
The Dichotomous Views on Action in Wollstonecraft and Lao-tzu

Lao-Tzu, from his work "Thoughts from the Tao-te Ching", offers political protocols for the leader through the abandonment of action and guidelines on how people should live their lives. Although Mary Wollstonecraft, from her work "Of the Pernicious Effects Which Arise from the Unnatural Distinctions Established in Society", vindicates the subject of inequality between men and women, her approach towards the sociopolitical matters offers actions to be executed. The disparity which prevails in society, according to Wollstonecraft, undermines the development for a rationalized nation, where one half of the population is neglected from male monopolized work and education, and thus would never reach the pinnacle of a virtuous nation. On the other hand, Lao-Tzu's criterion for a successful nation is one which withholds a passive government where the commonality gets to determine their own moral values, compassing through the justification of their instincts.

Lao-Tzu also opposes the idea of intellect or progression towards an urbanized life whereas Wollstonecraft encourages women to gain percipience and be part of the highly-skilled working demographic by being educated. The correlation between inaction (Lao-Tzu) or action (Wollstonecraft) and sociopolitical order augments their perception of the world, where Lao-Tzu can be considered as an idealist while Wollstonecraft as a realist. Despite the paradoxical views both parties have against each other, they have a reciprocal end goal, which is to create sociopolitical order and morality in the society. Action is necessary to achieve certain targets.

Wollstonecraft's entire regime towards creating sociopolitical order in society suggests the element of action. She argues over the marginalization between men and women, which she finds inimical towards the well-being of a rational society. She elaborates: There must be more equality established in society or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even founded on a rock, if one half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride (656). For a society to be virtuous, they must be filled with rational beings who know how to make the right decisions. However, for that to happen, half of the population (women) is unable to make decisions based on their own autonomy because they are constantly degraded, and considered as a conjoined unit with her husband. "The laws respecting a woman, ... make an absurd unit of a man and his wife" (661). Wollstonecraft controverts women's invalidation as they should be perceived as one unit themselves even without the presence of her husband.

In contrast, Lao-Tzu believes that inaction provides solace from any wrongdoings by allowing

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society to subside their own morals values. He elucidates, “Practice not-doing, and everything will fall into place” (206). Lao-Tzu ponders upon the concept of letting situations take its natural course, with no government interventions. He further expanded his statement, “Throw away morality and justice, and people will do the right thing” (207). This suggests how Lao-Tzu hypothesizes that inaction leads to sociopolitical order, where people use the justification of their instincts to determine what is morally right and wrong. Lao-Tzu and Wollstonecraft both present solutions on sociopolitical order, however, from different temperaments. Wollstonecraft engages on a prominent controversy (gender discrimination) while suggesting pragmatic actions (specific to specific).

On the other hand, Lao-Tzu streamlines society’s problems into a fitting solution which imposes certain philosophies on how the government and the general populace should act, which is inaction (general to specific). Gender discrimination falls into Lao-Tzu’s general category of societal problems. In this case, Lao Tzu’s philosophy is flawed because there has never been a law to intervene the undermining of women, yet society has gradually synthesized marginalization between men and women, placing the latter on the bottom of all social distinctions. Intellect should not be dismissed as a negligible factor contributing towards morality in society. Wollstonecraft regards intellect as the first building block towards equality. She clarifies, “[S]peaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures” (661). In favor of becoming “rational creatures”, women need to be allowed to get formal education to attain the qualification of jobs, to be independent from men. In fact, she encourages women to practice in highly skilled jobs. “Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses.” (664). She further elaborates why: How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practiced as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect... instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility... (665). Women have the potential to be a greater influence in their socioeconomic sphere, however, their paths towards highly skilled jobs have been barricaded by the impertinent gender roles. This results into women being subjected as subordinates in terms of intellect, a notion in which Wollstonecraft hopes to abolish. Lao-Tzu’s take on intellect is antithetical of Wollstonecraft’s. He expounds, “Throw away... and wisdom, and people will be a hundred times happier” (207). Lao-Tzu creates a correlation between knowledge and happiness, suggesting that the less the population knows, the better it is for the whole. This statement deviates from the sake of the general populace, instead, implies a negative connotation where the government is wary about the knowledge people gain, fearing they someday may rebel against. What good is there to bring to society by being apathetic?

In addition, Lao-Tzu preaches counterintuitive ideologies towards the development of technology. “They enjoy the labor of their hands and don’t waste time inventing labor-saving machines” (214). He eulogizes over his ideal society, which has a stagnant development in terms of intellect and urbanization where no new knowledge or technology should pierce the

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sphere of the population. Conversely, Wollstonecraft encourages women to study and be employed in the tertiary sector. She believes the state of having sociopolitical order is when the satisfaction from men and women coincide, where both men and women are free to do what they aspire to do, and not be constricted under the mold in which shapes a discriminatory society. She explains, "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters... in a word, better citizens" (666). The phrase "better citizens" infers a mutually beneficial relationship between both men and women, where the liberation of women allows the disposition for a greater good to create them as human beings with depth in perception.

Wollstonecraft evokes parallelism between African American slavery and women: Why subject her to propriety- blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality? Is sugar to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subjected to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? Is not this indirectly to deny women reason? (660) This speculates that women's roles in society have only existed to please men, which in turn denies women from rationalization. Being "better citizens" essentially prompts freedom. Meanwhile, Lao-Tzu apprehends intelligence as a circumscription from his belief of "let[ting] go of fixed plans and concepts" (211). He acclaims a moderate lifestyle, where intellect is an unremarkable factor, "The mark of a moderate man is freedom from his own ideas... he has no destination in view and makes use of anything life happens to bring his way" (212). The phrase "no destination in view" refers to devising no fixed plans, giving the impression that his indefensible government is virtually indoctrinating the population with totalitarian regimes. A government which encourages their citizens to fixate themselves in the same country for their lifetimes, forsakes the art of being curious, denies intelligence and promotes traditional lifestyles with outdated technology.

By contrast, Wollstonecraft derives how "morality will never gain its ground" (656), if intelligence does not coexist within the society, because rationality and freedom will never be achieved for women. If the case is in retrospect to Lao-Tzu's philosophy, whereby creating a rational society only takes inaction, it would already have reached a halcyon-like state, where discrimination among genders is nonexistent and Wollstonecraft's arguments would not be present in the first place. Nevertheless, this infeasible society which Lao-Tzu conjectures cannot be synthesized in the real world without prescribing actions based on Wollstonecraft's ideology, which is, by performing actions that will lead people into being more rational beings, thus defining morality, creating sociopolitical order.

In conclusion, the issues Lao-Tzu raise of are strictly imposed by his own beliefs on how the world should work. Unlike Wollstonecraft, who grasps the situation on how it is already working,

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presents the flaws of society based on her experiences. Their methodologies differ from the implication of their solutions towards creating a harmonious society. Lao-Tzu's ideal nation is analogous to a totalitarian reign, in Wollstonecraft's perspective, where there is lack of freedom due to the dismissal of knowledge or curiosity. The values that Lao-Tzu seem to oppose are a blueprint towards Wollstonecraft's.

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