

The Limit of Language in Daoism

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The paper is concerned with the development of the paradoxical theme of Daoism. Based on Chad Hansen's interpretation of Daoism and Chinese philosophy in general, it traces the history of Daoism by following their treatment of the limit of language. The Daoists seem to have noticed that there is a limit to what language can do and that the limit of language is paradoxical. The 'theoretical' treatment of the paradox of the limit of language matures as Daoism develops. Yet the Daoists seem to have noticed that the limit of language and its paradoxical nature cannot be overcome. At the end, we are left with the paradoxes of the Daoists. In this paper, we jump into the abyss of the Daoists' paradoxes from which there is no escape. But the Daoists' paradoxes are fun!

Introduction

'Don't be guided by any guidance!' is a paradoxical guidance. The only way to be guided by the guidance is by not being guided by it. But not being guided by the guidance, we are guided by it. How can we be guided or not be guided by this guidance?

The main theme underlying Daoism is the paradox of this sort. The Daoists noticed the paradoxical nature of the guidance such as above. They 'played' with the paradox throughout the development of Daoism.¹

This is not the picture that is painted by the dominant view of Daoism, however. Traditionally, Daoism is considered as mysticism. The Daoists are traditionally viewed as being concerned with *the Dao* which is 'the way the universe works' (Waley, 1934, p. 30). According to the tradition, *the Dao* is 'something very like God' (Waley, 1934, p. 30) and 'a completely independent entity, and replaces heaven in all its functions' (Lau, 1982, p. xx). Yet *the Dao* cannot be spoken of. Hence *the Dao* 'refer[s] to a mystical reality' (Schwartz, 1985, p. 194).

As is argued by Hansen (1992), the traditional view of Daoism must be rejected. It is philosophically fallacious to hold the view that the Daoists are concerned with mystical reality, *the Dao*. Instead, the Daoists provide 'theoretical' treatment of the guidance 'Don't be guided by any guidance!' and its paradoxical

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nature. They are fascinated by the paradox of guidance. The Daoists' slogan is not 'Be one with *the Dao!*' but 'Paradoxes are fun' as is the case for a contemporary philosopher Sainsbury (1995, p. 1).

In this paper, I trace the history of Daoism by following the development of the paradoxical theme of Daoism. The treatment of the paradox of guidance matures as Daoism develops. The Daoists are critical of their predecessors and expose their paradoxes. But they seem to have noticed that their paradoxes cannot ultimately be 'resolved'. At the end, we are left with the paradoxes of the Daoists.

Now, without any further ado, let us jump into the abyss of the Daoists' paradoxes. The Daoists' paradoxes are fun! But before that, we have to set the background in which the Daoists develop their philosophy. In particular, we have to examine the view of language that underlies Chinese philosophy and thus Daoism.

The Chinese View of Language

In the classical period of Chinese philosophy, language played a major role. The classical Chinese philosophers were interested in the use of language. Language was the focus of their philosophical activities (see Hansen, 1983a; 1992). This does not mean, however, that they were concerned with the semantics of language. In general, the Western philosophers (and Indian philosophers) take language to be representative. Language is thought to represent the world, beliefs and so on (extra-linguistic 'reality'). The Western study of language thus focuses on the semantics: how extra-linguistic reality is 'mirrored' in language. The main function of language for the Western philosophers is descriptive.

The classical Chinese philosophers were not interested in the semantics of language. They were preoccupied with pragmatics of language. Instead of semantic truth (and falsity), the Chinese philosophers were concerned with pragmatic assertability and acceptability (see Hansen, 1983a, pp. 57ff.). They asked 'Is this sequence of characters acceptable?', rather than 'Is the proposition expressed by this sequence of characters true?'. In particular, they were engaged in the formulation of sequence of characters that are acceptable by the society as a whole.

Given their interest in a function of language which is not a primary concern for Western philosophers, it is easy to see that the classical Chinese philosophers had a different view of language. The underlying view of language among classical Chinese philosophers is that language *prescribes* acceptable behaviours in society.² Language 'regulates' what to do in social contexts. The Chinese philosophers in the classical period viewed language as a tool to guide our social behaviour in order to achieve societal harmony. In particular, they were fascinated about how to formulate, in a language, a way which leads 'constantly' to a harmonious society.³

