

5.7 無為 wú wéi: the prescriptive paradox returns

Here we will look at the paradox in the concept of 無為 wú wéi and discover that it is the same paradox as we saw in Shen Dao, but in a much richer and more interesting form.

Laozi distinguishes between

social, conventional distinctions
e.g., the five colours

vs.

natural distinctions

e.g., the colours our natural eye can distinguish

and this distinction lines up with the distinction between

socially acquired desires

vs.

natural desires

Laozi's idea is that along with learning a distinctions, we also **acquire a new tendencies to desire and be averse to the two contraries—like desiring beauty and eschewing ugliness**. These desires, in turn, guide us to 為 wei (treat the parts so divided in socially *appropriate* ways). To wei is to act on social constructs. So we learn the whole system of social control: 1) a distinction, 2) two opposite names, 3) new desires linked to those names and 4) behavior the socialized desires induce, and call the whole complex **knowing how to act**.

Now notice, Laozi has just taught us the distinctions above and, with them, we have a new desire: to free ourselves from social control. We act on this new desire by what Laozi calls **forgetting (the opposite of knowing)** You forget until you go back to the child-like state before you acquired language distinctions and socially constructed desires. This is the formula for:

無為 wú wéi: No behavior directed by socially constructed desires

The paradox

But in order to guide your life by the principle of 無為 wú wéi, that requires drawing a distinction between:

為 wéi (wei-ing)

vs.

不為 bù wéi (not wei-ing)

And that distinction is *itself* a social construct that Laozi has drawn for us. So the paradox returns:

In order to follow the principle of 無為 wú wéi (cease acting on socially constructed desires), you have to **use a social construct**: the distinction between 為 wéi and 不為 bù wéi. But then that means if we behave according to 無為 wu-wei we must wei—use the social construct, the distinction and the associated desire go guide our behavior.

Interestingly, Laozi, unlike Shen Dao, seems to recognize the paradox here. He actually formulates it. At one point he talks about avoiding the distinction itself: 無為 wú wéi and yet 無不為 wú bù wéi.

道常無為而無不為。

Some guide treats lacking deeming-action as a constant, yet everything is deem-acted.

(Daodejing, Chapter 37, trans. Chad Hansen)

So Laozi recognizes that one has to get rid of both sides of the distinction. We cannot simply lack 為 wéi (names, distinctions, socially constructed desires) without also lacking the self-defeating injunction “don't act on social constructs.”

So the prescriptive paradox we saw in Shen Dao, arises again in Laozi, but this time it is tied in with a much richer and more interesting theory of language and desire, and Laozi **recognizes** he is mired in paradox.