

## ***Dao de jing* Selections I**

In addition to the online *Dao de jing* translation and introduction, this will be the first of two readings that will organize some *Dao de jing* sections under topical headers related to the issues we will discuss in class. Reading these particular chapters in this way in advance should help make the lectures clearer.

Note, however, that because the *Dao de jing* chapters are composites, a single chapter may have sections dealing with multiple topics, and most do. So in these readings, a chapter listed under the topic “The Dao” may also have sections on, for example, language or on desire – in fact, chapter 1 is an example of a text that deals with all three, the Dao and language in its <a> section, and desire in <b>. For this reason, you will find a cross reference to §1 <b> under the topic header “Non-desiring.”

### **Reading the *Dao de jing*: sampling one chapter**

The *Dao de jing* was clearly written to project a sense that the knowledge it conveyed was of so special a kind that it could not be conveyed in straightforward speech – in theory, not by any speech at all. Yet the text is with us and promises to be an access route to understanding the ideas inscribed in it. In addition to being willfully obscure in its rhetoric, the text is also challenging because the chapters are “montages” of ideas, themes, what appear to be contemporary homilies, and formulas of rhetoric that are often repeated over and over, without necessarily becoming clearer through repetition.

Before turning to the text, let’s consider the first chapter and the way it might be read:

- 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 two sections, <a> and <b>, may well have had independent origins and been joined in this chapter during a gradual process of compilation. While it may be possible to read the two sections as one continuous thought, it is legitimate to treat the as separate “micro-texts,” each a chapter thought in itself. Section <a> clearly is about the Dao and “names.” We know from our earlier discussions of the philosophy of language in early China that all words were conceived as being, in some sense, names, so <a> is really about the Dao and words, which makes perfect sense, since the opening sentence tells us that the “enduring” Dao cannot be spoken.

Section <b> is not about words; it is about desire – freedom from desire and having desire. The first two lines describe what you will see of the world from each of those two states. Some commentators, aware that the *Dao de jing* frequently advocates having no desires as a path to wisdom, believe that the second line, “Make having desires your constant norm; thereby you will see what is manifest,” was meant to be understood as describing an inferior point of view. Other commentators, aware that both this text and the *Zhuangzi*, the second great text associated with Daoism, often take the position that knowledge is relative, read the two lines as simply presenting alternative perspectives for viewing the world and not necessarily validating one and rejecting the other. Both interpretations are possible, but when we read the third line, “These two arise from the same source but have different names. Together they may be termed ‘the mysterious’,” we may be more inclined to the relativist interpretation, since this line places the perspectives of desire and non-desire on a continuum as two aspects or poles manifesting a single source.

The final line, printed as part of <b>, seems to close off that section, but it could actually have been added after the two parts of the chapter were fused together, picking off the term “mysterious” from the end of <b> in order to look back on <a> and suggest that the relation of the Dao to words (or perhaps the Dao itself as being beyond words) is a second mystery – thus, “mystery and more mystery,” referring to sections <a> and <b> as two mysteries. If so, the line might actually best be labeled section <c>, entering the text at a different stage from <a> or <b> and standing outside them to comment on both together. This ambiguity alerts us to the provisional nature of the internal breaks in the chapters, and to the need to think about what the component parts might have meant in isolation, and also how their meaning may be altered when they take their place in the text as it ultimately came to be. (One issue you will not have trouble with is the question of the many translation options available, the current rendering being only one set of choices. For example, it is possible and reasonable to translate the last line more literally as “the further mystery of the mystery,” which might change our understanding of what the “gate of all that is subtle” refers to.)

The *Dao de jing* gives every appearance of having been written to encourage this kind of intellectual reflection, repeating the text over and over to seek out coherence at many levels. The text makes only a minimal effort to constrain the reader’s thoughts with clarity of expression. This may be a device to ensure that ultimately, the reader follows the book as a “pointer” to insight, rather than relying on “words” alone – it may equally be that the authors and editors were not themselves quite sure what they wanted to say. Regardless, what is certain is that rather than reading through the book quickly to understand its ideas, it is probably more productive to focus on a subset of passages and reflect on their many interpretive possibilities, letting the text work on you the way that its creators seem to have intended.

