

Fall 2002

# Anarchic Philosophy: East and West

Jessica Delfert  
*Lake Forest College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege\\_writing\\_contest](https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Delfert, Jessica, "Anarchic Philosophy: East and West" (2002). *All-College Writing Contest*.  
[https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege\\_writing\\_contest/16](https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest/16)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Lake Forest College Publications. It has been accepted for inclusion in All-College Writing Contest by an authorized administrator of Lake Forest College Publications. For more information, please contact [levinson@lakeforest.edu](mailto:levinson@lakeforest.edu).

## **Lake Forest Paper Winner 2003**

### **Jessica Delfert**

Words from Jessica:

This paper was written for Professor Zhu's Asian Thought class, a course I took to complete my Philosophy minor. The assignment required me to analyze political thought in the writings of Chuang-Tzu and also provided an opportunity to learn more about Western anarchic philosophy. Anarchist thought has always interested me, but until this paper I had not done any in-depth research on the topic. I also wanted to dispel the myth that anarchy is synonymous with "mere chaos" by discussing its intricate philosophical framework. Approaching this task from two widely differing, yet sometimes surprisingly similar, perspectives made the process even more exciting.

I greatly enjoy philosophy but am actually a math major and plan to begin graduate school next year. I hope to obtain my Ph.D., become a professor, and write for mathematical journals as well as other publications. Mathematics, like philosophy, is full of deep and complex ideas. One must write clearly and concisely when conveying these ideas to colleagues as well as to the general public. Eventually, I would like to follow in the footsteps of excellent and enthusiastic writers like Douglas Hofstadter, Ivars Peterson, and Carl Sagan, who all express beautiful mathematical, scientific, and philosophical ideas in a manner that anyone can understand and enjoy. It is my hope that this paper will present views you may never have considered and make you think about a frequently heard term in an entirely new way.

### **Anarchic Philosophy: East and West**

To most people today, the word "anarchy" conjures up images of disorder, violence, and danger. In fact, its perceived connotation is quite similar to that of "chaos." Anarchic philosophy is a serious category of political philosophy, however, and one that actually embraces a very generous and optimistic view of human nature. A Taoist justification for anarchy is presented in *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, the collected writing of this influential Taoist author. Many of his ideas are similar to those of seminal Western anarchists and anarchist philosophers such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Noam Chomsky. Both Eastern and Western anarchic thought assumes a sort of natural order or law, which is violated by bureaucratic institutions and coercive governmental policies. The existence of this inherent order allows for social harmony when the oppression of the government is lifted. Anarchists believe that people are self-sufficient and, in the Western case, rational enough to interact peaceably without imposed judicial restraints or stultifying bureaucratic decision-making. They maintain that no government may justifiably coerce its citizens into any action. Chuang Tzu especially takes issue with the normative paradigm underlying any system of law. One of his primary tenets is that distinctions do not truly exist-to be normative is to go against the Tao. While the anarchic philosophies of Chuang Tzu and Western philosophers differ in several important ways, they also present many similar attitudes about human nature and governmental authority.

In *Anarchism*, a collection of essays by various political philosophers, John P. Clark defines the following as criteria that a political theory must contain in order to be

called "anarchism":

(1) a view of an ideal, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society; (2) a criticism of existing society...based on this antiauthoritarian ideal; (3) a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress toward the ideal; and (4) a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives (13).

Clark claims that any implementable anarchic philosophy must contain all of these ingredients. In describing a society made up of people who are following the Way, Chuang Tzu fulfills the first and third of the criteria. He also analyzes the state of Chinese government at his time by critiquing its respected political philosophies. The fourth criterion is met implicitly, perhaps even naively to a Western eye. Chuang Tzu does not lay out a step-by-step plan that must be implemented to achieve the Taoist societal ideal; rather, he gives a few brief guides that encapsulate the application of the Tao in the social realm.

Western anarchic philosophy, on the other hand, is marked by its thorough attention to matters of labor and the economy. For example, Noam Chomsky states, "The consistent anarchist...will not only oppose alienated and specialized labor and look forward to the appropriation of capital by the whole body of workers, but he will also insist that this appropriation be direct" (xv). In a labor-based society, the appropriation of capital by the common labor force is an important step in the dismantling of authoritarian domination. For this reason, Western anarchists analyze economic structures and their ramifications in great detail.

Despite its detailed discussion about labor and economics, however, Western anarchist philosophy is based on deeper ideas of natural order and the possibility of social harmony. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a prominent nineteenth century anarchist, "was the first to proclaim that anarchism is not disorder but order, is the natural order in contrast to artificial order imposed from above, is true unity as against false unity brought about by constraint" (Guerin, 42). Anarchic philosophers deny that the absence of laws and governmental structures will bring about chaos and injury. Rather, they believe that certain inherent characteristics of people and their societies will allow them to interact freely and peacefully. In other words, the laws that govern plants, animals, and natural forces can also extend to cover humans. The imposition of laws by a governmental authority figure will necessarily infringe upon these natural and hence more justifiable laws. Therefore, "only a society without government could restore the natural order and recreate social harmony" (Guerin, 12).

