

Dao de jing

Selections and Comments, Part I

Introduction

There are 81 chapters in the *Dao de jing*. We do not know the origins of the chapter divisions, but three versions of portions of the text recovered from a tomb sealed about 300 BC make it clear that at least a third of the current chapters were in something like their current form at that early date. The specific chapter order we now have is a later development, however, and the text that became standard in later ages included significant differences from the earliest version discovered through archaeology.

Many chapters are clearly composites of even smaller micro-texts: short sayings, repeated rhetorical formulas, originally independent observations that are now linked. Over and over, these cut-and-paste divisions are tied together by phrases meaning “hence,” “thus,” “therefore,” which imply logical links, but in fact merely signal that two somewhat similar ideas have been juxtaposed. In this version, where a chapter has such apparent divisions, they are designated by subsection letters: *a*>, *b*>, etc. Decisions about section breaks are subjective, and scholars break them differently.

The *Dao de jing* was traditionally divided in two, with sections 1-37 known as the “classic of the Dao” and 38-81 known as the “classic of De.” The term *de*, which is translated here by the bland term “virtue,” possessed a complex meaning that embraced meanings of human excellence, morality, self-control, power, charisma, and beneficence. Although the terms *dao* and *de* appear throughout the text, there is somewhat more emphasis on the Dao in the first half of the text, and on *de* in the second half. Silk texts recovered from graves sealed about 100 BC, which are the earliest we possess of the text as a whole, place the “classic of De” first, beginning with chapter 38. Since we know there third century AD versions that used the current order, we know that the division of the text in this way is very old, though we’ll need more information before we know which alternative was “original.”

In this translation, Dao will be capitalized as a proper name when the word seems to signify a single, transcendent notion, whether described as a thing or as a doctrine. When the phrasing suggests that the text means one *dao* of a number (e.g., the *dao* of Tian, the *dao* of man, and so forth), it will be treated as an ordinary noun.

Selections

I. The Dao as Transcendent

The chapters and passages in this section reflect the *Dao de jing*'s portrait of the Dao as a transcendent entity or order. Some interpreters hold that no such notion exists in the text, and that all such suggestions should be read metaphorically.

1.

a> **A *dao* that may be spoken is not the enduring Dao. A name that may be named is not an enduring name.**

No names – this is the beginning of heaven and earth. Having names – this is the mother of the things of the world.

b> **Make freedom from desire your constant norm; thereby you will see what is subtle. Make having desires your constant norm; thereby you will see what is manifest.**

These two arise from the same source but have different names. Together they may be termed ‘the mysterious’.

Mystery and more mystery: the gate of all that is subtle.

The first sentence of 1/a may be the most famous pun in Chinese. The word *dao* possesses a variety of early meanings, and among them are the verb meaning “to speak,” and two nominal meanings: “a teaching,” and “the transcendent order of the universe.” The initial six characters of the *Dao de jing* include three *daos* (in Chinese it reads: 道可道非常道 “**dao ke dao fei chang dao**”). The three *daos* may be taken to mean, respectively, “teaching,” “to speak,” and “transcendent order.”

“Name” translates a term that may equally be rendered “word,” since ideas of language during this period tended to conceive the origins of words to be names for things (a belief equally characteristic of early European theories of language). A separate section below (V) discusses the issue of words/names/language and the Dao. However, the question is pervasive from this first chapter, and you should be alert for it as you read.

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4.

- a*> **The Dao is empty yet you may keep drawing from it as though it could never fill your need.**
- b*> **It is an abyss, like the ancestor of the world of things.**
- c*> **Blunt the point,
Undo the tangle,
Soften the glare,
Join the dust.**
- d*> **Dim, it seems almost to exist. I know not whose child it may be. It seems the forerunner of the Lord.**

This chapter employs religious symbolism at two points. In 4/b, the term for “ancestor” is that used to denote the grand progenitor of a clan in the context of the clan sacrificial temple. The final line speaks of the “Lord” (*di* 帝), a term that can denote an earthly ruler, but also an anthropomorphized image of Tian, usually referred to as *shang di* or “the Lord Above.” (When “lord” is not capitalized, it translates terms referring to earthly rulers. The earliest Chinese written texts most frequently use the term to refer to earthly rulers after their death, in terms of their power as spirits.)

