

# *The Tao of Ethical Culture*

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By **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader New York Society for Ethical Culture

The *Tao Te Ching*, with Ts pronounced as Ds is loosely translated as *the book of the way* or just *The Way*. It consists of 81 short chapters, none more than a page in length and some of only a few lines. Scholars say that the whole of the *Tao* can be found in the first chapter. The Feng & English translation from the original Chinese begins this way:

“The *Tao* that can be told is not the eternal *Tao*.”

That’s somewhat abstract and seemingly impenetrable. In that respect it’s a lot like the idealism of Ethical Culture which can be stated in much the same fashion: The ideal that can be achieved is not an enduring ideal.

These are not parallel postulates. But they share a philosophic structure that’s challenging to cultural concepts, especially those of a different age and of a different people. The *Tao* challenges the outside mind. Ethical Humanism is likewise difficult to grasp from the outside. But both come alive when lived from within. The simplicity of either is revealed when you become a part of it and it a part of you.

There is a *Tao*—a capital W *Way*—to our chosen lifestance. My aim this morning is to follow that path, that way, as it leads us inside Ethical Culture.

Good morning! Are you enjoying June? This is the month, according to James Russell Lowell, of perfect days. “What is so rare as a day in June? Then, if ever, come perfect days.” Days when nature is rich and verdant, the air filled with a sense of renewal, of freshness, of newness. I hope you bring that attitude with you this morning as we take a fresh look at Ethical Culture through the lens of the *Tao*.

The *Tao*—a classic manual on the art of living—is one of the most translated works in history, some say second only to Christian scripture. There are transliterations that render the *Tao* into English painstakingly, character by character. There are also a number of interpretations done by those who don’t read or speak Chinese. These tend to be more poetic than the scholarly translations upon which they depend. Some versions attempt both philosophic faithfulness and a poetic rendering. These succeed, as you might imagine, to greater and lesser degrees.

And then there are adaptations that place the *Tao* in a specific context or stress a particular aspect of it. Like *The Tao of Leadership*, which makes sense as there’s a lot about personal responsibility and ethical stewardship in the *Tao* itself. There’s *The Tao of Physics*, which is also reasonable as the *Tao* makes much of the influence of non-action and the soft yet unrelenting power and gentle persuasion of water. There’s even *The Tao of Homer*, as in Homer Simpson.

One of my favorites is a light but serious approach, *The Tao of Pooh*. Rather than a translation or an interpretation, I think an “extracting” or an “extrapolating” would best describe what Benjamin Hoff brings out of A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*. In the forward to his “expotition”—as Pooh would say— through the *Tao*, Hoff relates the following story:

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

Some of us were discussing the Great Masters of Wisdom, and someone was saying how all of them came from the East, and I was saying that some of them didn't, but he was going on and on, just like this sentence, not paying any attention, when I decided to read a quotation of Wisdom from the West, to prove that there was more to the world than one half, and I read:

"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh," said Piglet at last, "what's the first thing you say to yourself?"

"What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting today?" said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

"It's the same thing," he said.

Hoff goes on.

"What's that?" [one of our group asked.]

"Wisdom from a Western Taoist," I said.

"It sounds like something from *Winnie-the-Pooh*," he said.

"It is," I said.

"That's not about Taoism," he said.

"Oh, yes it is," I said.

"No, it's not," he said.

"What do you think it's about?" I said.

"It's about this dumpy little bear that wanders around asking silly questions, making up songs, and going through all kinds of adventures without ever accumulating any amount of intellectual knowledge or loosing his simpleminded sort of happiness. That's what it's about," he said.

"Same thing," I said.

And there you have it; the large in the small, the small in the large; tiny fractions of tiny atoms that form a vast and expanding universe; they're the same thing. The interconnectedness of all who are; the interrelatedness of all that is; the same thing. The you in me, the me in you; the same thing.

The same thing, only different.

