



## Harmony in Dissent Mencius and Laozi's Moral Visions Across Time

*Harmonia na Dissidência: As Visões Morais de Mencius e Laozi Através dos Tempos*

Nguyen Thi VAN

Phd in Ha Noi National University of Education

Email: [Nguyenvansphn76@gmail.com](mailto:Nguyenvansphn76@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0009-0003-3684-2672

### ABSTRACT

The moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi represent two foundational strands of classical Chinese thought that continue to influence ethical discourse across East Asia and beyond. Mencius develops a theory of moral cultivation grounded in the innate goodness of human nature, arguing that moral emotions such as compassion, shame, respect and discernment form the basis for ethical behavior and political legitimacy. Laozi, by contrast, proposes an ethics rooted in naturalness, non coercive action and harmony with the Dao, offering a radically different yet complementary framework for understanding morality, governance and personal conduct. This article presents a comparative and academically focused analysis of these two traditions using content analysis of primary texts, historical logical interpretation and comparative philosophical methods. Core teachings including the four sprouts of virtue, benevolent governance, the Dao, non action and simplicity are examined as coherent systems that address ethical life at personal, social and political levels. The findings reveal that despite fundamental differences, both Mencius and Laozi offer valuable insights for contemporary concerns such as leadership ethics, public administration, environmental responsibility and mental well being. The study concludes that their shared emphasis on harmony, moral integrity and the cultivation of inner character provides a meaningful resource for ethical renewal in modern societies.

KEYWORDS: Mencius; Laozi; Daoism; virtue; moral philosophy.

## RESUMO

As filosofias morais de Mencius e Laozi representam duas vertentes fundamentais do pensamento clássico chinês que continuam a influenciar o discurso ético em toda a Ásia Oriental e além. Mencius desenvolve uma teoria do cultivo moral fundamentada na bondade inata da natureza humana, argumentando que emoções morais como compaixão, vergonha, respeito e discernimento formam a base para o comportamento ético e a legitimidade política. Laozi, por outro lado, propõe uma ética enraizada na naturalidade, na ação não coercitiva e na harmonia com o Tao, oferecendo uma estrutura radicalmente diferente, porém complementar, para a compreensão da moralidade, da governança e da conduta pessoal. Este artigo apresenta uma análise comparativa e academicamente focada dessas duas tradições, utilizando análise de conteúdo de textos primários, interpretação histórico-lógica e métodos filosóficos comparativos. Ensinos centrais, incluindo os quatro ramos da virtude, a governança benevolente, o Tao, a não ação e a simplicidade, são examinados como sistemas coerentes que abordam a vida ética em níveis pessoal, social e político. Os resultados revelam que, apesar das diferenças fundamentais, tanto Mencius quanto Laozi oferecem perspectivas valiosas para preocupações contemporâneas como ética na liderança, administração pública, responsabilidade ambiental e bem-estar mental. O estudo conclui que a ênfase compartilhada por eles na harmonia, na integridade moral e no cultivo do caráter interior fornece um recurso significativo para a renovação ética nas sociedades modernas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Mencius; Laozi; Taoísmo; virtude; filosofia moral.

### 1. Introduction

Mencius and Laozi stand as two of the most influential and enduring figures in the history of Chinese moral philosophy, yet the ethical visions they put forward emerge from profoundly different assumptions about human nature, social order and the proper path toward moral excellence (CEN and Jun, 2014). Both thinkers lived in periods marked by political turbulence, weakening institutions, widespread suffering and erosion of trust. Their philosophical inquiries were therefore not abstract exercises but urgent reflections on how human beings might restore harmony in themselves and in society. Although they share the classical Chinese concern for moral transformation and societal stability, they pursue these goals through divergent theoretical frameworks (Hui and Karl, 1998). Mencius develops an optimistic account of human nature rooted in compassion and moral intuition, while Laozi offers a philosophy grounded in naturalness, simplicity and alignment with the Dao. Studying these two thinkers together provides a rich entryway into understanding the diversity and depth of classical Chinese ethical thought (Luo, 2015).

