

5.6 Laozi's theory of desires and 無為 wú wéi

Laozi's analysis focuses on natural vs. social desires.

In the Daodejing, Laozi seems to react negatively to a number of things:

- naming
- distinctions (opposites)
- desires
- deeming & acting (為 wéi-ing)

For example, in a famous passage, Laozi focuses on the way names always come in opposites. He writes,

天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已。皆知善之為善，斯不善已。故有無相生，難易相成，長短相較，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨。

The social world's knows to deem the beautiful as "beautiful," thus the ugly already! The social world knows to deem worth as "worthy," thus worthlessness already. Similarly "exists" and "not-exists" mutually sprout; "difficult" and "easy" are mutually performed; "long" and "short" are mutually gauged; "high" and "low" mutually incline; "sound" and "tone" mutually blend; "before" and "after" mutually follow.

(Daodejing, Chapter 2, trans. Chad Hansen)

Here Laozi observes that when a learned, known shared social *dào* guides us to deem (為 **wéi**) beautiful things as 'beautiful', automatically there will be **the ugly**: things that are not deemed (為 **wéi**) as beautiful. The same goes deeming entities at good-at something entails some are not good at it. Ditto for existence (it implies non-existence), and so on.

Laozi is making a point about language that the Later Mohists had made earlier using the concept of 辯 **biàn** (distinctions). Every name comes with a distinction that creates two sides: the 是 **shì** (this) and the 非 **fēi** (not that). The *Laozi*, however, doesn't use those Mohist terms; he poetically links the opposing *names* (terms).

The difference from Mozi is that Laozi implicitly sees something inauthentic in distinctions. They involve an optional creative element that he views as *social* rather than natural. *Society* created and infused these distinctions into our guiding mechanism. They draw our attention and affect our perception. In this next famous passage, Laozi doesn't talk of opposites, but of the impact of a conventional number of **socially constructed** distinctions. He notes how they impair our natural perception of difference.

五色令人目盲；五音令人耳聾；五味令人口爽

The five colors stupefy the people's eyes.

The five tones desensitize the people's ears.

The five flavors numb the people's mouths.

(Daodejing, Chapter 12, trans. Chad Hansen)

The **five process theory** was a feature of late Classical thought that imposed a 5-factor correlation on nature and social guidance. Laozi suggests this lumping into 5's (five colours, elements, tastes...) distorts natural guidance; a person doesn't react to the world as subtly when society thus constrains our natural guiding faculties.

In several other passages, Laozi highlights natural spontaneity using a metaphor of uncarved wood.

無名之樸，夫亦將無欲。

Nameless uncarved wood is, in general also being on the point of lacking desires.

(Daodejing, Chapter 37, trans. Chad Hansen)

As soon as the block is cut, as with pairs of opposite names, it becomes an artefact. It ceases to be natural and its identity becomes a social one (a bowl). Social *dào*s with those names are learned along with desires for bowls. Using nameless uncarved wood starts us on the road to freedom from socially conditioned desire.

無為

wú wéi
(lack) (deem)

Don't act on socially constructed desires.

So this is Laozi's way of diagnosing the disease and the remedy. To rid ourselves of these controlling social desires, we get rid of (forget) names. Learning names subjected us to social manipulation and domination of our natural spontaneity. The cure is to start at the root and forget the whole structure of "knowing how to act:" names, distinctions, desires and the resultant deeming behavior he calls 為 **wéi**. Hence 無為 **wú wéi**: eschew guiding behavior with social constructs.