Sorry, I sometimes get carried away with Pooh, but I think the Ethical Manifold of Ethical Culture is in there somewhere. If it can be reasonably said that the whole of the Tao can be found in its first chapter, it's as reasonable to say that the whole of Ethical Culture can be seen in two concepts of its founder, Felix Adler: The Ethical Manifold that speaks to the oneness of all that is, and the supreme moral axiom, Act so as to elicit the best in other and thereby in thyself.

The Tao is similar to and in many ways compatible with Ethical Humanism. It carries with it a murmur of mysticism, just as Adler's philosophy was tinged with the transcendental. Yet these characteristics are secondary to the practicality of these two great teachings. They inform and help us understand life in surprisingly similar ways.

Lao Tzu speaks of the energy, the flow of life. Adler speaks of the aim, the ideal of perfected living. Two complementary emphases arrived at over two millennia apart.

Ethical Culture was founded 131 years ago. The *Tao Te Ching* has been around a bit longer, since about 600 BCE, some 2,600 years. And while its authorship is debated, it's generally attributed to Lao Tzu, the "Old Master" who was, if he was at all, an unassuming record keeper in China.

Whether or not he was an actual person is itself open to speculation. If he was he may have been a teacher of Confucius. Or the texts attributed to him may have come later in reaction to Confucianism. The history is honestly murky but whenever and wherever the *Tao* arose, it certainly gave rise to important religious concepts, like that of Zen Buddhism. The first to draw from the concepts of Taoism were the early Chinese Zen Masters.

But Taoism itself, though recognized as one of the world's important religions, has never been unified in its teachings or incorporated institutionally. In those respects it's similar in nature to the New Age, spirituality, or consciousness movements in the West and can perhaps best be viewed as a Chinese folk religion.

But while there's uncertainty in some areas, there's agreement in others. One area of universal agreement is on the *Tao's* dedication to and espousal of moral excellence. And this is where it begins to come into juncture with Ethical Culture.

My talk this morning is not intended to be an exposition on the technical philosophy of the *Tao Te Ching* or a theological treatise on any of the religions, plural, that it influenced. It's more a probing, a reconnaissance, than an expedition—or "expotition" as Pooh would say.

I'm assuming a certain vague familiarity on your part. But even if the *Tao* is completely new to you that shouldn't be too much of a handicap. Like Ethical Culture, it's available and obvious to any with an open mind.

Besides, I'm using the one, the *Tao*, to get inside the other, Ethical Culture, rather than trying to compare them in any meaningful way. So subjective are the two that there's really no common scale by which to measure them. Consequently, a reductionist approach doesn't work. So I'm looking for the junctures, the similarities, of which there are many.

Both make you think about important things and I only want to get far enough into it to make the correlation of the *Tao* to Ethical Culture, so I'll be leaving out a lot. There's 81 chapters, and I'll only cite a few.

The message of the *Tao Te Ching*, like that of Ethical Humanism, is moral in the most profound way. Unburdened by any concept of sin, Lao Tzu doesn't present evil as something to resist or to be overcome, but rather as an opaqueness, a darkness that light can't penetrate.

Without the diametric categorization of good and evil, the absence of sin gives freedom to compassion for all. The well and the wicked, the selfish and the generous, the kindly and the curmudgeonly, even the right and the wrong all are held close and dear in an empathetic embrace.

This is how Stephen Mitchell puts it in his translation of Chapter 27. The *master* he refers to is one who has mastered the *Tao*, the *Way*:

“Thus the Master is available to all people and doesn’t reject anyone. He is ready to use all situations and doesn’t waste anything. This is called embodying the light.

“What is a good man but a bad man’s teacher? What is a bad man but a good man’s job? If you don’t know this, you will get lost, no matter how intelligent you are. It is the great secret.”

“The great secret,” and the intersection with Ethical Culture. What is a good man but a bad man’s teacher? What is the aim of an Ethical Humanist if not to elicit the best in others? Even, or perhaps especially, when the best, or even the good, is not evident.

Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself. What is a bad man but a good man’s job? If you don’t grasp that, you will get lost. That is a great secret—one we should share openly with others. In order to prove that there’s more to the world than the majority opinion especially when that opinion is largely unexplained and lightly held by most.

Chapter 50 of the *Tao* addresses the concept of non-action. One version of the pivotal chapter, again Stephen Mitchell’s, says in part, “[The master] doesn’t think about his actions; they flow from the core of his being.” Ethical Culture places deed above creed. Goodness is not encapsulated in what we think but exhibited in what we do. Informed by an internalized respect for others, good deeds flow from the very core of our being, of the way we are.

The Taoian concept of non-action is not the same as in-action. Still, it is not about pro-active deeds or re-active deeds but, like in Ethical Culture, about deeds that are an expression of our being, that spring from a deeper well – from our religious center.

There’s a “just so” quality to the *Tao*, and to Taoism, that’s also present in Ethical Culture. The *Tao Te Ching* is replete with references to nature. Taoism addresses the harmonious complexity of the universe which is pretty darn close to the Ethical Manifold of Felix Adler.

The Ethical Manifold recognizes that we are at once diverse and unified; individual and collective; we are the one and we are the many—autonomous beings who are an interdependent part of our social and physical environments.

I mentioned before that there are numerous version of that all-important first chapter. Of the thirty-some I’ve collected each stresses a different aspect of the *Tao*. Here’s an opening line that came along about fifty years ago. It’s from Archie J. Bahm’s version:

“Nature can never be completely described, for such a description of Nature would have to duplicate Nature. No name can fully express what it represents.”

That’s a lyric expression of the Ethical Manifold, of the interconnectedness of all that is. It is also an expression of the limits of the philosophic theory of reductionism. Reductionism asserts that complex things can be reduced to the sum of simpler things, broken down into edible derivatives.

This limit of reductionism was employed by Thomas Nagel in his 1974 essay *What is it Like to Be a Bat?* A bat, a nocturnal flying mammal. *What is it Like to Be a Bat?*

Nagel is University Professor at New York University. He argues that consciousness has essential to it a subjective character, a “what it is like” aspect. He states that “an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to be that organism—something it is like for the organism.”

In other words, no matter how much we can break down, how much we can reduce the bat-ness of being a bat—membranous wings, sonar-like “sight,” and so on—being a bat is a subjective state and can not be reduced to an inter-species understanding. While not exactly the same, there’s more than a weak comparison to be made to the *Tao*, and to Ethical Culture, and to the experience of life itself—the awe and wonder of it all. The concept or characteristics are, if not irreducible, at the very least strenuously resistant to reductionism.

The *Tao*, Ethical Culture, Life—they are, in a deep sense, subjective experiences. There is something about being an Ethical Humanist that is subjective in character—Ethical Culture has a “what it is like” aspect to it that renders it immune to reductionist efforts.

I said earlier that Ethical Humanism is difficult to grasp. It appears, emphasis on appears, to be more than the sum of its parts. That’s difficult to grasp from the outside, from which vantage it appears abstract. But it’s surprisingly simple from the inside, where one becomes an inseparable part of it and experiences its warmth.

Likewise the *Tao*, which is simple without being simplistic. It says, in essence, that we do not need magnificent reminders that we are alive. We do not need grandeur to confirm that we are a part of something grand. Just the simplest, thing, just the idea that there is a creature like me who can contemplate what it is like to be a creature like me ... the entire of it all is right there.

Not in my being—not in my existence, not in the fact that there is a creature like me, though that’s mystifying enough—but in my contemplation of my being, in the consciousness that I am.

And not only that I am as I am. But that I once was something else, a different creature perhaps more akin to a bat, certainly to a fish. And that one day creatures like me will again be something different, perhaps more akin to or a fuller realization of humanity’s repeated concepts of a supreme or ideal being.

