

## HOW TO READ DAOIST TEXTS PHILOSOPHICALLY

The *Laozi* is a collection of dense, minimalistic verses: it strikes the reader as a gossamer of obscure images reflecting one another through an almost contextless semantic darkness. Its philosophical methodology might be described as structuralist: meaning is conveyed through the juxtaposition and contraposition of ideas. In ancient Chinese texts, meaning is often encoded in sentences with parallel structures, arranged in couplets, triplets, or larger groupings. This is especially so in the *Laozi*. Philosophical claims are made through comparison and contrast. When they are compared with surrounding sentences that contain explicitly evaluative terms, it often becomes clearer what is being promoted and what is being criticized.<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg Moeller demonstrates how metaphors and images that recur through the text have structural significance; they allude to one another, creating epicenters of resonance.<sup>31</sup> Though arguments can sometimes be discerned and reconstructed, they are not the primary means of philosophical persuasion; rather, there is a network of images and ideas with explicit and implicit parallel structures of significance. Interconnections build and shift as one develops familiarity with the verses, but the meaning never crystallizes into a final form. Despite its popularity, this methodology makes the *Laozi* one of the most difficult texts to interpret in a responsible manner.

The primary mode of philosophical discourse in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi* is literary: they philosophize through literature, especially narrative. Philosophical ideas and worldviews are sometimes expressed literally, but this is not the favored method. More commonly, ideas are *exemplified* in stories. This is especially appropriate for discussions of pragmatic and existential concern. The purpose of the stories is often to challenge conventional wisdom by exploring anomalous cases: unfamiliar things, people, and circumstances that complicate our naïve presuppositions. But the existential significance of the anomalous cases can rarely, if ever, be expressed as a straightforward universal “moral.”

The method of narrative is also used to explore Daoist views of the world. This can be thought of as a kind of phenomenological discourse: the narrative passages encode philosophical presuppositions, and analysis of the unfolding of events yields an understanding of the worldview behind the narrative. The presuppositions of any worldview allow for certain kinds of

possibilities, limiting what may or may not happen; what occurs in the stories will therefore exemplify those possibilities, and thereby help to reveal those presuppositions. Each element of the story has a philosophical function in relation to other elements. A specific character who is able to perform certain tasks, for example, is being used to make a general point about the conditions and possibilities of human action. The unfolding of events, and relevant evidence from other stories, texts, and contexts provides further evidence for either the development or the correction of philosophical interpretations.

Discussions between interlocutors provide a more familiar source of philosophical discourse. Aside from the explicit statements of philosophical views, analysis of the discussions can also uncover deeply held convictions, styles of argument, and the means through which ideas may appropriately be challenged. The narratives and discussions are sometimes interspersed with highly abstract discourses about fundamental concepts, such as existing and not existing, right and wrong, things and boundaries. This method is used when considering issues of ontological, epistemological, and cosmological significance. It can be understood as a type of phenomenological explication: a reflection on our most fundamental concepts, the relations between them, and how they function to construct our understanding of the world as we engage with it. Unfortunately for the reader, these explicit passages tend to be dense, expressed with obscure vocabulary, paradoxical, and lacking sufficient context for clear and straightforward interpretation. But active interpretation is also part of the pleasure of engaging philosophically with ancient Daoist texts.

The elements of Daoist narrative often include fantastic beings and events that cannot be interpreted literally. The narrator of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* is not literally claiming that there exists a fish the size of a continent. One must extract the salient characteristics of the image, metaphor, or fictitious entity and identify what philosophical concepts it is being used to explore. There may, of course, be more than one. The size of the fish may represent vastness as that which goes beyond our ordinary understanding, as well as the vastness of the cosmos, while the fish, the darkness, and the ocean represent the *yin* phases in the transformations of things.

The myths and narratives that exemplify a general point should not be treated as articulating a strictly universal claim, unless the text explicitly says so. Rather, there is a general 'maxim' exemplified by the particular story: that is, a contextualized generalization. When similar stories are contrasted,

it is the differences in detail and in context that are significant. Thus, one should refrain from explaining the ideas as absolutely fixed structures that describe an independent reality. The very choice of narrative as a philosophical medium should call into question such realist presuppositions. The hermeneutic techniques required for reading fiction would be an odd choice for someone intending to describe literally the structures of an independent world. On the contrary, this method of writing, thinking, and reading requires the reader actively to interpret and reinterpret the structures of the world represented.

