

A CRITIQUE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY  
IN THE LIGHT OF THE *TAO TE CHING*

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In Partial Fulfillment

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MASTER OF ARTS in PHILOSOPHY

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by

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March 2006

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## APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis entitled A CRITIQUE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF THE *TAO TE CHING* prepared and submitted by MARYROSE A. COBARDE in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN PHILOSOPHY has been examined and is recommended for acceptance and approval for ORAL EXAMINATION.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Rationale of the Study

As human knowledge surges forward, man becomes increasingly aware of the limitations of his efforts in solving the deeper issues that concern his life. As machines continue to outdo him in efficiency and finesse, man is met with a struggle to hold his place. Even as technology continues to render the world to a radical change, an undercurrent of alarm quietly makes its way to the forefront of man's consciousness. The all-too-current murmurs of annihilation in the face of global threats by weapons of mass destruction no doubt bring urgency to reflection. "Ten years after the end of the Cold War there are still some 36,000 nuclear weapons in the world, mostly in the arsenals of US and Russia. Some 5,000 of these weapons remain on hair-trigger alert, ready to be launched on warning and subject to accident or miscalculation."<sup>1</sup> *Time Magazine*, in its February 17, 2003 issue cites a timeline of terror, which includes North Korea's admission Oct. 16, 2002 to a secret nuke program in violation of a 1994 accord. Pres. George W. Bush had earlier branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil".<sup>2</sup> On February 6, 2003 North Korea threatens the US with preemptive strikes on US forces and warns of total war.

From 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the movement of science has progressively built up the view of the physical world in the material sense often putting to neglect the

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<sup>1</sup>David Kreiger, "The Most Important Moral Issue of our Time" [article online], available from [www.nuclearfiles.org](http://www.nuclearfiles.org), 27 February 2003.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Taro Greenfeld, "Misplaced Priorities," *TIME*, 17 February 2003. 14-15.

non-material side of man. Breakthroughs in scientific research call into question his view on what is natural and human. Discoveries of science continue to reinforce man's view of nature as an object and subsequently influence the manner he treats it.

While the endless benefits of technology have been exhaustively reviewed, it was only in the early part of the last century that its harms have been seriously considered. The world wars fought in the early part of the last century, which knew no distinction between combatants and non-combatants, brought to the surface the ethical concerns on weapons of mass destruction and the immense dangers made possible by technology.

Technology has "radically altered our connections with nature. Even the original environment, including the natural (biological) nature of humans themselves has been brought under the direction and control of technology."<sup>3</sup> S. Strijbos describes the new environment as "artificial". It is his conviction that an intellectual-spiritual side be considered for a deeper grasp of the technological society.

Incidentally, the turn of the millennium shows a demand for conventional wisdom. Practices such as yoga inspired by eastern worldviews are enjoying a new lease of life as they are popularized by famous personalities. As in any milestone in history, the present time renews interest in age-long questions that refuse to die. Notwithstanding the myriad other concerns that abound, man continues to seek light into his humanity. Michael Zimmerman claims, "The most pressing question of our

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<sup>3</sup> S. Strijbos, "Ethics and the Systemic Character of Modern Technology," *Techné Summer 1998* [journal online], available from [http://www.scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/SPT/v3\\_n4/Strijbos.html](http://www.scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/SPT/v3_n4/Strijbos.html), 28 December 2002.

age remains: ‘Who is man?’<sup>4</sup> The advent of technology plays a role in fueling such questions. The unrestrained use of the natural environment in the service of man’s technological pursuits rouses alarm for the fate of the world and ultimately, man’s. The technological perspective runs in the opposite direction from the idea of co-survival with other elements in nature triggering ethical debates as to technology’s adverse effects on life itself.

The crisis of technology from the Taoist perspective is a crisis of nature. Human nature and the physical world is challenged by technology. The purpose of this study is not so much to fit Taoism in the contemporary setting, as it is to find a place for technology in the Taoist paradigm. To do the former would be, as Rick Matz points out, “backwards”. “To be an effective philosophy, a person should manage their [sic] life according to the precepts of that philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> This writer contends that the philosophy of technology is at bottom a philosophy of nature and therefore may always find relevance in the latter.