## Topic 1. The Dao

How are we to conceive of the Great Dao? Two fundamental options are to picture it as transcendent or as immanent. 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, below, we may see the idea that the Dao exists 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.

### §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 <*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.”

In this translation, Dao will be capitalized as a proper name when the word seems to signify a single, transcendent notion. 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.

### §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 <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 *shangdi* 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., 39 <a>), 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.

## §32

*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.

*b*> The Dao is to the world as the Yangzi and sea are to streams and brooks.

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 section <a> 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.

#### §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.

#### §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.

Section <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.

#### §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 character of the Dao is conveyed in speech in section <a>; in <b> it is conveyed in the words of a wisdom text (otherwise unknown – perhaps simply invented in this passage); <c> asserts the gulf that exists between the Dao and words.

#### §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.
- b*> The things of the world bear Yin on their backs and embrace the Yang. They exhaust their *qi* in harmony.
- c*> People detest being orphaned or widowed or unemployed, yet these are the terms kings and lords use to refer to themselves.
- d*> One may detract from a thing and it is enhanced thereby, or enhance it and so detract from it.

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* here is used to refer to a pervasive force or energy penetrating the things of the world, including the human body, but other animate things as well.

#### §51

- a*> The Dao gives birth to them, virtue (*de*) rears them, things give them form, circumstances complete them.  
 Thus all things in the world revere Dao and honor virtue. That the Dao is revered and virtue honored is ordained by no one; it is ever so of itself.  
 Thus the Dao gives birth to them and virtue rears them – fosters them, nurtures them, settles them, completes them, nourishes them, covers them.
- b*> To live but not possess, to act but depend on nothing, to lead without directing, this is called mysterious virtue.

### **Topic 2: Nothingness**

cf. §40 <b> above

§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 suggested in chapter 42 above – that 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.”

**Topic 3: Non-desiring**

cf. §1 <b> above

§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.

§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.”

§46

- a> When the Dao prevails in the world, fast horses are corralled for manure; when the Dao does not prevail in the world, steeds of war are born in the city pastures.
- b> There is no calamity greater than not knowing what is sufficient; there is no fault greater than wishing to acquire. Thus the sufficiency of knowing what is sufficient is eternal sufficiency.

#### **Topic 4: Nature as a model**

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.

#### §8

Highest good is like water: water benefits the things of the world and does not contend. Dwell in places that the masses of men despise.

#### §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. 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.”

cf. §25 above

#### §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 section <a> to <b> is a serious one. The non-human world is a medium in which the lessons the Dao teaches us are expressed.

### **Topic 5: Reversal**

cf. §40 <a> *above*

#### §77

- a> The *dao* of Tian is like the stretching of a bow: the high is brought down and the low is raised up; it takes from what has abundance and supplies what is wanting. The *dao* of Tian takes from what has abundance and supplies what is wanting, but the *dao* of man is not thus. It takes from what is wanting in order to supply what has abundance.
- b> Who can serve Heaven by means of abundance? Only one who possesses the Dao.
- c> Hence the sage acts but relies on nothing. His task accomplished, he does not take the credit: he does not wish to manifest his worth.

### **Topic 6: Wuwei: “non-striving”**

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 or, in the words of a recent interpreter, “effortless action.” 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.

#### §27

- a> Good traveling leaves no wheel ruts; good talking makes no slips; good counting uses no counters.  
Good shutting uses no bolts, yet cannot be opened; good tying uses no cords, yet cannot be undone.
- b> Therefore, the sage is always good at rescuing people, thus he never abandons any person; he is always good at rescuing affairs, thus he never abandons any affair.  
This is called stretching enlightenment.

Thus the good person is the teacher of those who are not good, and those who are not good are grist to the good person.

Not to honor one's teacher, not to cherish one's grist – though one may be clever, this is to be lost adrift.

