

5.1 Shen Dao's Great Dao

Here we'll take a look at some proto-Daoists, as well as Shen Dao, the first theoretical Daoist.



The Hermits

The earliest forerunners of Daoism are the hermits that crop up in the Analects. Like Yang Zhu, they emphasized **living alone**, not getting involved in politics or society. They were **anti-social, anti-political, anti-moral, anti-complexity**.



The Agriculturalists 農家

They valued the natural, physical, primitive state of human beings before there was society. They advocated **no division of labour** and having **no ruler**. Each person makes his own clothes, grows his own food, and so on.

Note that primitivism need not imply ethical egoism, like that of Yang Zhu. Primitivists simply reject the starting point of **names, roles, social statuses** (see lecture 2.1), or anything that **distorts natural behavior**.

Shen Dao (慎到 Shèn Dào)

Shen Dao counts as the first theoretical Daoist, the first to make the concept of 道 **dào** motivate his doctrine.

The Zhuangzi contains a history of thought leading up to Zhuangzi. Shen Dao (and school) represent a stage in this trend of thought. The text relates Shen Dao's sayings and attitude:

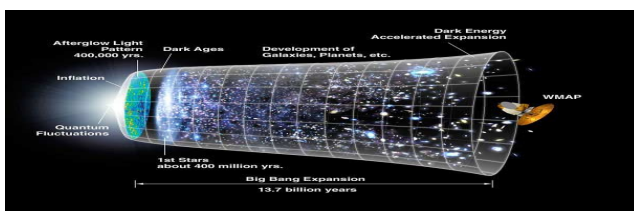
天能覆之而不能載之，地能載之而不能覆之，大道能包之而不能辯之。

Heaven can overturn it, but it cannot convey it; Earth can convey it, but it cannot overturn it. The Great Dao embraces all things, but it cannot distinguish among them.

The Zhuangzi passage continues,

是故慎到，棄知去己，而緣不得已，泠汰於物以為道理，曰：「知不知，將薄知而後鄰傷之者也。」謏譏無任而笑天下之尚賢也，縱脫無行而非天下之大聖，椎拍輓斷，與物宛轉，舍是與非，苟可以免，不師知慮，不知前後，魏然而已矣。推而後行，曳而後往，若飄風之還，若羽之旋，若磨石之隧，全而無非，動靜無過，未嘗有罪。是何故？夫無知之物，無建己之患，無用知之累，動靜不離於理，是以終身無譽。故曰：「至於若無知之物而已，無用賢聖，夫塊不失道。」

Therefore Shen Dao abandoned knowing and discarded “self,” and flowed with the inevitable. Calmly and passionless toward things, he deemed there was no path or guidance. He said: “know to not know; to deploy even a thin veneer of knowing would end in landing in dangerous territory.” Careless of his body and irresponsible, he sneered at the ambition to ambition to worthiness in the social world. Haphazard and without direction, he rejected the great sages of the social world. Beating, soothing, disregarding, he twisted and turned thing-like. He took leave of *this* along with *not-that*; was sloppy with *permissible* and *avoid*. He didn't teach knowing and reflecting; didn't know *before* and *after*—simply got on carelessly. Push and he went that way, pull and he walked that way—like being blown about by the wind, twisting like a feather, like inertial turning of a millstone. Complacent, he rejected nothing, acting or still he eschewed *wrong*, never even hinted at *guilt*. Why thus? Well, unknowing things, lack the concerns of a constructed self, have no use for the toils of knowing. In acting or repose, they don't separate from natural tendencies, so in their lives no regret. Hence it is said “just be like an unknowing thing; avoid worthies and sages; even clod of earth cannot miss *dào*.” (Zhuangzi: Chapter 33: 4.)



We can think of Shen Dao's Great Dao as **the sum of the way everything happens in the course of history**. It is the history of everything, from the very beginning, to the very end. We can picture this with a modern scientific illustration of **the expansion of the universe from the moment of the Big Bang** (here the horizontal axis is the time dimension).

So what advice does Shen Dao derive from his conception of Great Dao?

Great Dao is simply the actual course of world history. You need no knowing to conform to it. You need no social dao stored in language, no distinctions, no judgments. Nothing can **fail at following Great Dao**, Great Dao consists of what we things all do, all that actually happens, even to a clod of earth!

Note Shen Dao even rejects Yang Zhu's **ethical egoism**. Having a guiding with a concept of **self** means making distinctions, judgments, and following prudential guidance. Simply be and that will be Great Dao.