Lastly, Chinese philosophy does not divide into separate areas in the way that Western philosophy does. All texts have multiple layers of significance. Images, metaphors, and narratives may have linguistic, epistemological, cosmological, ethical, and political implications simultaneously. Even the most abstruse arguments are rarely far from having a pragmatic application. When the *Zhuangzi* investigates the nature of linguistic judgment, the possibilities of knowledge, or the ontological generation and determination of existing things, the context of the discussion is existential: how to live wisely in the face of the uncertainties of life and the inevitability of death.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Fundamental Concepts of Chinese Philosophy

Some terms play a foundational role in the philosophical discourse of a culture and get passed down as continuing themes, either presupposed by the tradition or made the explicit object of discussion and argument. In the West, these have included “truth,” “reality,” “illusion,” “beauty,” “justice,” “mind,” “essence,” and “God,” among others. These concepts are widespread, and although they are explained differently by different thinkers, they are foundational to much Western philosophical discourse. Indeed, the words are often capitalized to indicate that what they refer to has an ultimate, transcendent, or absolute status. They do not, however, generally play a central role in the early Chinese philosophical tradition, and what appear at first glance to be Chinese equivalents turn out to have significantly different meanings in the Chinese context. The most important concepts presupposed, or explicitly discussed, by Chinese philosophers include “*dao*” (way), “*tian*” (the natural world, the cosmos, the heavens), “*ren*” (human), “*wen*” (culture), “*wei*” (artifice), “*yan*” (language), “*wu*” (nothing, absence), “*qi*”

(energy, mass-energy), “*yinyang*” (complementary contrasts), “*xing*” (natural tendencies), and “*zhen*” (genuineness). These can be considered fundamental insofar as they tend to be presupposed in some form or another by early Chinese thinkers and writers. Their importance largely remains unquestioned, and though they may be explained in different ways, the manner in which they are used retains a distinctive core, suggesting something fundamental to early Chinese worldviews.

But there are also fundamental *modes of thinking*: modes of discourse and practice through which we attempt to understand the world. These fall into four broadly conceived kinds: the rational, the empirical, the pragmatic, and the hermeneutic. Rational discourse emphasizes reflection on the meanings of concepts to discover the essential structures and properties of anything to which they could possibly refer, and attempts to refine arguments to demonstrate the truth of one theory by eliminating all other hypotheses as impossible. Empirical discourse emphasizes the senses and controlled experiments: our observations provide data to be explained in terms of mathematical patterns described by natural laws. Pragmatic discourse emphasizes concepts and practices whose primary purpose is to enable us to solve problems and live flourishing lives. And hermeneutic discourse emphasizes making sense of the world, our lives, and our multifaceted forms of significant experience, giving them meaning and value through interpretation. Versions of all of these can be found throughout the history of Western culture; some have emerged as privileged over others by what have arguably become the dominant modes of discourse of Western culture in general and Anglo-American philosophy in particular. The rational and the empirical have primacy, with the pragmatic taking second place and the hermeneutic relegated to a lower status in terms of its capacity to yield a reliable understanding of the world and our experience. The Chinese cultural tradition has followed a different tendency, with the pragmatic and hermeneutic being valued as the primary modes of understanding and the rational and empirical falling to second place.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I shall discuss the fundamental Chinese concepts “*dao*,” “*de*,” “*tian*,” “*ren*,” “*yan*,” “*wei*,” “*wen*,” and “*yinyang*,” in light of these cross-cultural considerations, highlighting important differences in category, worldview, and modes of discourse, especially as exemplified in the various ways “*dao*” has been understood.<sup>2</sup> What will emerge most distinctively are the pragmatic, processive, hermeneutic, and naturalistic tendencies of early Chinese philosophical thinking.

## DAO 道

The word “*dao*” is often said to be the most basic concept of Chinese philosophy. It might be thought of as having the same philosophical status as “Truth” or “Reality” in Western philosophy. Literally, it means “path” or “road.” Etymologically, it consists of the radical for “walk” on the left hand side, 辵, and the graph for “head” on the right, 首. The “walking” radical under which the word is classified in the modern dictionary once took the form of a foot taking a step on a path.<sup>3</sup> A *dao* is the path one takes, the path one makes, and the path as it guides those to follow. Many words contain this component; notably, it is used almost exclusively for verbs related to movement of some kind.<sup>4</sup> By extension it takes on the abstract sense of “way” or “ways”: *how* processes occur or how things ought to be done. Thus, even as a noun its connotations are processive and adverbial. A *dao* might be social, political, personal, or natural. Confucius and Mozi, for example, advocate ways that are simultaneously social, political, and personal; Zhuangzi and Liezi, ways that are both cosmic and personal but with social consequences; the syncretist Daoists combine this with a way to govern a state.

The philosophical use of the term contains an evaluative element; it implies not only the way the world is but also the way it should be. There is thus a source of tension in the use of the word. There is not just one way the world is, but many; some result in flourishing, some result in destructiveness. The task of the sage or philosophical master is to identify which ways lead to flourishing and which do not: to forge a more fruitful path and show us how best to negotiate it. The Confucians, Mohists, and Legalists believed that it was the wisest of the leaders who were able to discern, chart out, and implement those ways. In contrast, the Daoists believed that we once conformed to those ways naturally, until we began to follow artificial procedures and social conventions.