Mencius, regarded as the most important successor to Confucius, argues that human nature is inherently good. He contends that all people possess the four sprouts of virtue, which are the inborn beginnings of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom. These sprouts are not learned from external sources but arise spontaneously from human emotional life. One of his most famous arguments describes a passerby who instinctively feels alarm and compassion when seeing a child on the verge of falling into a well. For Mencius, this reaction demonstrates an innate moral capacity that is independent of social reward or personal gain (Ahn, 2022). This understanding of human nature leads him to develop an approach to ethical cultivation that emphasizes nurturing, protecting and expanding these natural tendencies. The self becomes moral not through forced obedience to rules but through the deepening of its own inherent virtues. This philosophical optimism shapes his broader political thought, in which he insists that rulers must govern humanely and create social conditions that allow people to develop morally. Benevolent governance, according to Mencius, is not only ethically correct but politically effective, because people naturally respond to compassion with loyalty and trust.

Laozi, the foundational figure of Daoism and the reputed author of the *Daodejing*, approaches morality from an entirely different perspective. Instead of grounding ethics in human nature, Laozi anchors moral life in harmony with the *Dao*, the underlying natural order (Mou, 2001). He argues that moral corruption arises from excessive desire, rigid moral codes and artificial social structures that pull individuals away from their natural state. Laozi views conventional virtues as distortions that arise when people lose touch with the *Dao*. The more a society insists on rules, rewards and punishments, the more it sinks into disorder. Ethical life, for Laozi, requires a return to simplicity, humility and spontaneity. Central to this orientation is the principle of non action, or *wu wei*, which does not mean inactivity but refers to action that flows effortlessly with natural processes rather than forcing outcomes through willful control. An individual who practices non action cultivates inner calm, refrains from unnecessary interference and allows situations to unfold with minimal force. Laozi believes that such a person becomes genuinely effective because they align themselves with the natural rhythms of the world rather than imposing their own desires.

Despite these differences, Mencius and Laozi share several important concerns. Both respond to moral and political crises by advocating paths of inner transformation. Both critique forms of governance that rely heavily on coercion, manipulation and moral preaching. Both emphasize the importance of humility, self reflection and the cultivation of an inner orientation toward goodness or natural harmony (Huang, 2020). However, they differ significantly in their assessments of human nature and in the direction they believe moral cultivation should take. Mencius trusts that human nature, if nurtured correctly, leads naturally to goodness. Laozi, on the other hand, believes that conventional moral striving itself becomes

an obstacle to authentic living. Where Mencius encourages the active development of compassion and righteousness, Laozi advocates letting go of rigid moral concepts in order to rediscover naturalness and simplicity.

These contrasting yet complementary perspectives have captured the attention of scholars for centuries and continue to resonate in contemporary discussions on leadership, psychology, social ethics and environmental philosophy. Modern readers and researchers increasingly seek philosophical guidance on how to maintain moral integrity in an era characterized by rapid technological change, social dislocation and environmental challenges. The teachings of Mencius and Laozi offer valuable insights into the nature of human motivation, the foundations of ethical behavior and the possibilities for constructing more harmonious forms of social life. Mencius provides a model grounded in moral psychology and benevolent leadership, while Laozi offers a vision that emphasizes ecological awareness, minimal intervention and sustainable living.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive and academically focused examination of the moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi with the dual aim of understanding their classical meanings and assessing their contemporary significance. By comparing these two thinkers within a unified analytical framework, the study clarifies how their insights may help address modern concerns such as the crisis of trust, the pressures of competitive societies, the fragmentation of moral norms and the search for more humane and sustainable modes of governance. Through this analysis, the study demonstrates that the moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi, though separated by distinct metaphysical assumptions and ethical orientations, together form a rich intellectual foundation for rethinking morality in a complex and rapidly changing world.