The endangered state of the natural world in the midst of technological onslaught calls for a critical review of modern technology. Lao Tzu says, “Hold on to the Tao of old in order to master the things of the present.”<sup>6</sup> The words of Lao-Tzu, spoken hundreds of years ago, aptly capture the underlying theme of the project at hand. This research paper attempts to draw wisdom from Taoism, whose legacy in

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<sup>4</sup>Michael Zimmerman, “Marx and Heidegger on the Technological Domination of Nature,” *Philosophy Today* 23 (1979): 110

<sup>5</sup> Rick Matz, “Guide to Practical Taoism,” [article online]; available from [www.sonshi.com/the\\_tao.html](http://www.sonshi.com/the_tao.html), 3 December 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Lao Tzu, *The Way of Lao Tzu*, trans. Wing Tsit-Chan (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1963), 13.



present day China is traced in the values of contentment, simplicity, spontaneity and utter respect for the way of nature, to create a unique venue for the critique of modern technology. Wing Tsit-Chan says, "In the Lao Tzu, water, the infant, the female, the valley and the uncarved block are used as models for a life according to Tao. No other school has deliberately selected these as symbols for a good life. Practically all of these symbolize the life of simplicity."<sup>7</sup>

The gap between Lao Tzu's time and the present day presents both a challenge and an inspiration to the project, for it may be argued that Taoism lacks relevance to the present world. In "The Scientific and Technological Revolutions," Hans Jonas speaks of a recent evaluation of "modernity as an asset."<sup>8</sup> This view assigns to modern ideas the value of being a source of wisdom. The modern thinkers are supposedly the older ones having been taught by the errors of the past. However, the current state of things belies this. The relevance of the project is echoed by the words of Francis Collingwood in his *Philosophy of Nature*.

No one should be misled into thinking that one branch of the philosophy of nature is the ancient one and the other modern, and that two are irreconcilable. Rather philosophic truth is eternal.... It is the task of the contemporary philosopher of nature to bridge the temporal span of his reader and to bring together in one presentation the various apprehensions of the truth obtained by different men at different times.<sup>9</sup>

These are times that challenge the basic issues of man's humanity. In all areas of life, be they social, economic, political, he is confronted by problems that were

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Jonas, "The Scientific and Technological Revolutions," *Philosophy Today* 15 (1971): 79.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Collingwood, *Philosophy of Nature*. (New Jersey. Prentice-Hall, 1961), 67

previously absent from his concern, having been borne by the times. Biological and chemical weapons gravely threaten his continued survival in the planet. The Nov. 8, 2002 UN resolution recognized “the threat Iraq's noncompliance with Council resolutions and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles poses to international peace and security.”<sup>10</sup> This scenario demonstrates the dangers that may ensue when man forces his way on nature.

In the conclusion of his paper, “Marx and Heidegger on the Technological Domination of Nature,” Michael Zimmerman presents the likely consequences of indifference to the dilemma posed by technology.

Modern technology will continue to be used in ways destructive of both man and Nature for as long as our practical activity is guided by the understanding of being as raw material for the Subject. If mankind is understood as the goal of history, the source of all value, the pinnacle of evolution and so forth, then it is not difficult for humans to justify the plundering of the natural world, which is not human and therefore “value-less”.<sup>11</sup>

### Theoretical Background

Taoism. Aristotle, who defined nature as “the primary material of which any natural object consists or out of which it is made” shares the idea of nature as essence. We say that that which cannot be otherwise is necessary as it is. In the active sense nature “indicates a spontaneous activity in nonliving things.”<sup>12</sup>

In his article entitled “Nature as Part of the Human-Cultural World in Taoist Thought,” Michael La Fargue describes the modern notion of nature as separate from

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Falk and David Kreiger, “Iraq and North Korea: Meeting the Challenge of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation,” [article online], available from [www.wagingpeace.org/new/issues/nuclearweaponsabolition.htm](http://www.wagingpeace.org/new/issues/nuclearweaponsabolition.htm), 6 January 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Zimmerman, “Marx and Heidegger,” 103.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V 1014b15, 755