This is called the pivotal mystery.

cf. §37 above

#### §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.

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

#### §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.

#### §63

- a> Engage in non-action, undertake having no undertakings, taste the tasteless. Enlarge the small, increase the few, requite hostility with virtue (*de*).
- b> Plan for the difficult on the basis of the simple, do great things on the basis of details – the difficult undertakings of the world are all arise from simple situations, and the greatest undertakings in the world all arise from small details.
- c> Hence the sage never does a great act, and is thus able to complete his greatness.
- d> Thoughtless assent always brings little trust; many easy acts always lead to many difficulties. Therefore the sage seems to treat them as difficult, and thus never has difficulties.

#### §64

- a> When things are at rest they are easy to maintain; when situations have not yet emerged they are easy to plan for. When brittle, things are easy to split; when minute things are easy to disperse.  
Deal with things before they occur; order things before they are disordered.

- b*> A tree trunk several arm spans round was born of the tiniest seed. Towers nine stories high rise from foundations of piled earth. A journey of a thousand *li* begin with the first footfall.
- c*> He who acts, fails; he who grasps, loses.  
Therefore the sage takes no action (*wuwei*) and hence has no failure, does no grasping and hence takes no loss.
- d*> When people pursue an undertaking, it is always at the point of success that they ruin it. Attend at the end as you did at the start and you will have no failures.
- e*> Therefore, the sage desires not to desire and does not value goods hard to come by; he learns not to learn and redeems the errors of the masses.  
Assisting the things of the world to be as they are in themselves, he dares not act.

### **Topic 7: Knowledge and value**

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*> 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 wordless teaching.
- 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.

In section <a>, polar opposites of conventional value are identified with one another. In <b> 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.

What the “it” is in <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.

## §5

- 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.
- b*> All between heaven and earth is like a great bellows--  
Empty, yet it does not collapse,  
The more it is moved the more it issues forth.
- c*> Many words are soon exhausted;  
Better to preserve the central.

## §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.

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.

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.

## §39

- 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.

- b*> Therefore, the honored takes the lowly as root; high takes low as foundation. For this reason, kings and lords refer to themselves as ‘the orphan’, ‘the widow’, ‘the unemployed’ – does this take the lowly as the root or does it not?  
 Hence the utmost renown is to be unknown. Have no wish be glossy like jades, rather be hard like stones.

Section <a> allows us to be sure that there is some form of immanental 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.

### **Topic 8: Language**

cf. §1 <a> above

#### §23

To be sparse in speech is to be spontaneous.  
 Thus wind squalls do not outlast the morning and teeming rain does not outlast the day.  
 Who causes these? Heaven and earth. Even heaven and earth cannot long persist thus, how much less can man.  
 Those who follow the Dao are alike in Dao with others who follow the Dao, are alike in virtue with others who have virtue, are alike in loss with others who have loss.  
 Alike in Dao with others who follow the Dao - he delights indeed in grasping the Dao;  
 alike in virtue with others who have virtue - he delights indeed in having virtue;  
 alike in loss others who have loss - he delights indeed in having loss.  
 Where faithfulness is insufficient there is unfaithfulness.

cf. §32 <a> above

#### §56

- a*> Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know.  
*b*> Blunt the point,  
 Undo the tangle,  
 Soften the glare,  
 Join the dust.  
 This is called the dark joining.  
*c*> Hence one cannot become close to it, one cannot become distant from it, one cannot profit it, one cannot harm it, one cannot honor it, one cannot disdain it.  
 Thus it is honored by the world.

## §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.

**Topic 9: Value relativity**

cf. §2 <a> *above*

cf. §12 *above*

## §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.

## §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.

§45

- a*> Great perfection appears defective, so use can never make it worn; great fullness seems vacant, so use can never make it empty. Great straightness seems bent; great skill seems clumsy; great eloquence seems inarticulate.
- b*> Haste overcomes cold, tranquility overcomes heat.
- c*> Clear and tranquil, be a standard to the world.