

## Lao Zi Uses Glaring Clarity to Benight One's Vision

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How can something so simply stated be so little understood? The first chapter of the *Dao De Jing* is written in parallel prose that is intended to dramatically proclaim, not the yin-yang duality claimed by the noted commentator Wang Bi, but an opposition between the phenomenal and the noumenal that it claims is exhibited in the structure of everything in the Universe.

道 dào	The Way	名 míng	Names
無名 wú míng	nameless	有名 yǒu míng	nameable
始 shǐ	embryonic	母 mǔ	mama (mammary)
無欲 wú yù	desireless	有欲 yǒu yù	desireful
妙 miào	miraculous	徼 jiào	superficial

Notice how the columns show a deliberate opposition. On the left side the items are all noumenal. They are the mysterious Way that captivates the attention and curiosity of all those who study the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuang Zi*, the nameless (i.e., something that people are incapable of characterizing in words), the embryonic (which shares the hiddenness of an embryo in the womb), the desireless (which indicates the detachment of the observer), and finally a word that is much like the Melanesian word “mana,” that Bronislaw Malinowski described as the word that the Trobriand Islanders uttered when they encountered something that was utterly incomprehensible and also very powerful.

The complements of the left-side ideas are all words that apply to phenomena. They are the commonplace experiences that give rise to concepts and names, and are as a consequence nameable, opposite in character to the embryo because the mammary glands are external, palpable, universal in human experience and the state of being full of desires and other related kinds of emotions that lead humans to their many attachments, and they can all be described as merely superficial aspects of reality. Literally, they are the fringes, something like the coat of fur that conceals the structure and musculature of an animal such as a tiger. The fringes or the fuzz can show the general outline and identity of something, but at the same time the inner nature of the observed thing is screened from view.

The left-side concepts and descriptions all relate to something that is there in human experience when the language center of the brain does not interpret it.

The second part of the first chapter of the *Dao De Jing* elaborates on the functions and relationships among the two aspects of the universe that have just been

mentioned. It indicates that the *miào*, the ineffable experiences that connect us with the engines of operation of the universe, are available when one is in a state of desirelessness. But the *Dao De Jing* does not leave it at that. It continues to say that the ordinary phenomena of the world, the things humans need to be aware of and react to in order to survive, are available when one is in the ordinary state of having desires. In shamanic cultures, the shaman is understood to be able to pass between two worlds. The shaman is a member of the community and, as a shaman, he or she enters the other world to seek information or other aid from the gods. Community members who see the shaman when in his or her paranormal state will observe one thing. The shaman will see another world and will report his or her findings while in the trance state. The “other world” of the Daoist adept is the same universe that ordinary people experience, but it is seen without conceptualizing it or dealing with it in words.

According to the Daoists, there are two aspects to reality, the realm of the noumenal, and the realm of the phenomenal, and these two aspects are fused. They are brought into existence together from some deeper level of reality, but they have two different names. The ground level from which these two emerge can only be called “dark and mysterious,” because humans cannot gain awareness of it. It is only known as the source from which all the marvels of the universe emerge.

The foremost authority on the *Dao De Jing* is Wang Bi (226–249). By his time, ideas about yin and yang that were given great importance because of their association with the 易經 *yì jīng* *Book of Changes* must have dominated many of the conversations of the group called the Neo-Daoists. His commentary to the *Dao De Jing* gave many interpretations in terms of yin-yang theory. Both yin and yang apply to things of this world. Metaphysically speaking, they are on the same level. In terms of the analysis given in the *Dao De Jing* and described above, they both apply to the phenomenal world. In later elaborations of ideas originating in the *Yi Jing*, both yin and yang are the first-level products of the supersensible 太極 *tài jí* Grand Ultimate.

Perhaps because of the general acceptance of Wang Bi’s scholarship and genius, the idea that there is a level deeper than the phenomenal world, a world on which conceptualizations are imposed by the activity of human minds, has apparently disappeared from view.