Although the anarchist view of human nature is essentially optimistic, most Western anarchists allow that people often have a tendency to seek and maintain power. In that case, "The problem for anarchists is to create the social conditions under which the libertarian rather than the authoritarian...capacities of people are realized" (Clark, 16). Western anarchists believe that authoritarian social structures lead to authoritarian and coercive behavior in their societies' members, while the libertarian ideals of anarchism can also be assimilated into the thought and conduct of the emancipated individual. As such, it is possible to maintain harmony and peace in a community that runs according to natural rather than artificial laws.

Taoism is also rooted in the concept of natural order, of the universe operating according to the Tao. Chuang Tzu writes, "To try to govern the world [by devising one's own principles and regulations] is like trying to drill through a river" (93). In

other words, it is impossible. He implies that the mere idea of government policy is pointless and perhaps even dangerous. The Tao is a river flowing throughout the universe, a natural wisdom informing all actions. It does not require the labor of the human mind. A related Taoist idea is that of fate--"In the world, there are two great decrees: one is fate and the other is duty" (Chuang Tzu, 59). Both fate and duty imply acting in accordance with natural law, or the Tao. Fate describes all those things over which humans have no control: "there are some things which man can do nothing about-all are a matter of the nature of creatures" (Chuang Tzu, 80). Essentially, fate is just another way of describing the workings of natural law.

This natural law, since it operates through the entire universe, can logically be applied specifically to the area of human relationships. Chuang Tzu tells his idealized ruler to "follow along with things the way they are...then the world will be governed" (94). Like the Western anarchists, Chuang Tzu does not see the necessity for government intervention in people's affairs. Even though Chuang Tzu's remarks are made in the context of a sovereign-governed society, the implied result is the same as the Western anarchists' ideal world-an absence of authoritarian rule and bureaucratic stultification.

Chuang Tzu criticizes these attributes of his own society. A character in one of his stories says, "[Emperor] Yao has already tattooed you with benevolence and righteousness and cut off your nose with right and wrong" (89). These actions are punishments, injuries to the "you" who believes in the value of these qualities and distinctions. The Confucians, for example, stress the importance of benevolence and kindness toward one's fellow citizens. However, when one follows the Tao, one does not require the benevolence of others. It is, in fact, an injury to the completeness of Taoist expression. Chuang Tzu does not approve of authority that assumes correctness for itself at the expense of the individual's freedom of thought.

Western philosophers also reject benevolent or paternalistic justifications for government intervention. The paternalist government believes that the ordinary citizen is not competent to make his or her own decisions-rather, he or she must be cared for, even thought for, by an authority figure. This is clearly at odds with anarchist ideas of individual freedom and responsibility. Richard T. De George, another of the contributors to *Anarchism*, emphatically states, "The anarchist...does deny the validity of the claim that government can be justified in paternalistic terms" and "each...knows his wants and needs better than some supposedly benevolent parent figure" (101). In making and enforcing laws, governments may remove not only the physical freedom but also the mental freedom of their citizens. In this way, governments deny human intelligence and accountability.

The effects of concrete laws on human freedom are fairly easy to see, but actually any type of authority is normative and thus stifling. In his book, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, Daniel Guerin writes, "In order to emancipate himself, the individual must begin by putting under the microscope the intellectual baggage with which his parents and teachers have saddled him" (28). No person can truly be free when someone else determines his or her beliefs and ideas of right and wrong. Chuang Tzu takes this idea even further by denying normativity under all circumstances: "There is nothing that is not so, nothing that is not acceptable" (40). As previously mentioned, the Tao is characterized by a lack of inherent distinctions. Chuang Tzu emphasizes that we create all distinctions between things; the Tao in itself is whole and complete. Again, the government or any other authoritative force that creates a division between right and wrong is contradicting the Tao. Chuang Tzu

also says, "If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument" (49). Since various authorities contradict each other on issues of moral correctness, it is clear that none has the monopoly on truth. Those ideas that are generally agreed upon, such as the murder taboo, would likely appear in some form in an anarchist community, by consensus of its members. The political philosopher Greenville Wall also discusses this issue; he states that "the existence of human fallibility...makes human authority possible," since "if incorrect judgment were not possible, correct judgment would not be possible either" (287). When people believe they might be wrong, they concede that others might be right. In turn, they may start listening to an authority figure whose judgment they believe to be more correct than their own. The Taoist solves this problem by eliminating the idea of correctness in judgment. Chuang Tzu's statement about "right" and "not right" can also be applied here. The authority that believes it is using "right" judgment is in error, since its "rightness" cannot be justified.

In denying the need for authority, both Chuang Tzu and the Western anarchists ascribe a high level of self-sufficiency to the common person; he or she does not need the government's help. Chuang Tzu describes a ruler who was too worried about meeting every one of his subjects' needs. He finally realizes, "I was thinking too little of my own welfare and ruining the state" (74). His over-concern had disrupted an essential societal balance. By following the Tao and letting his subjects follow the Tao as well, he allows the state to return to its natural order. The basis for Western anarchists' views on self-sufficiency also lies in their basic opinions on human nature. Guerin writes, "Anarchist thinkers have become advocates of a libertarian and democratic form of planning, worked out from the bottom up by [a] federation of self-managing enterprises" (54). "Self-management" and "democratic planning" can only arise when the individual's ability to make decisions is respected. The phrase "from the bottom up" implies that even the traditionally least influential members of society must have an equal say in an anarchist community. Everyone is treated as an emancipated individual with a voice that deserves to be heard and a freedom of choice.