The main constituents of language as guidance for the classical Chinese philosophers are *ming*^{names}. *Ming* guide us to discriminate 'stuff' in the domain of discourse in a certain way.⁴ They provide a way to make a *shi*^{this}–*fei*^{not this} distinction. They prescribe a way to 'carve up' the stuff which we encounter in the social contexts in terms of *shi*^{this} and *fei*^{not this}: do *shi*^{this} and do not do *fei*^{not this} (that). Our social behaviours are then regulated based on the way we carve up the stuff.⁵ Thus, enquiries into

ming^{name} are the main activities throughout the classical period of Chinese philosophy, as exemplified by the first Chinese philosopher, Confucius, and the last philosopher in the classical period, Han Feizi. We see Confucius saying in *The Analects* that

If names are not rectified, the language will not flow smoothly. If language does not flow smoothly, then social acts cannot be carried out. If social acts cannot be carried out, then ritual and music will not thrive. If ritual and music do not thrive, then punishment will miss the mark. If punishments miss the mark, then the people will not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore the superior man will utter a name only in appropriate language and use language only in appropriate conduct. (Hansen, 1992, p. 66).

The Analects, 13:3

Also Han Feizi states in *The Han Feizi* that

In using the method of maintaining uniformity, names are of primary importance. When names have been rectified, things will be fixed. When names have not been rectified, things undergo change. Therefore the Sage holds to uniformity and rests in quiescence. He causes names to be self-applying, and commands that things remain fixed in themselves. (Fung, 1952, p. 324)

The Han Feizi, Chapter 8

As we can see above, during the classical period, *ming*^{names} and their prescriptive function fascinated Chinese philosophers.

The Computer Analogy

As the view of language for classical Chinese philosophers is quite different from that for Western philosophers, an explanatory remark is in order. As a way of illustration, Hansen provides the computer analogy to explain the (classical) Chinese view of language (see, in particular, Hansen, 1992, pp. 18ff.).

Mainly, a computer consists of two components: hardware and software (or program). Hardware, the physical computer, is just a box in which silicons, metals and other things are wired up in extreme sophistication. Without software, viz. program(s), the computer does not do much.⁶ In order to 'behave' in a certain way, a computer requires a program consisting of several 'components' (for those who do computer programming) such as commands (in an imperative program), classes (in an object-oriented program) and clauses (in a PROLOG program). Given input, some of the components of the program are executed. Depending on the structure of the components, the hardware performs a task in a certain way. For example, certain components may be triggered and instruct the monitor to flash a picture of Zhuangzi, when an appropriate location on the monitor is clicked. Or there may not be any component which can instruct the hardware to do anything for a certain input. In a sense, each component of the program sorts input into 'do something' and 'do nothing'. Based on these 'categories' that each component gives rise to, the program as a whole instructs hardware to do or not to do certain tasks. In other

words, the components discriminate input and they together guide the behaviour of the computer.

The above illustration of the computer and its operation in association with programs serves as a model for the Chinese view of language. For the Chinese philosophers, what language is for humans is what a program is for a computer. A program having its components structured in a certain way guides the way the computer behaves. Similarly, a language based on *ming*^{names} as its components guides human behaviours in society. It provides a way of conducting our social life. As the main components of the language, *ming*^{names} discriminate stuff which we encounter amidst of human social interactions by giving rise to *shi*^{this}–*fei*^{not this} distinctions and prescribe how to behave in the given situation.

Dao

Computer programmers (or maybe software engineers depending on how the computing industry divides labour) are interested in the ‘best’ way to control a computer’s behaviour. They are mainly concerned with what components there should be in the program and how to execute each component of the program in what way. No matter what the input is, it is hoped that the program regulates the computer’s behaviour to suit the situation.

The classical Chinese philosophers were engaged in a similar activity. They were preoccupied with formulating a language which ‘best’ prescribes our social behaviour. Which *ming*^{names} to use to discriminate our social interactions and how to regulate our social behaviour based on the discrimination given by *ming* were the main questions for the classical Chinese philosophers.

Each philosopher’s formulation of the ‘best’ way to prescribe our social behaviour has come to be known as a *dao*. A *dao* is a way to guide our behaviour in social contexts. Given that it is language that guides our behaviour, a *dao* is a language, whatever the form it takes, for the guidance. Each philosopher argues that their *dao* ‘best’ achieves a harmonious society. In particular, they argue that their *dao* ‘constantly’ guides our behaviour: no matter what the situation is, it is argued, societal harmony will be achieved by following their respective *daos*. They all wanted for the society to implement their *dao*. Confucius argued for his *dao* based on traditional *li*^{ritual} and Mozi rejected Confucius’ *dao* in favour of his *dao* based on *li*^{utility}. Classical Chinese philosophy centres around the debates about *dao*.⁷

The Limit of Language

‘Finitude is a basic fact of human existence. Whether one treats this as a source of sorrow or of relief, it is without doubt that there are limits to whatever people want to do, be they limits of human endurance, resources, or of life itself.’ (Priest, 1995, p. 3). This is how Priest (1995) starts his investigation into the nature of the limit of thought, the limit of the mind. Tracing the history of Western philosophy, Priest (1995) shows the limit of thought expressed by some Western philosophers and beyond it. He argues that the limit of thought is contradictory. The limit is the

boundary beyond which our thought cannot go; yet our thought does cross the boundary. That which cannot be thought cannot be thought; yet we just thought about it.