Here is my translation of the first chapter:

As for ways, if one can be directed along it, it is not the constant Way. As for names, if it can be given as a name, it is not a constant name. Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth. Named is the mother of the myriad creatures. So always be without desire in order to observe its ineffable efficacies, and always be with desire in order to observe its outer fringes. These two emerge together and are differently named. Together, they are spoken of as the dark

and mysterious. The most dark and mysterious of all the dark and mysterious is the portal of the multitude of ineffable efficacies.

Starting with the first chapter, Lao Zi links motivations that are relevant to maintaining individual existence with loss of objectivity and separation from the reality that underlies the flickering appearances of the phenomenal world. This opposition is not a zero-sum kind of conflict. To the contrary, each aspect of reality experienced by human minds can deepen the significance and utility of the other. The sage, therefore, is one who can visit either of these separate realities at will. The phenomenal reality determines whether we eat or starve, whether we live or die. The noumenal reality is that anvil against which our conceptualizations are tested. Those conceptualizations that badly correspond to the underlying reality will lead humans astray, and progress can only be made by expunging them and moving on to something more fitting.

British sinologist Arthur Waley made a great contribution to our easier understanding of the *Dao De Jing* when he translated 樸 pú as “the Uncarved Block,” because it helps clarify what Lao Zi means by 制 zhì, to fabricate. It answers the question, “Use your tools on what?” The image that Lao Zi gives us is of a single continuous reality, an all-inclusive unity, of which we are seeming parts. As fuzzily defined regions in the whole, humans find themselves capable of creating internal maps of that which is clearly outside of their individual domains. What Lao Zi calls “fabricating” might somewhat more fittingly be described as drawing outlines (or, more accurately, drawing envelopes) around what we thereafter regard as 物 wù creatures.

The fabrications performed on the Uncarved Block exist only in individual human minds. Humans share information or opinions about creatures when language permits them to agree upon approximately equal or nearly identical envelopes that everyone can try to fit to various regions in the universe, regions that are then called creatures. It is common for there to be obvious differences in the values attached to these creatures, but there is plenty of room also for individual differences in the envelopes (or, one might say, the defining characteristics noticed by several different observers).

The Uncarved Block is not anything like damp clay upon which humans can impose forms as they see fit; instead, it can very effectively thwart human desires to make it conform to their ways of thinking. The *Dao De Jing* does not deny the reality of the Uncarved Block, i.e., the reality of the Universe. It does indicate, however, that humans can easily make discrete entities (discrete in mental existence, that is) that do not fit well with their underlying reality and that eventually will need to be changed as they prove themselves problematical.

Intellectual history consists of a long series of abandoned fabrications that humans have attempted to impose on the Uncarved Block. Humans thus far have always

found that many of their most important fabrications prove unfitting at some level of investigation and attempted validation. Even modern physics has failed to put the phenomena covered by Quantum Mechanics into a larger theory (grand theory of everything) that is also consistent with Relativity. The question for the future is whether humans can make a model, a convenient fiction, that works well for that whole range of phenomena. If and when physicists succeed, they will have refabricated the Universe and the creatures found in it one more time.

It must have been very trying and very frustrating for early 20th century physicists to put aside the ideas that were at the center of Newtonian physics and venture into the worlds of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. However, the Universe would not bend to the demands of commonsense human conceptualizations.

Zhì means to cut, to fabricate, as one would carve wood into some semblance of a real thing or into some utilitarian shape.<sup>1</sup> Metaphorically speaking, the Uncarved Block is what we need to understand, yet it is too vast to be comprehended as a whole. Humans single out regions of that continuum that seem to us to be coherent and significant parts of the whole that impact our continuing existence.

This cutting or fabricating operation performed by human minds is done upon the Uncarved Block, and humans are often unwilling to give up their fabrications no matter how problematical they may have become in everyday life. The sky is clearly blue, as anyone can see. Who doubts that the sun passes across the sky from east to west?

Fabrication is done to facilitate the kinds of operations that are necessary for human survival, and yet the results are often problematical because they depart too far from the underlying reality; witches and warlocks do not exist. “Races” are social constructs.