The Western method of self-rule is based on a Kantian idea of universalizable moral principles. In his seminal work, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant makes the Golden Rule-like point that any person's actions should be based on principles that can be applied by anyone else in the same situation. Kant states, "Act only in such a way that you can will that the maxim of your action should become a universal law" (70). De George applies the same idea to the practical restriction of freedom in an anarchist society-"For the communitarian anarchist, freedom is not equivalent to license... The laws which an individual gives himself should be rational and universally applicable" (104). The Western anarchist regards all people as rational and therefore able to make these kinds of decisions. As a result, people will not have to fear the consequences of others pursuing their freedom. This makes the anarchic community safer while still eliminating the need for authoritarian rule.

The Western anarchists are not the only ones who draw from the respected philosophical canon of their culture-the common Eastern idea of relinquishing attachments also comes up in Chuang Tzu's political discourse. He describes a horse lover who catches the horse's waste in fine dishes but puts himself in the position to get kicked if a fly bites. Tzu explains, "The horse lover tries to think of everything, but his affection leads him into error" (63). In becoming too close to the horse and not respecting the natural order of their relationship, the man opens himself up to danger. The cause of this is an undue attachment to another living thing. Chuang

Tzu warns against attachments to ideas as well. Speaking of a wise man, he says, "The Way gave him a face; Heaven gave him a form. He doesn't let likes or dislikes get in and do him harm" (76). Tzu begins by describing the things that are clearly beyond humans' control. He then moves on to preferences, which, to a non-Taoist, also seem like uncontrollable things. However, he asserts that a person can keep likes and dislikes out of his or her mind. This is achieved by not making distinctions, as previously discussed. When one realizes that one cannot know truths, it is easy to relinquish attachment to one's opinions.

When the Taoist ruler is detached, he will not be compelled to coerce his subjects. Non-coercion is another major component of anarchist theory. Chuang Tzu writes, "The government of an enlightened king? His achievements...appear not to be his own doing...[T]he people do not depend on him...[H]e lets everything find its own enjoyment...[and] wanders where there is nothing at all" (94). Clearly, the ideal Taoist ruler does not force anything, implicitly or explicitly, upon his subjects. He is the very model of detachment, letting the Tao take its course in the world. The Western self-ruling anarchist must similarly be free from coercion: "True internationalism rests on self-determination, which implies the right of secession" (Guerin, 67). These beliefs about the possible world anarchic community can easily be applied to the individual case as well. In a true anarchy, a person is free to leave any community that he or she is a part of. If this were not true, there would clearly have to be some sort of external authority to enforce community membership, thereby contradicting the idea of anarchy.

In the matter of coercion as well as other aspects of anarchic philosophy, there exist at least minor differences between Chuang Tzu's thoughts and those of the Western anarchists. Overall, it seems that Chuang Tzu's view is more optimistic and all-encompassing, while the Westerners state more caveats and make more allowances. By its very nature, the Tao lends itself to universal principles. If one believes that the Tao exists and has the qualities ascribed by Chuang Tzu, then one must accept the anarchic philosophy that results. Even Tzu's less abstract arguments, like those about right and wrong, have a stark clarity that is difficult to distrust. Western anarchic philosophers, on the other hand, do not have such a clear basis for their generous views of human nature. This results in the stipulations about creating proper social conditions presented by Clark, as well as statements like the following: "Human beings [are] the sort of social animal that always establishes an order of dominance in association" (Newton, 165). This philosopher believes that a truly anarchic community is not sustainable, based on her conception of human nature. Without an idea such as the Tao to turn to, many Western conceptions of anarchy are weaker than that of Chuang Tzu.

In essence, however, both types of anarchic thought embody and apply the same principles. All anarchists deny the need for authority; this denial is based on respect for human ability, either to think rationally or to follow the Tao. Additionally, anarchists speak of a natural order that is deeper and more real than imposed governmental order. Despite its misleading reputation, anarchy is thought by its proponents to be the truest order of all.

#### Works Cited

Chomsky, Noam. Introduction to Anarchism: From Theory to Practice. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970, vii-xix.

Chuang Tzu. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Trans. Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

Clark, John P. "What is Anarchism?" *Anarchism*. Eds. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman. New York: New York University Press, 1978, 3-28.

De George, Richard T. "Anarchism and Authority" *Anarchism*. Eds. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman. New York: New York University Press, 1978, 91-110.

Guerin, Daniel. *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Trans. H.J. Paton. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

Newton, Lisa. "The Profoundest Respect for Law: Mazon's Anarchy and the Political Association" *Anarchism*. Eds. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman. New York: New York University Press, 1978, 160-166.

Wall, Greenville. "Philosophical Anarchism Revisited" *Anarchism*. Eds. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman. New York: New York University Press, 1978, 273-293.