

Dao de jing

Selections and Comments, Part II

This set of readings focuses on two levels of appeal in early Daoism: to the individual, it held promise to become a path to human perfection – sagehood. To rulers, whose patronage may have been sought by early Daoists, it promised a path to subduing the world and becoming a universal king.

VII. Self-Cultivation

18.

When the Great Dao was discarded, only then came *ren* and right. When wisdom and insight emerged, only then came the Great Artifice. When the six kinship classes fell out of harmony, only then came filiality and parental kindness. When the state is darkened with chaos, only then do the loyal ministers appear.

Passages like chapter 18 make it clear that if we wish to follow the imperatives that the *Dao de jing* seems to imply, we must avoid precisely the kinds of character traits that traditional self-cultivation prized – we are not to be *ren*, filial, kind, loyal, and so forth. But one of the problems that the *Dao de jing* presents as a prescriptive text, telling us how we should change, is that it unusually vague in telling us how to go about accomplishing that change.

19.

**Cut off sagehood! Cast out wisdom! The people will benefit a hundredfold.
Cut off *ren*! Cast out right! The people will return to filiality and parental kindness.
Cut off cleverness! Cast out profit! Brigands and thieves will nowhere be found.
As patterns, these three are insufficient and only make the people seek to add to them.
Exhibit the plainness of undyed cloth; embrace the uncarved block.
Be little self-regarding and make your desires few.**

We have encountered before the image of “the uncarved block,” here accompanied by the alternative metaphor of “undyed cloth.” When the uncarved block appeared in chapters 32a and 37, in the first set of readings, its primary association was with “namelessness,” but in chapter 37, the uncarved block of namelessness was pictured as a tool to suppress desire. Here, the two models of unembellished perfection are associated again with a clear prescript to make one’s desires few, a formulation we saw in the *Mencius*.

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.

Chapter 16 is a good example of the way the *Dao de jing* links the notion of returning to a “natural” state to features that we might associate more closely with human ethics. Notice how the passage moves from very vague statements that seem to relate to aspects we might associate with nature to a “ladder” of perfection (knowing the constant → accommodation → impartiality → kingliness) that seems very much tied into the social world, finally taking us beyond that to Tian and the Dao. The final sentence seems to tie the goal structure of the passage to desires for longevity, and underscores the prudential nature of this type of “Dao-seeking.”

55. (b)

b> **Knowing harmony is called constant; knowing the constant is called enlightened.**

To increase one’s nature is called inauspicious; when the mind directs the *qi* it is called self-coercion.

Note that, as in chapter 16, the chapter 55 invokes the value of “knowing the constant.” The second line seems so directly aimed against Mencius 2A.2 (the “flood-like *qi*” passage) that it is tempting to see it as a direct response. (The full chapter 55 appears below, in section VIII.)

10.

a> **As you carry your bodily soul embracing one-ness, can you never depart from it?**

As you concentrate your *qi* and extend your suppleness, can you be as a new born babe?

As you polish the dust from your mysterious mirror, can you render it free of all blemishes?

As you cherish the people and order the state, can you do so without awareness?

As heaven's gate swings open and shut can you keep to the female?

As your brilliant awareness penetrates everywhere can you refrain from employing it in action?

- b>* **You give birth to it, you nurture it – yet in giving birth you do not possess it, in doing it you do not retain it, in leading it you employ no authority: this is called mysterious power (*de*).**

In the first set of readings, we observed how the *Dao de jing* employs the images of the uncarved block and undyed cloth to symbolize the Dao, in contrast to the patterns that are characteristic of human society. Here we see another symbol, but one much more concrete: the new born babe (a much fuller description appears in 55a, below). Consider the contrast with Confucianism in taking the uncultured baby as a model for self-cultivation.

VIII. The Sage

20. (c)

- c>* **How joyous the mass of people are, as if banqueting on the sacrificed ox, as if mounting a tower in spring –**
I alone am still, without visible sign, like a new born baby yet to smile,
all listless, like one with no home.
The mass of people have more than enough –
I alone appear bereft; I, with the mind of a dolt, so slow.
Ordinary men are brilliant –
I am dim.
Ordinary men are perceptive –
I am closed.
Sudden, like the sea, like a tempest, as though endless, the mass of
people all have their means –
I alone am obstinate, uncouth.
I alone wish to be different from others, and value feeding from the
mother.