Humans cling to past fabrications because they value them for their apparent utility; to change the most cherished fabrications, one must first put human clinging into remission via deep relaxation, also known as meditation.

Zhuang Zi uses another simile to explain concept formation, the employment of “fish traps,” i.e., a human-created analog-in-thought for a wire-frame object that can enclose one kind of thing and not another and thus provides a way of identifying things as to general kind.

In the *Dao De Jing*, the Uncarved Block, Lao Zi’s analog for the undivided unity of the entire universe, is over and over again associated by contrast with the word 欲 yù. This word is ordinarily translated as “desire” or “to want,” but it must include all the feelings invested in things that one fervently wishes to experience or not to experience, and it must include any other kind of motivational forces or impulses that can distort one’s thinking.

Being without desire is central, in the view of the Daoists, to being a good ruler. The non-verbal ethical or moral suasion of a good ruler is so pervasive, in the view of the author(s) of the *Dao De Jing*, that they depict the sage as saying, “ I am without desire and the people become wholesome (like the Uncarved Block) without outside intervention.” (Chapter 57.)

In some way that I do not understand, the completely undifferentiated state of the Universe called the Uncarved Block can be applied by the sage to quell desires in the hearts of ordinary people. Chapter 37 says:

The Way is always without ado and yet there is nothing it fails to do. If the nobles and kings could manage to preserve it, then the myriad creatures would transform by themselves. Should they transform and yet desire arise anew, I would suppress it by means of the absence of names that characterizes the Uncarved Block. [By means of] the nameless Uncarved Block, [they] will in future be without desire. By desirelessness stilled, all beneath Heaven will in the future become settled on their own.

Purification of the mind is closely related to eliminating selfishness and desire. In Chapter 19, the text advocates extirpating sageliness, benevolence, ingenuity, and similar things in each of these main categories, and then restates these matters in other terms:

Show forth the unbleached silk,  
Embrace the Uncarved Block,  
Diminish selfishness and desire.

The “unbleached silk” is another simile used to illustrate the universe before it has inked lines drawn on it that set 物 wù creatures apart from each other by means of the analytical and conceptual capacities of the human mind. Selfishness and desire can be decreased to the extent one is able to keep to the unelaborated state, the natural state of the universe before human minds start to cut it apart. Selfishness and desire are two different names for the same general characteristic that humans share with other animals, which is their possession of drive states and other kinds of motivations that cause them to seek certain things and certain outcomes. This interested seeking inevitably distorts human perceptions to some extent.

In Chapter 37, the author(s) of the *Dao De Jing* tell the reader that if individuals can become able to dispense with names (concepts) then they will also be unable to experience desire:

Should they transform and yet desire arise anew, I would suppress it by means of the absence of names that characterizes the Uncarved Block.

[By means of] the nameless Uncarved Block, [they] will in future  
be without desire

The Daoist way of explaining what makes a thing a thing is confounding to many or most people. If a person grows up thinking of all categories, all definitions such as those of genus and species, all concepts of a geometrical or mathematical nature, etc., as having a perfect exemplar in the world of ideas, or a related fundamental form from which individuality is produced only by imperfect realization in the world or opinion or the result of little contingent modifications called “accidents,” then the Daoists’ way of thinking of creatures and how they get their natures will seem very strange and perhaps even offensive.

Nevertheless, Daoist thinking does not threaten most of the the practical results of ordinary epistemological assumptions. The Daoist way does not deny what we have learned in the past couple of centuries about biology because, following the general Daoist path to understanding the environment, we ought to come to the same general conclusions that have been expressed by others as scientific fact. However, the Daoist way of analysis precludes the idea that there are pervasive stereotypical structures in nature such as race. Even genera and species are understood to be useful fictions.

