

5.3 Shen Dao and the prescriptive paradox

So Shen Dao's advice, as we've seen, is to "abandon knowing". Abandon knowledge, abandon language, abandon all forms of guidance, abandon the making of distinctions. Basically, Shen Dao advises us **not to follow any advice**. But now we seem to have a paradox...

Shen Dao: "Don't follow any advice!"

You: "Okay, I won't follow any advice. Oh, but wait a minute... Shen Dao, if I do what you say, if I don't follow any advice, then doesn't that mean I'm following *your* advice? And then that means I *am* following advice, after all. So it's impossible for me to obey you!"

The paradox:

If I *obey* Shen Dao's advice, then I am *not* obeying his advice. So in order to obey his advice, I must *ignore* his advice! But then I am not obeying his advice. To obey is to disobey; to disobey is to obey...

We may call this a **prescriptive paradox**, because it is a paradox in prescription form (advice, guidance). This is the kind of paradox we see most often in ancient China. We don't find semantic or logical paradoxes so much as **paradoxes about guidance**.



You can probably think of analogous prescriptive paradoxes in everyday life. For example, imagine an expert on parenting, who, when asked for his advice to parents, says:

"Don't listen to the experts!"

Well, if you listen to that advice, then you're listening to an expert! So it is impossible to follow that advice!

"Don't listen to the experts!"

So it turns out that Shen Dao's advice to "abandon knowledge" seems to have **two** problems:

1. The advice doesn't provide any actual guidance at all. (As we saw in 5.2.)
2. The advice generates a paradox and so obeying it is disobeying it. (As we see here.)

We noted in 5.2 that the Zhuangzi history includes the first criticism as "a *dào* (guide) that doesn't *dào* (guide)." Its version of the second is "Cannot avoid being *fei* (not-that:wrong)" The next thinker between Shen Dao and Zhuangzi in *The Zhuangzi* history is **Laozi**, who liked something about Shen Dao but implicitly shared these criticisms. How did Laozi try to improve on what he "likes" from Shen Dao?