25.

**There is a thing formed from confusion and born before heaven and earth.
Silent, solitary, alone and unchanging. It revolves everywhere and is never in danger. It can be the mother of all under heaven. I do not know its name, but I style it “the Dao.”**

**If forced to give it a name, I call it “the Great.” The Great I call “Receding.”
Receding I call “Distant.” Distant I call “Reversing.”**

Thus the Dao is great, heaven is great, earth is great, and the king is great as well.

Within the realm there are four great ones, and the king sits as one among them.

Men emulate earth; earth emulates heaven (*tian*); heaven emulates the Dao; the Dao emulates spontaneity.

The line “Within the realm there are four great ones, and the king sits as one among them” may be a late interpolation to tie this passage on the Dao to the text’s possibly later emphasis on the utility of the Dao for political success. Note that “*tian*” here seems to be used more closely as a complement to “earth” than as a spiritual concept: “heaven,” in the sense of the sky, not in the sense of Tian, an ultimate spirit force. It is frequently difficult to determine which interpretation better fits a specific use of that term in the text. In this translation, *tian* is rendered as “sky” when it seems unambiguously to denote the physical sky (e.g., 39a), as “Tian” when the predominant sense seems to draw on religious notions (e.g., 16), and as “heaven” when it appears that elements of both senses may be in play.

40.

- a> Reversal is the motion of the Dao. Weakness is the method of the Dao.**
- b> The things of the world are born from being, and being is born of nothing.**

40/b suggests a model that pictures the Dao's transcendent position as prior to the phenomenal world, which somehow is born out of it. (Chapters 1 and 42 suggest this as well.) The terms "being" and "nothing" (or "nothingness") suggest, on one level, a bifurcated metaphysics, with the phenomenal world existing in some way "within" or "below" a more embracing transcendental level. But some interpreters feel it is inappropriate to suggest that being and nothingness are in any way pictured as entities or realms, and that we should understand them in their original Chinese verbal sense, "to exist" and "to lack," which don't imply a bifurcated metaphysics, but only a temporal succession of states.

42.

- a> The Dao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to the ten thousand things of the world.**
- b> The things of the world bear Yin on their backs and embrace the Yang. They exhaust their *qi* in harmony.**

This is the first half of chapter 42, which moves on to other topics.

The phrase "the ten thousand things of the world" is more literally rendered simply as "the ten thousand things," or "the myriad things." In this translation, however, it is more often rendered as "the things of the world." In early Chinese texts, this phrase seems to use "thing" to mean a species of thing, rather than an individual thing – "the myriad kinds" would be an awkward way of capturing this sense.

In Warring States and later thought, Yin and Yang were conceived as polar dualistic forces of female and male, governing the phenomenal world which reflected the constant interplay between them, different things pertaining more to one or the other, and the two in a constant rhythm of alternation over time. *Qi* refers to a pervasive force or energy penetrating the things of the world, including the human body. It is sometimes pictured substantively, other times as an animating impulse.

II. The Dao as Immanent

"Immanent" is opposed to "transcendental." When we speak of the Dao as "transcendent," we mean that it is, in some way, above the divisions and boundaries that we see as part of the ordinary world. A transcendent Dao might be something outside the world of experience, or something that is present in the world in a way that crosses what seem otherwise to be unbridgeable divisions. In discussing chapter 40, above, we referred to the idea that the Dao may exist on some plane beyond the phenomenal world

of experience – in something like the manner of Plato’s “Ideas” or the way the Christian God is often conceived as being beyond space and time. This would be an idea of the Dao as transcendental. A Dao that is immanent exists wholly within the phenomenal world, but nevertheless transcends all its boundaries, more like a permeating force.

11.

Thirty spokes share a single hub; grasp the nothingness at its center to get the use of the wheel.

Clay is fashioned to make a vessel; grasp the nothingness at the center to get the use of the vessel.

Bore windows and doors to create a room; grasp the nothingness of the interior to get the use of the room.

That which is constitutes what is valuable, but that which is not constitutes what is of use.

