



The Ten Thousand Creatures of the Universe

Taoism


Mr. T'ien, of the Ch'i State, was holding an ancestral banquet in his hall, to which a thousand guests were bidden. As he sat in their midst, many came up to him with presents of fish and game. Eyeing them approvingly, he exclaimed with unctious:

'How generous is Almighty God to man! He makes the five kinds of grain to grow, and creates the finny and the feathered tribes, especially for our benefit.'

All Mr. T'ien's guests applauded this sentiment to the echo; but the twelve-year-old son of a Mr. Pao, regardless of seniority, came forward and said:

'You are wrong, my lord. All the living creatures of the universe stand in the same category as ourselves, and one is of no greater intrinsic value than another. It is only by reason of size, strength or cunning that some particular species gains the mastery, or that one preys upon another. None of them are produced in order to subserve the uses of others. Man catches and eats those that are fit for food, but how can it be maintained that God creates these expressly for man's use? Mosquitoes and gnats suck man's blood, and tigers and wolves devour his flesh; but we do not therefore assert that God created man expressly for the benefit of mosquitoes and gnats, or to provide food for tigers and wolves.' □

Story by Lie Yukou, in the *Lieh Tzu*.

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Comments

The *Lieh Tzu* or *Liezi* is one of the three great Taoist classical books, along with the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuanzi*. It was inscribed in the imperial library under the title of the *Treaty of Perfect Emptiness*. Its first chapter outlines the existence of a mythical kingdom in which there are no rulers, everything works naturally, by itself, and the people lack desires. This possibly constitutes one of the first formulations of society based on the principles of social anarchy.

About its author, it is said that Lie Yukou may have lived sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries A.E.C., and that he was a kind of philosopher-shaman who rode on the wind as he travelled.

Sources

Lieh Tzu (1912). *Taoist Teachings from the Book of Lieh Tzu*. (Digital edition by Forgotten Books, 2013). London: John Murray.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Other passages that this story illustrates

The Way Forward: Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life.