Daoist thinking, like modern philosophy of science, challenges the idea of a kind of realist epistemology, the idea that universals exist and guide our process of categorization of things in nature. Consider a medium size herd of chinchillas that was established many years ago by selecting individuals from many herds and putting them all on an isolated island. After many generations have passed they will all appear almost identical, but if their genomes are investigated many differences will be found from individual to individual. If we consider the real connections among them going back to the time of the foundation of the herd, it will be clear that there are real links among all of them. So the apparently isolated existence of each of them is a way of looking at them that is analogous to looking at a slice of a tall tree “cut out” from its height of 50 feet and its height of 50 feet one inch. One would just see one-inch sections of tree limbs, all apparently standing independently.

One problem for a realist interpretation is that it assumes the existence of discrete individuals and ignores the real connections among them that exist in the past. The seemingly individual chinchillas are all physically connected (even though those connections are at earlier points in time). That is another way of saying that all of them are physically related and therefor have a fairly high degree of similarity. But there is no one of them that stands as the obligatory defining specimen for all of the rest of them.

Put aside the subjective demand for discrete individuals and some intractable practical problems disappear. If there is no Platonic idea of the perfect chinchilla,

and if there is no Aristotelian form of the chinchilla, with “accidents” to account for the many subtle differences among them, what changes? There is no obviously valid reason for denying membership in this group to a chinchilla that is missing a leg. Humans are clear when they are using ordinary language that there are the ordinary chinchillas that have four legs and there are also some individuals that would properly be described as “a chinchilla that is missing a leg.” But a belief in universals demands a way to deal with the individual that becomes alienated from its original class membership because of an injury or a developmental imperfection.

The idea that a chinchilla who has lost a leg is a non-chinchilla can be counted as acceptable for practical purposes, but that provisionally acceptable idea hides a big problem. If somebody were to insist on this definition for some purpose (buying chinchillas for sale as pets, for instance) then nobody could really disagree with that special definition as long as it were kept for use only in its appropriate contexts. The question remains, “What do we call an animal that was formerly a chinchilla but lost a leg?”

The genetics that determine what is there to be seen in a herd of chinchillas does not determine what you as the perceiver make of the rich field of experience spread out before you when you see most of them at the same time. Your mind looks at the outside aspects of these little animals and constructs a stretch-to-fit envelope that will successfully “grab” any one of them, but will not attach itself to a rat or a marmot.

To get at the inner structure of a chinchilla, one’s mental activity must literally go below the level of the surface. A biologist determining the genus and species of one of the animals captured from the herd would not only measure and characterize it from the outside, but also dissect it and look for characteristics that distinguish it from other members of the same Family. Perhaps all chinchillas inherit a unique shape of hydroid bone. All of the inner structural elements of the organism might be well characterized before researchers began to work out its genome. Even at the level of the genome, there is no one “perfect” genome and a great number of imperfect genomes. Instead there are just many genomes, the differences among which may sometimes be found manifested in superficial features that the earliest researches had surely already noticed.

Once humans realized that they could attach names to the 物 wù they had created, and even discuss them using other words they had created, it was a small step to make verbal descriptions of creatures that have never been seen, and create (mentally, that is) the shrink-fit envelopes for each of these creatures. Some, such as the Loch Ness monster may never be found. Others, such the coelacanth previously seen only in fossil form, have eventually been found.

There is likewise no Platonic idea of the circle, of  $\pi$ , etc., but humans create these things, and concepts such as  $\pi$  can prove very useful in learning more about nature.

Concepts that were given names such as “electron,” “proton,” etc. could be used to name things that humans could not see and yet could investigate by the use of instruments. Theories could be formed using such concepts, mathematical concepts, geometrical concepts, etc. All of these components of modern science have to fit with the underlying reality that humans experience, and yet they are all creations of the human mind and do not have a necessary validity.

One indication of the fragile nature of convenient fictions, the concepts that humans create to try to understand their world, was the path that the physicists associated with the Copenhagen group took to success. Werner Heisenberg decided that he must use no second-order concepts. He could avail himself only of things for which he had direct evidence. He said he intended to “discard all hope of observing hitherto unobservable quantities, such as the position and period of the electron” and “try to establish a theoretical quantum mechanics, analogous to classical mechanics, but in which only relations between observable quantities occur.”