Although the Dao is not named in chapter 11, since “nothing” is often associated with the idea of a transcendental realm of the Dao – as may be suggest in chapter 42 above – this chapter seems to present an alternative way of thinking of “nothing” as naming something present within the phenomenal world and the possible locus of the Dao, rather than something beyond the world of “being.”

34.

a> **The Great Dao flows everywhere, at our every right and left. Relying upon it, the things of the world are born, yet it remains wordless; its work done it takes no name as the doer.**

b> **Clothing and nourishing the things of the world, it never acts as their lord – constant without desire, it may be termed small. The things of the world return to it but it never acts as their lord – it may be termed great.**

Because it never takes itself to be great it is able to complete its greatness.

Is the Dao here pictured as transcendent or immanent? It is pervasive throughout the world, but it seems to act as an independent entity to which things “return.” Although the competing interpretations of “immanent” and “transcendent” are of central concern to interpreters, the text does not seem to clearly distinguish the two as alternative formal notions of how the ultimate ground of reality may be conceived.

III. The Dao in ‘Nature’

The *Dao de jing* associates images from nature (here meaning simply those aspects of the world not modified by human activity) with the Dao and uses them in some cases as models for people to emulate. Interpreting such imagery as a serious attempt to portray the action of the Dao, rather than as merely a helpful metaphor, tends to support the “immanent” interpretation of the Dao.

16.

Reaching the ultimate of emptiness, deeply guarding stillness, the things of the world arise together; thereby do I watch their return.

The things of the world burst out everywhere, and each returns to its own root.

Returning to the root is called stillness; this is called returning to destiny; returning to destiny is called constant; knowing the constant is called enlightenment.

Not knowing the constant one acts blindly and ill-omened.

Knowing the constant one can accommodate; accommodation leads to impartiality; impartiality leads to kingliness; kingliness leads to Tian; Tian leads to the Dao.

With the Dao one may endure, and to the end of life one will not be in danger.

The Dao is not here specified as the source of the natural features described at the chapter's start, but the logic of the chapter seems to require that interpretation.

2. (d)

d> **Herein arise the things of the world, it does not turn from them; what it gives birth to it does not possess; what it does it does not retain. The achievements complete, it makes no claim to them. Because it makes no claim to them, they never leave it.**

What the "it" is in 2/d is not specified, but, as in the last passage, there seems no alternative to reading it as the Dao. The natural world is pictured as its disinterested product, as in the next passage.

39. (a)

a> **Those of old that gained the One:**
The sky (*tian*) gained the One and was thus clear;
Earth gained the One and was thus calm;
The spirits gained the One and were thus potent;
The valley gained the One and was thus full;
The things of the world gained the One and were thus born;
Kings and lords gained the One and were models to the world –
This is what the One brought about.
Without what makes it clear, the sky would likely split;
Without what makes it calm, the earth would likely collapse;
Without what makes them potent, the spirits would likely dissipate;
Without what makes it full, the valley would likely run dry;
Without what gives them birth, the world of things would likely be extinguished;
Without what makes them honored, kings and lords will likely topple.

39/a allows us to be sure that there is some form of immanent notion in the *Dao de jing* – the idea of a single One that penetrates and in some way animates and makes operative the structures of the phenomenal world. The Dao is not named, but, as in other cases, it is difficult to imagine that it is not implied.

78.

- a*> **Nothing in the world is more weak and soft than water, yet nothing surpasses it in conquering the hard and strong – there is nothing that can compare.**
All know that the weak conquers the strong and the soft conquers the hard.
But none are able to act on this.
- b*> **Thus the sage says that he who receives the derision of the state is the lord of the state altars; he who receives the misfortune of the state is the king of the world.**
- c*> **Straight words seem to reverse themselves.**

The analogy between action in the non-human world (water and rock) and the political world of mankind, operating as the passage shifts from 78a to 78b is a serious one. The non-human world is a medium in which the lessons the Dao teaches us are expressed.

IV. *Wuwei* – the Operation of the Dao

The term *wuwei* means literally “lacking doing.” It appears frequently in the *Dao de jing* (along with other negatives, such as “lacking [any] undertaking”) as a description of the spontaneous and disinterested operation of the Dao, and as a prescript for the way human beings should behave to be like the Dao. Because *wuwei* does not involve the cessation of *all* action – breathing, eating, and so forth seem to be consistent with it – it should be thought of more as non-striving: never acting in order to realize some goal of rational planning. It is a complement to spontaneity, denoted by a Chinese term (*ziran*) and related phrases which are generally rendered using “of itself/themselves” in this translation. *Wuwei* is, at root, spontaneous, unpremeditated, ordinary action.

