

5.8 Laozi: a dao of reversal

The famous first line of the Daodejing is:

道可道，非常道。

Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào.

Daos can be guided; they are not constant guides.

(Daodejing, Chapter 1, trans. Chad Hansen)

Here **dao** is being used as a verb as well as a noun. We saw this when we were talking about Confucius on punishment (lecture 2.7). To **dao** is to guide. So we can **dao** (verb) a **dao** (noun). We guide someone to take a path. Or we may guide them along the path. If we guide them along a path, then it follows that one could follow that path differently—what I would call wrong—非 *not that*. So that path is not self-guiding—it needs proper interpretation. Daos can be dao-ed, hence they are not **constant daos**.



What kinds of **daos** are constant **daos**?

For example, consider the law of gravity. If you tell someone to **obey the law of gravity**, he'll say, "It's pointless to **dào** me to follow gravity—it is a constant **dào**." One doesn't need guiding to follow gravity. So the complaint about Shen Dao's Great Dao applies to any **constant dào**. Guiding you to it is pointless.

The second line of the first chapter is:

名可名，非常名。

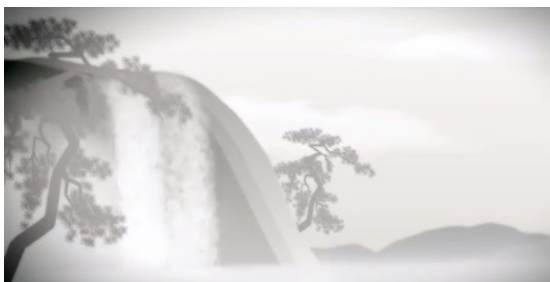
Names can be named; they are not constant names.

(Daodejing, Chapter 1, trans. Chad Hansen)

This has exactly the same grammatical structure as the first line, and hints at a relation between **dào** and names. What makes **dào**s **dào**-able (and changeable) is we can use words (signposts) in different ways. Names are conventional, not tied to the natural world in one, fixed way. They can be linked in different ways.

The reversal of opposites

As we saw in lecture 5.6, Laozi points out that every word comes with its linked opposite; and with **every word we learn a pattern of behavior-guiding desires toward the two sides** (for the beautiful, for example, rather than the ugly). Laozi now takes the concepts in use (the currently dominant social **dao**, such as the Confucian **dao**) and tries **reversing that dao: making every "desirable" side undesirable and vice versa**. Reversing, he says, is how **dào**s move. The bulk of his philosophical poem consists of this kind of reversing: value the thing that is normally treated as the lower, or lesser of the two: value the cool, the dark, the moist, the female, lack and absence.



The example of water

天下莫柔弱於水，而攻堅強者莫之能勝，其無以易之。弱之勝強，柔之勝剛，天下莫不知，莫能行。

In the social world, nothing is softer or more pliant than water. And yet when it attacks firm, rigid things, none of them is able to win. This is due to their lacking that with which to metamorphose it. That the pliant wins over the rigid, the soft wins over the hard. In the social world, no one fails to know. [Yet] no one is able to execute.

(Daodejing, Chapter 78, trans. Chad Hansen)

Laozi emphasizes the value in being more passive. There's a **value in taking the lower position** because if you take the lower position you can only do better. Look at water, Laozi says, water's ability to find its path is its natural **德 dé** (virtuosity). It constantly seeks a lower position. And it is very passive, receptive, conformable. It doesn't push hard against things, and yet it wears away even the hardest rock.

So what is this **dao** of reversal for Laozi?

We can read this **dao** of reversal as a lesson about how **daos** can be changed. You can come to see the value of feminine styles of dealing with problems, as opposed to only masculine styles. You can come to see the value of emptiness, quietude, passivity, solitude. All of these are ways of being that you would be ignoring if you followed the dominant social **dao** all the time. Laozi teaches us to know guiding flexibility.