

## 5.2 Fatalism and the Great Dao

Let us explore Shen Dao's reflections through the lens of some Western “free will” concepts.

Western philosophical tradition had an ancient preoccupation with **determinism** (the course of the world, including our behavior, is fixed in advance or forced) vs **free will**. (see handout 3.5.) Consider 3 types:

- **logical determinism**
- **scientific (or causal) determinism**
- **fatalism**

### 1. Logical determinism

Logical determinism is a truth of logic: an empty, tautological claim made true by its form alone.

Consider the statement form: **A is A**.

Any replacement for A in that form will be a true statement. It doesn't depend on the world. Consequently, it is not a very *useful* statement, while true, it can add nothing to what we know. Consider an example where we could replace “A” with “a horse”. That gives us:

**A horse is a horse.**

True, but useless. You don't have to know anything about horses to see it is true. Now we can see how this is like Shen Dao's Great Dao. Simply replace “A” with “what will be”. That gives us:

**What will be is what will be.**

That statement sounds deterministic. It sounds like we're saying “you can't change things so stop trying.” But it is a simple, empty, logical truth that tells us nothing about what we can do to change things.

Consider a prescriptive form: “**Do what you will do.**” Does it tell us what to do?  
Not very helpful as guidance!

### 2. Scientific determinism

Scientific determinism relies on the concepts of **law or causation**. The idea is: if you knew all the scientific laws of the universe and know the position and velocity of every particle, you'd be able to predict precisely what will happen tomorrow—including human behavior. Free will is a huge topic in Western philosophy, but we merely note that Shen Dao did not use **causation, laws or prediction** in his account of **Great Dao**.

### 3. Fatalism

Fatalism combines some version of determinism with a theory of free will to conclude that we cannot change the future. The future course of events is fixed. It is fated, and we should abandon thinking about how to change it.

### Which of these three forms of determinism best characterizes Shen Dao's theory?

Shen Dao seems to arrive at his **fatalistic-sounding** conclusion from 1. He does not talk about will (or moral responsibility) but about **guiding knowledge**. As we saw in 5.1, he suggests we abandon all knowing and act **as if** we cannot change the actual path of the world, the Great Dao. But the Great Dao simply is the actual course of the cosmos—past **and** future. So Shen Dao's **determinism** seems to be **logical determinism: what will happen is what will happen**.

### An alternative reading

But perhaps we don't need to attribute such a position to Shen Dao, especially since he did not present the issue in free will terms. An alternative way is to think of Shen Dao's reflections as making Hume's point:

**You can't get an “ought” from an “is”.**

In other words, perhaps Shen Dao is simply pointing out that the concept of an actual way the world is can't entail any judgments about how to behave. The **Great Dao** is merely the way things actually happen. No guidance to be extracted from it. You can't get an “ought” [guidance] from an “is” [the Great Dao].

But if that's Shen Dao's position – that there is no guidance to be had – then we can see why other classical Chinese philosophers complained: “**This is not a *dào* (guidance) for the living; it is a *dào* for the dead!**”