37.

The Dao is ever non-acting (*wuwei*), yet nothing is undone. If a lord or king can preserve this the things of the world will of themselves be transformed.

Transformed, should desire arise, I will press it down with the uncarved block of namelessness. The uncarved block of namelessness – surely then they shall be without desire. Without desire and thus still, so will the world be settled of itself.

The “uncarved block” is a repeated metaphor in the text, used to symbolize an ideal human condition or disposition that stands in contrast to the “patterned” (*wen*) character of human society, prized by Confucians as the *dao* inscribed by former sages. A parallel metaphor in the *Dao de jing* is “undyed cloth.”

48.

- a*> **He who studies is daily enlarged; he who follows the Dao is daily diminished. Diminished and then diminished yet more, at last attaining non-action (*wuwei*). Never acting, nothing is undone.**
- b*> **To control the world, undertake nothing. Once you undertake to do anything you are unfit to control the world.**

The close of chapter 48 indicates how the idea of emulating the non-action of the Dao is tied in the text to political ideas.

V. The Dissolution of Values

Early Daoism is sometimes called “relativistic,” and that term can apply to it in a variety of senses. Sometimes it signifies that the texts authorize no single view of what reality consist of (a position most often associated with the *Zhuangzi*). This section collects some sections of the *Dao de jing* that take a relativistic position towards the world of values, calling into question their objective status and, implicitly or explicitly, recommending that we abandon our commitments to them.

2. (a-c)

- a*> **All in the world deem the beautiful to be beautiful; it is ugly. All deem the good to be good; it is bad.**
- b*> **What is and what is not give birth to one another,
What is difficult and what is easy complete one another,
Long and short complement one another,
High and low incline towards one another,
Note and noise harmonize with one another,
Before and after follow one another.**
- c*> **Therefore the sage dwells in the midst of non-action (*wuwei*) and practices the teaching that has no words.**

In 2a, polar opposites of conventional value are identified with one another. In 2b, the image is less of identity than of continuity and necessary dependence. We may wonder whether these were two independent positions, placed in proximity by an early editorial hand so that the second would serve as an “explanation” of the first, softening its paradoxical nature, or whether, indeed, the two are in sufficient conceptual harmony that we may conceive them as part of a univocal teaching.

5. (a)

a> **Heaven and earth are not *ren*: they treat the things of the world as straw dogs. The sage is not *ren*: he treats the people as straw dogs.**

A “straw dog” is explained in commentary as paraphernalia used during ritual ceremonies. Treated as sacred during the ceremony, straw dogs were subsequently crushed under carriage wheels.

20. (a)

a> **To assent and to object – how different are they? Beauty and ugliness – what is the distinction between them?**

Note especially here the parallel implicitly asserted between a relativistic view of values and a relativistic view of words or verbal assertions.

12.

**The five colors blind men’s eyes,
The five tones deafen men’s ears,
The five flavors numb men’s mouths,
Racing at a gallop in pursuit of the hunt maddens men’s minds.
Rare objects obstruct men’s conduct.**

Therefore the sage is for the belly and not for the eye. Therefore he discards the one and selects the other.

Chapter 12 appears to set up a value “dichotomy”: it pictures “eye” values and “belly” values, rejecting the former, but not the latter. Any book that *advocates* dissolving all values is implicitly introducing a value – the value of being free of values. This is an apparent contradiction, but it can be argued that if we apply the word “value” univocally (with a single, simple level of meaning), we obscure the fact that there can be different levels of value, and advocacy of value freedom as opposed to commitment to a world shaped by values is something quite different in structure from advocacy of one set of values over another set. Chapter 12 raises the question of whether the *Dao de jing* is attacking *all* values as mere conventions, or whether it is instead attacking those values that convention has prized, as opposed to other values that convention has overlooked.

38.