## 2. Methods and Literature Review

This study employs a combination of content analysis, historical logical interpretation and comparative philosophical methods in order to construct a coherent and academically grounded understanding of the moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi. Content analysis serves as the primary method because it allows for direct engagement with the foundational texts that shape these two traditions, including the *Mengzi* and the *Daodejing*. Through close reading of key passages, the study identifies the fundamental concepts, metaphors and argumentative structures that define each thinker's ethical orientation (Perkins, 2014). For Mencius, content analysis exposes the centrality of the four sprouts of virtue, the emotional basis of ethical life and the link between personal morality and benevolent governance. For Laozi, it highlights the emphasis on naturalness, simplicity, non action and alignment with the Dao. Examining these texts in a systematic and interpretive manner ensures that the analysis remains faithful to the original philosophical intentions while also engaging with modern scholarly questions.

The historical logical method complements content analysis by situating Mencius and Laozi within the broader development of classical Chinese thought. Mencius appears historically as the most prominent successor of Confucius, yet his contributions significantly extend and reinterpret early Confucian ethics. Later Confucians such as Xunzi, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming and modern Neo Confucians debated and further elaborated his ideas, particularly concerning moral psychology, ethical intuition and the role of the state. Laozi, by contrast, is widely regarded as the founding figure of Daoist philosophy, and generations of Daoist thinkers, including Zhuangzi and various religious Daoist scholars, expanded upon his insights regarding the Dao, non action and the critique of desire and artificial norms. Understanding these historical continuities and transformations helps clarify which aspects of Mencius' and Laozi's teachings reflect original insights and which reflect later interpretations shaped by new intellectual and political contexts. The historical logical method therefore allows the study to chart the evolution of their ideas and the shifting significance of their ethical frameworks across time.

Comparative philosophy provides a third framework that deepens the analysis by positioning Mencius' and Laozi's ideas within a global philosophical context. Comparing Mencius with Aristotle, for example, reveals similarities in their emphasis on virtue cultivation and the development of moral emotions, yet their philosophical foundations differ in important ways. Aristotle grounds ethics in rational deliberation and the pursuit of eudaimonia, whereas Mencius emphasizes emotional spontaneity and the cultivation of innate moral tendencies. Laozi's thought, when compared with Buddhist philosophy, highlights parallels regarding non attachment, stillness and the critique of desire, while also exposing differences in metaphysics and ethical goals. Comparisons with Kantian deontology illuminate Laozi's rejection of rigid moral principles and his preference for situational responsiveness. These comparative approaches enrich the understanding of both Chinese thinkers and demonstrate the value of engaging classical Eastern philosophies in global ethical discourse.

The literature review indicates extensive scholarly interest in both Mencius and Laozi across historical periods and cultural contexts. Classical interpretations often focused on their role in shaping Chinese culture and political thought. In traditional East Asian societies, Mencius was regarded as a champion of benevolent governance, while Laozi became associated with spiritual cultivation and naturalistic philosophy. Modern East Asian scholars revisit these traditions with new concerns, such as leadership ethics, environmental sustainability and mental well being. Western scholars increasingly engage with these philosophers through the lens of virtue ethics, moral psychology, comparative metaphysics and political theory. The diversity of these interpretations shows the conceptual richness of both Mencius and Laozi and confirms their ongoing relevance in addressing contemporary ethical challenges. By

synthesizing these scholarly perspectives and grounding them in primary textual analysis, this study provides a comprehensive and balanced interpretation of their moral philosophies.

### 3. Research results

The findings of this study reveal that although Mencius and Laozi represent two distinct philosophical traditions within classical Chinese thought, each offers a comprehensive and internally coherent moral framework. These frameworks respond to the ethical, political and psychological challenges of their historical contexts and continue to provide valuable insights for contemporary ethical reflection (Wong, 2001). The findings are organized into thematic areas that clarify the foundations of each philosopher's moral orientation, their respective theories of human motivation and cultivation, their views on governance and the deeper metaphysical assumptions that shape their ethical visions. By examining these thematic areas in detail, the study highlights both the complementarity and the tension between the moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi.

