

5.9 Laozi, Mencius, and modern examples

There are some ways Laozi's and Mencius's attitudes converge. Both are concerned with **naturalness**, with wanting to **get rid of language** and **not letting language infect our natural development**. But there are also some interesting ways in which Laozi's theory can be used to criticize Mencius. And his line of criticism can be extended to cover some insights with modern relevance to our consumerist lifestyle.

Are the tendencies of our heart-minds truly “natural”?

性

xìng
(human
nature)

As you may recall, Mencius thinks that human beings have certain tendencies (the four seeds of the heart-mind) that are our 性 **xìng** (nature). Laozi, however, could well respond to that claim by saying, “Things that *seem* like your 性 **xìng** (nature) may turn out to have been socially cultivated after all. Certain tendencies *seem* natural to you because you acquired them in learning distinctions in your language. They may not be patterns of nature, but patterns that appear natural because they were instilled from very early training”.

Doubts about the value of cultivating taste and excellence



Human beings typically place value on **cultivating taste** and **recognizing excellence**. We train ourselves to enjoy fine wines over cheap wines, listen to classical music over boyband pop, and so on. But Laozi asks, “**What's the point?** You go through that cultivation exercise, you end up having less enjoyment because you're discriminating and creating dislikes. Your *fine* desires get harder and harder to satisfy.” You no longer like cheap wine and the Backstreet Boys, You have to work harder to afford expensive wines and world-renown orchestras. Your tastes are so rarefied, they have become more difficult to satisfy.

Modern-day examples of forms of social manipulation



Modern advertizing trains us to link natural desires with artificial ones. Our desire for love can generate a new desire for an expensive suit and a BMW convertible. The advert shows an attractive person being drawn to you because of your suit and car. Laozi would view this as a modern technique of **social** manipulation of our desires making them into desires for “rare objects.” The rare objects are expensive products from the advertiser. To buy them we have to pursue certain professions, work for many hours in an activity we don't particularly like. It is a sophisticated form of slavery—and we're taught to

call it *freedom*. **Real freedom** lies in our natural desires, not these cultivated ones. Manipulating them not only enslaves us, it also leads to competition for the same rare goods, the main source of conflict and wars.

Laozi's pacifism

Laozi is very pacifist. “The songs of war are funeral dirges”, he says. In his view, the source of war is the urge to get a single **dao** uniting the empire. Laozi's utopia is different, and he has a description of it at the end of the Daodejing.



小國寡民。。。使民復結繩而用之，甘其食，美其服，安其居，樂其俗。鄰國相望，雞犬之聲相聞，民至老死，不相往來。

In a little state with a small population. . . . I would make the people return to the use of knotted cords (instead of the written characters). They should think their (coarse) food sweet; their (plain) clothes beautiful; their (poor) dwellings places of rest; and their common (simple) ways sources of enjoyment. ...

(Daodejing, Chapter 80, trans. James Legge)