The highest virtue (*de*) is without virtue, hence it has virtue. The lowest virtue never deviates from virtue, hence it lacks virtue. The highest virtue does not act (*wuwei*) and has no reason to act; the lowest virtue acts and has reason to act. The highest *ren* acts without any reason to act. The highest right (*yi*) acts and has reason to act. The highest *li* acts, and if no persons respond, rolls up its sleeves and twists their arms.

Hence, only after the Dao is lost is there virtue; only after virtue is lost is there *ren*; only after *ren* is lost is there right; only after right is lost is there *li*.

***Li* is the thinning of loyalty and faithfulness, when chaos first raises its head. Foreknowledge is the blossom of the Dao, when ignorance first begins. Therefore, the great man dwells in the thick, not in the thin; abides in the fruit, not in the blossom. Thus he discards the one and grasps the other.**

This extended discussion of ethical terminology begins the “classic of De” half of the text – in some editions this is the initial passage of the entire text. Neither the term *de* nor the term *dao* were closely associated with a single philosophical school during the Warring States period; however, in discussing *ren*, *yi*, and *li* together, the text is clearly attacking the Confucian tradition.

VI. The Elimination of Words

1. (a)

- a*> A *dao* that may be spoken is not the enduring Dao. A name that may be named is not an enduring name.
No names – this is the beginning of heaven and earth. Having names – this is the mother of the things of the world.**

As noted at the outset, the theme of tension between language and the Dao is pervasive in the *Dao de jing*. Here, 1a is repeated to remind you that the issue is foregrounded in the opening passage of the “classic of the Dao” half of the text. A number of the passages below simply isolate sections of passages discussed above to call attention to how they address this tension.

2. (c)

- c*> Therefore the sage dwells in the midst of non-action (*wuwei*) and practices the teaching that has no words.**

34. (a)

- a*> The Great Dao flows everywhere, at our every right and left. Relying upon it, the things of the world are born, yet it remains wordless; its work done it takes no name as the doer.**

35. (c)

- c*> When the Dao is spoken as words, how thin it is, without taste. Look at it and it cannot be seen; listen to it and it cannot be heard. But use it, and it cannot be exhausted.**

41.

- a*> **When the best gentlemen hear the Dao they practice it assiduously. When middling gentlemen hear the Dao, sometimes they seem to have it, sometimes they seem to have lost it. When the least of gentlemen hear the Dao they laugh out loud. If they did not laugh out loud, it would not be the Dao.**
- b*> **Thus the “Standard Sayings” says:
 The bright *dao* seems dark,
 The advancing *dao* seems to retreat,
 The level *dao* seems steep.
 Highest virtue (*de*) seems a valley,
 Greatest white seems sullied,
 Broad virtue seems inadequate,
 Vigorous virtue seems to shirk,
 Plain virtue seems soiled.
 The great square is cornerless
 The great vessel is last complete,
 The great note is rarified sound,
 The great image has no form.**
- c*> **The Dao hides in wordlessness. Only the Dao is well begun and well completed.**

This unusual passage seems to combine three different approaches to the issue of speech. The Dao is conveyed in speech in 41a; in 41b is conveyed in the words of a wisdom text (otherwise unknown – perhaps simply invented in this passage); 41c asserts the gulf that exists between the Dao and words.

32. (a)

- a*> **The Dao is ever nameless. Though the uncarved block be small, it cannot be made the subordinate of any in the world. If a king or lord could preserve it, the things of the world would come to him of themselves. As heaven and earth conjoin to send down sweet dew, the people will settle themselves, though none so decrees.
 As soon as it is cut, then there are names. Once there are names one must know it’s time to stop. Knowing to stop is the way to avoid danger.**

The namelessness of the Dao is captured in the metaphor of the uncarved block in this passage. Its elusiveness is suggested in the contrast between its “size” and its critical status as key to good rule. The second part of 32a seems to recast the uncarved block as perhaps a primal, cosmic state, perhaps a primal, social state. It is not the size of the block that is critical in the metaphor, it is its undivided character. Naming and dividing are correlative here.

43. (b)

b> **Hence I know the advantage of non-action (*wuwei*). The wordless teaching and the advantage of non-action – few in the world attain to these.**

Echoing 2c, above, we hear in 43b the linkage of freedom from language and the ideal of *wuwei*.

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