### *Dao* as Pragmatic

Traditionally, “*dao*” has been rendered in English as “The Way” or “The *Dao*,” with its importance and uniqueness emphasized by capitalization and use of the definite article. It appears to name a unique thing, often described as static, unchanging, and eternal: the underlying ground or Substance, the ultimate Reality behind the appearances. However, this conception of *dao*

as transcendent turns out to be a presupposition of the reader or translator rather than implicit in the text. The concept of strict transcendence is highly artificial and attempts to outreach the limits of ordinary language. It may be defined as that which goes beyond the world of experience and must be posited as necessary for its existence.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, concepts intended as metaphysically transcendent have invariably been accompanied by extensive discussions and arguments distinguishing them from naturalistic and pragmatic impostors. Thus, the concept of metaphysical substance as the logical condition of the possibility of change or as the necessary substrate in which qualities inhere is distinguished from material or physical substance; the concept of a transcendental self as the condition of the possibility of unified consciousness is distinguished from any concept of a natural self that can be empirically experienced; and the metaphysical distinction between the world of mere Appearance and the ultimate Reality that underlies it is differentiated from the everyday practical distinctions we make regarding what things are and how they appear. That is to say, the everyday concepts, meanings, and distinctions that are pragmatically encoded into our ordinary language must be artificially, and therefore explicitly, refined into their idealized or absolutized counterparts.

It is significant that Daoist texts do not contain such discussions. When we read early Daoist texts more neutrally to discover whether they express views that are more consistent with metaphysical or pragmatic presuppositions, the evidence appears to favor the latter. The fundamental tendency of Chinese philosophy, even at its most rarified intellectual heights, remains grounded in pragmatic concerns and hermeneutic methodology. That is, Chinese philosophers attempt first and foremost to interpret the world and thereby investigate its significance for us, our lives, and our behavior. To say that the discourse of *dao* is pragmatic is to say, in part, that the context of even the most theoretical questioning is always how it works, and how we might learn from it. Philosophers such as Huizi, who had a tendency to get lost in abstract paradoxes and contradictions, were criticized dismissively and remained relatively unimportant precisely because their philosophies lacked, or were believed to lack, pragmatic relevance.<sup>5</sup> To say that a methodology is hermeneutic is to say, in part, that it uses meanings, images, narratives, and metaphors to interpret and make sense of our experience of the world. Hermeneutic methodology makes extensive use of what Pierce calls “abduction”—

interpretations of scant evidence that fill in the blanks, as it were, painting a picture, telling a story, or articulating a theory that thereby makes sense of our limited experience (whether perceptual, aesthetic, or linguistic) in more or less plausible ways.<sup>6</sup>

### *Dao* as Holistic and Immanent<sup>7</sup> Source of Things

The *Laozi* articulates a conception of *dao* that is understood to be originating, mothering, beginning. This deep, generative aspect is often understood in the strongest sense of metaphysical “transcendence,” utterly beyond the empirical world of which we are aware and in which we engage, and in some sense prior to and responsible for it. Now, ordinary questions and answers should not strictly be taken to be metaphysical unless they explicitly reject the adequacy of naturalistic explanation: they become metaphysical when, and only when, the necessity of something utterly beyond the natural world is either explicitly argued for or can be demonstrably shown to be presupposed. The development of ordinary questions from the naturalistic to the metaphysical can be traced through a certain kind of logical procedure. A fundamental question is raised about all natural phenomena, but any answer given in terms of natural phenomena is regarded as insufficient, on the grounds, implicit or explicit, that nothing can explain itself.

Western texts that articulate a conception of a transcendent origin go to great lengths to provide extensive arguments of this nature.<sup>8</sup> They try to show explicitly that holistic, naturalistic accounts cannot succeed, because they result in contradictions. Of course, transcendent accounts of the origin of the world are riddled with logical problems of their own, but those who articulate them appear to do so from a conviction that holistic accounts should be shown to be impossible. To confidently attribute a conception of a nonempirical beginning or origin, that is, an origin beyond the natural world, to Daoist thinkers, we would need to find extensive argument showing that anything worldly will not suffice as an explanation. However, in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, there is no unambiguously explicit articulation of an ultimate reality that is different from and superior to the realm of practical experience. In the absence of such an explicit argument, it is unwise to simply assume that the authors of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* shared these convictions.<sup>9</sup>

On the contrary, a fundamental theme of early Daoist philosophy, the holistic interdependence of opposites,<sup>10</sup> even of something and nothing,