expert in Taoism might be. In addition to this is, of course, the obvious cultural question of how relevant an ancient Chinese tradition could be to a 21st century western context, and how far a westerner such as myself could possibly understand its precepts. I cannot answer these important questions directly. Indirectly, however, because I am partly located in more than one western culture, and because of my reading of western religious and philosophical texts, I am convinced that Taoism is one expression of a tradition whose outlines can be discerned worldwide.

4. I will leave aside the question of the various different meanings of 'rational', 'rationalistic', and 'rationalism'. For present purposes it is sufficient to leave the term relatively vague as a reference to types of thought emphasizing forms of logic and statistics or, more controversially, economics.

5. There is a danger here of overstating the case. So it is important to note that this approach is not entirely unrepresented in western thought (see, for example, Bohm, 1980; Capra, 1975, 1982; Kingsley, 1999; Morgan, 1997; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Shah, 1970, 1985). Furthermore, Taoism does not represent eastern thought as a whole. Although the original language of Taoism is Chinese, which lends a particularly fluid quality to the nuancing of observation that stands at odds with hard rationalism, China nevertheless also generated its own rationalistic traditions in the form of Confucianism, Legalism and more recently Maoism (Cotterell, 1995; Roberts, 1999).

6. To save space I have abridged most quotations from the *Tao Te Ching.*

7. Most westerners interested in Taoism, myself included, have to rely on translations, thus compounding the problems of language. Translation, of course, presents its own difficulties, and, as one of the reviewers of this article remarked, when it is considered that the texts may have been translated through multiple languages – in the case of Zen texts, for example, from Sanskrit, to Chinese, to Japanese, to English, often via German, one can appreciate how things may get muddled.

8. Thank you to Martin Wood for pointing out that both movies and photographs comprise still images of the world and thus must both be considered as partial representations. However the point remains. A Taoist would accept that any perception of the world is similarly bounded and partial, but even so the representation of movement and fluidity available in a movie captures some elements of the world not available in a still photograph.

9. I am, of course, in danger here of overstating and oversimplifying a series of extremely convoluted and sometimes violent theological disagreements. I can only plead, once again, restrictions of space, time and resources.

10. That is, the notion that god and the universe are one and the same (see Honderich, 1995).

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11. This point has been raised of who might hold the moral position for such a claim. My position is that questions of power, leadership, influence, politics and so on, are appropriately considered to have ethical aspects, even though these tend to be overlooked in our usual analyses. As to which moral framework may be used to make this judgement, that is a separate question. What I am alluding to here is the simple proposition that 'leaders', however defined, and thus organizations, may undertake actions that are contrary to the ethical values held by others, including the 'followers' or other members of the organization.

12. It has been pointed out that most of us live in a 'Germanic' command and control culture characterized by various methods of performance measurement. In such circumstances it takes little imagination to appreciate that there are incentives for people to take credit for everything, and possibly minimize other people's contributions. Thus, the best we can hope for is that people will aim at 'second best' leadership. Two points. First, this is merely to acknowledge the distorting effects that bureaucracy has on human relationships. Such systems actually have little or nothing to do with leadership at all, understood as relations between people, but are an example of the crudity of the bureaucratic approach. Second, it is no part of Taoism to advocate withdrawal and quietism. The important point is *accommodation to the circumstances as they are.* This must, of course, include reference to the political, moral and administrative circumstances within which people are operating.

13. I am, of course, well aware of current work on flattened hierarchies and leadership process (e.g. Hosking, 1997; Wood, 2003) and also of vintage studies (e.g. Bales, 1965; Hollander, 1964). However, from recent reading it is palpably clear that process models are still subordinated to formal-structurally based models of leadership (Prince, 1998).

Acknowledgements

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