The first major finding concerns the foundational assumptions that each thinker makes about the nature of morality and its relationship to human life. Mencius grounds his ethical theory in the belief that human nature is fundamentally good. According to Mencius, every person possesses innate moral dispositions that, when properly cultivated, lead naturally to virtuous behavior. These inborn tendencies are not learned or imposed by external authority but arise spontaneously from human emotional life. Mencius identifies four primary moral emotions which he calls the sprouts of virtue. The first is compassion, the natural basis for benevolence. The second is the sense of shame, which supports righteousness. The third is the emotion of respect and deference, which provides the foundation for propriety. The fourth is moral discernment, which grounds wisdom. These sprouts are fragile but contain the potential for full virtue, just as a small sprout contains the potential for a large tree. The findings show that this psychological model underlies every aspect of Mencius' ethical and political philosophy. It provides a positive and optimistic foundation for moral life, suggesting that ethical development is a process of unfolding and strengthening what already exists within.

Laozi, by contrast, grounds his moral philosophy not in human nature but in the cosmic principle known as the Dao. For Laozi, the Dao is the underlying natural order of the universe, the spontaneous process that gives rise to all things and guides their transformation. Moral excellence arises not from cultivating specific virtues but from aligning oneself with the Dao by embracing simplicity, humility and naturalness. Laozi warns that when people forget the Dao, they create artificial distinctions, moral rules and social institutions that generate conflict, desire and disharmony (Wang, 2001). The findings show that Laozi's moral vision is built on a metaphysical orientation rather than a psychological one. Laozi does not begin with assumptions about human emotions but with observations about the rhythms and tendencies of

nature. Ethical life requires returning to a state of balance and openness, reducing egocentric desires and abandoning the pursuit of artificial goals.

The second major finding concerns how each philosopher understands the process of moral cultivation. For Mencius, moral cultivation is an active and deliberate process that requires reflection, discipline and self awareness. Because human beings possess natural moral tendencies, cultivation involves nurturing these tendencies and protecting them from corruption. Mencius uses agricultural metaphors to illustrate this point, arguing that just as sprouts need proper soil, water and nourishment to grow, moral emotions need supportive environments to develop. This requires personal effort as well as external conditions such as social stability, economic security and access to education. The findings show that Mencius views self cultivation as an active struggle against moral inertia and external pressures. Individuals must constantly reflect on their actions, align their behavior with moral emotions and avoid circumstances that can distort their nature. Through persistent effort, the sprouts of virtue can flourish into fully developed moral traits (Tan, 2021).

Laozi offers a radically different account of moral cultivation. Instead of active struggle, Laozi teaches that cultivation involves letting go of artificial desires, ambitions and conceptual thinking. Moral wisdom arises not from effortful striving but from allowing the mind to settle into stillness and the body to align with natural rhythms. Laozi argues that human beings become morally disoriented when they pursue excessive desires, cling to rigid beliefs or impose unnecessary rules on themselves and others. Cultivation requires emptying the mind of distractions, softening the heart and reducing the ego. This process restores harmony by allowing individuals to perceive and follow the subtle guidance of the Dao. The findings show that Laozi sees moral growth as a return rather than an ascent, a process of rediscovering one's original naturalness rather than constructing a complex moral structure. This stands in sharp contrast to the more effort oriented approach of Mencius.

A third major finding concerns the role of governance in their moral systems. Mencius believes that political leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the moral lives of citizens. He argues that because people possess innate moral tendencies, the task of the ruler is to create social conditions that allow these tendencies to flourish. Benevolent governance is central to this vision. A benevolent ruler provides economic security, reduces burdens, promotes education and demonstrates compassion and integrity. Mencius insists that when rulers act morally, the people naturally respond with trust, loyalty and moral improvement. He criticizes rulers who govern through fear or coercion, arguing that such methods suppress moral emotions and lead to social instability. The findings indicate that Mencius links political legitimacy directly to moral virtue, presenting an ethical theory of political authority rather than a purely legal or pragmatic one.