Both Confucianism and Daoism make the “Sage” (*sheng* 聖) an ultimate exemplar of human perfection. In discussing this in the Mencius, we noted how “totalistic” this goal is – all significant human excellence is comprehended in this grandiose ideal. As we encounter Daoist notions of sagehood, it will be useful to consider similarities and contrasts with Confucian models.

- a> In the past, those who were good at being gentlemen were subtle, marvelous, mysterious, penetrating – so deep they could not be fathomed. Just because they cannot be fathomed, I strain to describe their appearance:**
- Hesitant, as though crossing a winter stream;
Timid, as though fearing all nearby;
Reverent, like a guest;
Rent, like river ice soon to melt;
Solid, like an uncarved block;
Vacant, like a valley;
Turbid, like muddied water.**
- b> Who can be turbid, yet settling slowly clear?
Who can be at rest, yet moving slowly come to life?**
- c> One who protects this *dao* does not wish to become full. It is precisely because he is not full that he can be tattered yet new made.**

Passages like this tempt us to see the Sage as an inventory of characteristics. Book VII of the *Analects* (which largely describes Confucius) may share certain features of this approach.

55.

- a> One who possesses virtue in abundance may be compared to a new born babe. Wasps and scorpions, poisonous snakes: none will bite him. Fierce beasts will not maul him, predatory birds will not swoop down upon him.**
- His bones are weak, his muscles pliable, and his grasp is firm. He knows nothing of the female and the male, yet his male organ stirs. His essence is at its most pure. He can scream all day and not become hoarse. This is harmony at its height.**
- b> Knowing harmony is called constant; knowing the constant is called enlightened.**
- To increase one's nature is called inauspicious; when the mind directs the *qi* it is called self-coercion.**
- c> When things in their prime grow old, they are called 'contrary to the Dao'. What is contrary to the Dao comes to an early end.**

Compare 55a with the self-cultivation model presented in chapter 10, and the notion of aging and the Dao in 55c with the end of chapter 16.

IX. Prevailing in the World

43.

- a*> **The most pliant thing in the world will ride roughshod over the hardest. What comes out from where nothing is enters into what has no apertures.**
- 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.**

What might “the most pliant thing in the world” be referring to? Is there a way to make sense of the initial statement?

36.

- a*> **To shrink it you must stretch it; to weaken it you must strengthen it; to discard it you must raise it up; to seize it you must bestow it – this is called subtle discernment.**
- b*> **The weak and supple overcomes the strong and hard.**
- c*> **Fish must not emerge from the deeps; the vital tools of a state must not be revealed.**

The paradoxical rhetoric of chapter 43 appears here as well, and 43a is echoed very closely by 36b. Note that the chapter, as constructed, ties its string of paradoxes and oratorical utterances to the prosaic political message of 36c. A similar structure can be seen in chapter 28, which follows, which mixes paradox, self-cultivation, and politics more thoroughly.

28.

- a*> **One who knows the male but preserves the female becomes a ravine to the world. Such a one never swerves from constant virtue and returns again to be a new born baby.**
One who knows white but preserves black becomes a standard for the world. Such a one never deviates from constant virtue and returns again to being limitless.
One who knows glory but preserves shame becomes a valley to the world. Such a one is always supplied with constant virtue and returns again to be an uncarved block.

- b*> **When the uncarved block is dispersed, vessels are made from it. The sage uses these to become the leader of the officers of state. Thus the greatest carving never cuts.**

61.

A large state lies downstream; it is the female of the world. In intercourse, the female overcomes the male by means of stillness, because stillness lies below. Thus when the large state takes the lower position it controls the small state. When a small state takes the lower position, it places itself under the control of the large state. In the one case the state takes the lower position to control, in the other it takes the lower position to place itself under control.

Large states wish no more than to annex and nurture people; small states wish no more than to enter into service. Both gain what they wish. It is appropriate that the large dwell below.

It seems intuitively significant and reasonable that the *Dao de jing*, in sharp contrast to early Confucian texts, uses graphically sexual imagery to convey its points. Chapter 6 (at least as I have translated it) is probably the clearest instance of this imagery, but note the portrait of the new born babe in 55a, above. Here, in chapter 61, the logic of macro-politics is reduced to a meaningful sexual analogy.