That describes Ethical Culture and Felix Adler’s successful effort to reconstruct the spiritual ideal, to take all that had gone before and from it distill a purer expression of humanity’s longing for betterment—for an ideal or supreme way of being. Our concept of that, our ideal of perfected living, advances as we advance. It was once something else, and will one day be different still from that which it is today.

We change, and so do our ideals. We have changed and we will continue to do so. The underlying understanding of the *Tao* is that the only universal constant is change. Ethical Humanism recognizes that with no constant other than change, we must turn to it, to change, for moral guidance. And so, like Lao Tzu, we root our ethics in human need and interest as tested by experience.

Each of the many translations, interpretations, and adaptations of the *Tao Te Ching* reveals something new, some fresh nuance. And each reflects more than the original intent of the *Tao*, whatever that may have been. They are, like the reconstructionist nature of Ethical Culture, mirrors reflecting our own changing attitudes, society, and thinking.

There’s a prismatic aspect to the *Tao* that allows you to see what you already know, but to see it differently. It provides a fresh view of the familiar and allows you to see around the corners of prejudice, to peer over the obstacles of your own solidified thinking.

Both the *Tao* and Ethical Humanism are kaleidoscopic in that if you turn them only slightly, if you alter your perspective only a bit, everything about them shifts and an entire new arrangement, a new spectrum of color and texture presents itself. That's exciting and appealing – not just to us but to millions who think like us.

Just a couple of months ago the country-slash-folk singer Mary Chapin Carpenter performed in our auditorium at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Between songs, she recalled a bumper sticker she'd seen recently that said simply, "Everything's Connected." That obviously struck her and it struck me, too. "How Ethical Culture is that?" I thought.

And then, because it was on my mind, I looked through the prism of the *Tao* and I saw this dumpy little bear wandering around pasting pithy sayings on automobiles. And I wondered what other wisdom Pooh might have to stick on bumpers.

He might say, as he has, "Same thing." Or, he might lift from the late and lamented Kurt Vonnegut and say, "So it goes." There might be just a single word on Pooh's bumper sticker, "*Tao*." Or there might be two, "Ethical Culture." These all hint at the message of the *Tao*, but they only hint.

The *Tao* is beyond the power of words to define. The *Tao* that can be told is not the eternal *Tao*. The name, Ethical Culture, does not fully express what Ethical Culture represents. Ethical Culture can never be completely described, for such a description of Ethical Culture (large E and C) would have to duplicate an ethical culture (small e and c).

Creating that description—working toward a global culture of ethics that is so vital to us, to our environment, to our existence—is the aim of Ethical Culture and the work of Ethical Culturists.

The aim and the work. Same thing.

My relationship with you, your relationship with all that is. Same thing.

The *Tao* does speak to us across the ages. It does have something, something important and valuable to offer to the modern world. It speaks of a wholeness and it offers a oneness, of an attitude of wholeness and a sense of oneness through which peace emerges—personal serenity, social calm, and perhaps one day, true global peace.

I want to close with a conversation between Felix Adler and his two immediate successors, John Lovejoy Elliott, and Algernon Black. It was inspired by Benjamin Hoff, the afore-quoted author of *The Tao of Pooh*. I say *inspired by* as this conversation took place only in my own imagination. It never really happened. But it could have.

"What do you think Ethical Culture's all about?" Felix asked.

Elliott and Black pondered that a moment and Algernon spoke slowly but surely, as was his way, "It's about how I treat John," he said.

John Lovejoy Elliott harrumphed a bit, as was his way, and said, "No it's not. It's about social justice, the general availability of education, and the elimination of poverty. It's about equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in a free society."

Warming to his task, he went on, "It's about personal development, self actualization, and the realization of our full, entire being. It's about world peace!"

Felix looked from one to the other and said, "Same thing."

And so it goes.

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2 West 64<sup>th</sup> Street • New York, New York 10023  
212.874.5210 • [www.NYSEC.org](http://www.NYSEC.org)