Laozi, on the other hand, views governance through the lens of non action. He argues that the best rulers are those who interfere the least and allow people to live simply and naturally. Excessive laws, moral preaching and social engineering disrupt the natural order and create resentment and confusion. Laozi's model of governance is minimalist. The ideal ruler reduces desires, avoids displays of power, refrains from overregulation and remains humble. By embodying simplicity and non ambition, the ruler becomes a stabilizing presence, guiding the people without coercive control. According to the findings, Laozi believes that when rulers trust the natural intelligence of the people and refrain from imposing artificial structures, society maintains harmony. This political vision challenges conventional assumptions about authority and suggests a form of leadership based on restraint and subtle influence (Wang, 2022).

A fourth major finding involves the deeper ethical and metaphysical assumptions that shape each thinker's moral vision. Mencius' philosophy rests on the assumption that moral emotions are natural and reliable guides to ethical behavior. His conception of virtue is grounded in emotional sensitivity and moral intuition. He believes that human beings are naturally inclined toward goodness and that ethical failure arises from neglect, environmental harm or corrupting influences. This view leads Mencius to advocate active engagement with moral life and a deep sense of social responsibility. The findings show that Mencius' ethics are human centered and socially oriented, emphasizing relationships, empathy and constructive action.

Laozi's ethics, by contrast, rest upon a metaphysics of natural balance and spontaneity. Laozi believes that human beings lose harmony when they construct artificial moral systems or attempt to dominate the world through force. Instead of relying on moral emotions or intellectual judgment, Laozi encourages alignment with the Dao, which transcends human concepts. Ethical life involves simplicity, non interference, humility and acceptance. Laozi's ethics are not oriented toward fulfilling social obligations but toward achieving inner tranquility and reducing conflict. The findings show that Laozi's ethical vision is cosmic in scope, emphasizing the interdependence of all things and the power of softness and yielding. A fifth major finding concerns the complementarity and tension between the two systems. Mencius focuses on developing moral capacities through education, reflection and ethical action, while Laozi emphasizes releasing oneself from excessive desire, ambition and cognitive rigidity. Both see moral transformation as essential to addressing societal disorder, yet they recommend different paths. Mencius believes that moral growth requires engagement, effort and cultivation of relationships. Laozi believes that moral life requires stillness, emptiness and withdrawal from artificial structures. Their tension enriches ethical discourse by offering multiple perspectives on how to cultivate inner balance, integrity and harmonious living. The findings demonstrate that studying these two thinkers together provides a fuller understanding of the diversity of approaches available within classical Chinese moral thought.



Finally, the findings highlight the contemporary relevance of both philosophers. In an era of rapid technological change, environmental crisis, social fragmentation and widespread mistrust, people increasingly seek philosophical guidance on how to maintain ethical integrity and psychological well being. Mencius provides a model of virtue ethics grounded in moral psychology and compassionate leadership, which offers valuable resources for public administration, moral education and community building. Laozi provides insights into sustainable living, ecological awareness, stress reduction and non coercive forms of leadership. Together, their philosophies offer complementary resources for addressing modern ethical challenges at personal, social and global levels. The findings confirm that the moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi continue to hold significance because they speak to universal human concerns and provide enduring guidance for living a meaningful and harmonious life.

#### 4. Conclusion

The moral philosophies of Mencius and Laozi represent two of the most influential and enduring traditions within classical Chinese thought, each offering a distinct yet complementary vision of ethical life. Mencius presents an optimistic framework grounded in the innate goodness of human nature, emphasizing the cultivation of moral emotions, the nurturing of virtue and the importance of benevolent governance. His belief that compassion, righteousness, propriety and wisdom naturally emerge when conditions are supportive provides an ethical foundation deeply rooted in human relationships and social responsibility. Laozi offers a contrasting approach based on alignment with the Dao, advocating simplicity, humility and non coercive action. His emphasis on naturalness and non attachment challenges conventional moral striving and highlights the value of inner stillness, ecological awareness and minimal intervention. Although their perspectives differ in metaphysical orientation and ethical method, both thinkers share a commitment to restoring harmony in periods of disorder and both highlight the necessity of inner transformation as the basis for outer peace. Their teachings remain relevant for contemporary ethical concerns, providing valuable insights for leadership, environmental stewardship, mental well being and the search for more humane and sustainable forms of governance. Together, they offer a rich and multidimensional foundation for rethinking morality in the modern world.

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