What Heisenberg hoped to attain by these new means was some improved model the validity of which could be judged by how well it corresponded to the way nature or the Universe really works. If he were to make a theory that did not prove successful, it would soon be apparent because the universe would push back where his theory was wrong.

He had already made a useful approach to his new theory by reason of work that he had done on the way a beam of light is dispersed when it passes through a medium such as oil. In that study, done with Kramer, experimental data was in the forefront by reason of the nature of the practical problem.

From reading accounts written about attitudes and states of mind of Niels Bohr and the people around him during the period just prior to the formulation of the new quantum theory, it appears that there had for some time been a definite air of discomfort and almost of despair because the universe as seen at the level of atoms and atomic particles stubbornly refused to be comprehended by their efforts. They asked themselves whether nature really could be as irrational or crazy as it appeared to be when they examined it in the laboratory. When Heisenberg wrote his “magical” paper of 1925, there appears to have been a kind of universal sigh of relief. Yet they did not seem to have any way of easing their remaining labors or solving their further problems except to keep going stubbornly forward until a new way of thinking about quantum-scale events delivered itself out of a somewhat chaotic background.

A lingering source of discomfort, at least for those who had not thoroughly internalized the new way of thinking about quantum scale physics, was a substantial loss of connectivity between the world as seen by physics and the macro world of everyday life.

Reduction of discomfort and progress toward a more useful theory came from a drastic cutting back on dependence on earlier-established convenient fictions or models. Putting aside previously acceptable second-order conceptualizations, to put it bluntly, putting aside convenient fictions concocted on the basis of treating more general or fundamental convenient fictions as though they could be regarded as axioms, turned out to be a successful way forward. It eliminated hidden assumptions that could not be supported by empirical evidence.

The Copenhagen group of physicists seems to have determined not to base anything provisional on some other provisionally accepted idea, and not ever to disattend from the fact that what may have become one's accepted approximation to the truth is in fact provisional and forever in danger of being invalidated.

Arthur Waley, in a strangely analogous way, made a discovery about the way of thinking being manifested in the *Dao De Jing*, a discovery that was correct in spirit and general direction. Right or wrong, most other translators and/or commentators on that book seem to have rejected his idea. Just as some people have wanted to make the *Zhuang Zi* into a kind of disguised Western philosophy, a philosophy that was preoccupied with logic, set theory, and paradoxes, so others have rejected the suggestion that the *Dao De Jing* might have something to do with what might today be called meditation or deep relaxation used to put fear and other emotional blinders out of operation. However, to Waley it was a central concern.

Arthur Waley's introduction to his translation of the *Dao De Jing*, called *The Way and Its Power*, is well worth reading for its awareness that Lao Zi insists on maintaining the capability to smoothly disengage one's mind from an old convenient fiction that has turned out not to fit well with reality. If you do not have the book, you can find it on Amazon dot com and read it in the "Look Inside" offering. Search for "quietism" to see the section of his introduction that is most relevant to what I have to say here.

On page 44 of the 1956 printing, Waley says, "[T]he business of the 'self-perfecter' was to work his way back through these layers till 'man as he was meant to be' was reached. Through this 'stillness', this complete cessation of outside impressions, and through the withdrawal of the senses to an entirely interior point of focus, arose the species of self hypnosis which in China is called *Tso-wang*<sup>2</sup>, 'sitting with blank mind', in India *Yoga*, *dhyāna* and other names; in Japan, Zen. A definite technique was invented for producing this state of trance. The main feature of this technique was, as in India, breath-manipulation—the breathing must be soft and light as that of an infant, or, as later Quietists said, of a child in the womb."

<sup>1</sup> 國語辭典：制：切割。《淮南子·主術》：「賢主之用人也，猶巧工之制木也。」

<sup>2</sup> In pinyin romanization this is zuò wàng. The hanzi are 坐忘.