7.

Heaven endures; earth long abides. Heaven endures and earth long abides because they do not give birth to themselves. Hence they are long lived.

Hence the sage places his person last, and it comes first; he treats it as something external to him and it endures.

Does he not employ selflessness? Hence he attains his self-regarding ends.

In analyzing the ethical vision of the *Dao de jing*, no issue is more vexing than the question of whether its goal structure rests on a cynical premise – does the Sage seek the Dao in order to comprehend the world in selflessness, or as a means to the self-regarding goal of wealth and power? When the text tells us that by pursuing the Dao we can live out our lives to their natural end and experience various types of passion-free satisfaction, it is appealing to a set of desires that seem qualitatively different from those it appeals to when it urges us to pursue the Dao so we can have the things we want before we begin the pursuit.

79.

- a*> **When making peace between disputants, there is always some remaining sense of dispute – how can this constitute a good act?**

- b> Therefore, the sage keeps hold of the creditor's tally but never calls in the debts others owe him.**
- c> One with virtue (*de*) oversees the tally, one without virtue oversees the payment.**
- d> The *dao* of Tian has no favorites; it always shifts to the good person.**

The ethical world of chapter 79 does not seem entirely consonant with that of the chapters preceding it here. The use of value language in 79d, in particular, seems to introduce into the text a moral discourse that is explicitly banished elsewhere. Yet chapter 79 does not seem inconsistent with chapter 81, below, which closes the text.

81.

- a> Trustworthy words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not trustworthy. Good words are not eloquent; eloquent words are not good.**
- b> The wise are not broadly learned; the broadly learned are not wise.**
- c> The sage does not hoard. Having used what he has for others, his possessions increase; having given what he has to others, he has more and more.**
- d> The *dao* of Tian benefits and does not harm. The *dao* of the sage is for others and does not contend.**

X. Reforming Society

3.

- a> Do not honor the worthy. This will keep the people from contention. Do not prize rare things. This will keep the people from becoming thieves. Do not display the desirable. The hearts of the people will not be turbulent.**
- b> Hence the governance of the sage:
Empty their minds and fill their bellies,
Weaken their wills and strengthen their bones.
Always render the people free of knowledge and desire. Ensure that the clever do not dare to act.**
- c> Engage in non-action (*wuwei*) and nothing will go unruled.**

In chapter 3, we are clearly in the realm of the ruler, and rulers are the audience for the passage. Why are our text authors addressing rulers – what are the goals of the text here?

Note that although in some senses, the *Dao de jing* is a radically egalitarian text, picturing all people as identical within the Dao, and rejecting the world of values wherein goods are apportioned unequally, in chapter 3 there is a strong asymmetry between the perspective of the ruler and the people he rules. The Machiavellian direction of the text in this respect made it one that was of great interest to the technical and amoral political philosophy of Legalism, which we will encounter later.

80.

Make the state small and the people few. Let there be arms for troops in tens and hundreds, but unused. Make the people treat death seriously and not move to distant places.

Though there be boats and carriages, they shall not be ridden. Though there be armor and weaponry, they shall not be deployed.

Let the people return to keeping records by knotted rope.

Their food sweet to them, their clothes beautiful to them, their homes comfortable to them, their customs joyful to them.

Though neighboring states be in sight of one another and the sounds of the cocks and dogs heard from one to the other, the people of one will never visit the other, even as they grow old and die.

This passage presents the utopian view of the *Dao de jing*, largely consistent in its overall vision with chapter 3, above, but without any emphasis on the role of the ruler, or any overtone of cynicism about the ruler's goals. Where chapter 3 concerns social control on behalf of the ruler's unique interests, chapter 80 presents a Primitivist ideal that governs all society – is this even a society with rulers? Although these two chapters are similar in rhetorical tone, they are very different in their underlying ideas, which seem almost in conflict. Indeed, when passages of the *Dao de jing* are analyzed independently, it sometimes seems as if what holds the book most coherently together is precisely its tone and poetic structure, rather than any coherence in ideas, though various consistent strands of thought clearly appear and reappear throughout.

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