If finitude is a fact of our existence, there must be a limit of how far we can be guided. Whether or not the limit is contradictory, there must be a boundary beyond which we cannot be guided. But if there is a limit of how far we can be guided, there must be the limit of guidance itself. There must be the limit of how far a guidance can guide.

Among classical Chinese philosophers, the Daoists were those who were interested in such limit. They were interested in the limit of language as guidance: How far a language, formulated in the form of a *dao*, can guide our social behaviour? Some Daoists also noticed the paradoxical nature of the limit.⁸ A language as guidance, in particular in the form of a *dao*, at the limit of language is paradoxical. At the limit, language prescribes and guides our social behaviour; yet it cannot do so. It crosses the boundary which cannot be crossed. The Daoists offer the language which guides us to see the limit of language and its paradoxical nature throughout the development of their philosophy.

Shendao

If we take the view of Hansen (1992) that Daoism matures in its development, the Daoist theme starts with Shendao. The 'theoretical' treatment of the limit of language in Daoism also begins with Shendao. Shendao's writings are now lost (if he wrote anything at all). The only references to his teachings are second hand reports. One such report which is of interest in the study of Daoism is Chapter 33 of *The Zhuangzi*. There is a passage which gives Shendao's teaching.

Before examining the passage, we need to distinguish two notions of *daos*, as is done by Hansen (1992). A *dao*, as we saw above, is a way of conducting our social life. A *dao* may be in the form of a discourse. *The Analects*, for example, contains Confucius' *dao*, which is in the form of a discourse. Classical Chinese philosophers have all offered their discourse *daos*. When a discourse *dao* is presented, in order to follow it, one is required to interpret the *dao* into performance (or action). After all, the aim of providing a discourse *dao* is to guide our social behaviour. But, interpreting a discourse *dao* may lead to several possible ways to perform it in society. So a discourse *dao* may give rise to several performance *daos* (see Hansen, 1992, pp. 205f.).

Among all possible performance *daos* given by discourse *daos* of philosophers, there is one which is the actual way people conduct their lives. This actual performance *dao* achieves everything which actually happens. For Shendao, the actual performance *dao* is 'the great *dao*'. It achieves everything; yet it does not provide a *shi*^{this}-*fei*^{not this} distinction.

The great *dao* can embrace but it cannot distinguish.⁹

It is a discourse *dao*, not a performance *dao*, that provides a *shi-fei* discrimination.

We know that all things have a basis from which they are acceptable, and from which there are not.

A discourse *dao* induces in us a way of discrimination. Names in the discourse *dao* give rise to *shi-fei* distinctions. But a performance *dao* involves no names. So it lacks the ability to provide *shi-fei* distinctions.

However, a discourse *dao* alone does not achieve any harmonious social interactions.

If one selects then one is not thorough. If one lays down a doctrine one falls short.¹⁰

It is the actual performance *dao*, i.e. the great *dao*, that actually achieves everything.

Dao is that which leaves nothing out.

Hence

Shendao abandoned knowledge, discarded self and flowed with what could not be changed.

‘*Shi* the actual performance *dao*! Follow the actual performance *dao*! You could not do otherwise anyway!’

He regarded coolly letting things carry him along as the pattern of *dao* [i.e. the actual performance *dao*].

‘*Fei* discourse *daos*! Forget discourse *daos*! The discourse *daos* of Confucius and Mozi do not really achieve anything!’

He said, *know to not know*. He was one who started to diminish knowledge ended in wiping it out.

The actual performance *dao* does not have to be told by anyone. The way we actually perform our social behaviour does not need any discourse *dao*.

In this way,

Ineffectual and irresponsible, he laughed at the world’s *exalting worthies*; licentious and lacking (appropriate) conduct, he disagreed with the world’s great sages. ... [H]e gave up *shi* and *fei*, mixed *admissible* and *forbidden* and did not treat deliberate knowing as a pilot. He did not know to use the before/after distinction, he loftily withdrew – went where he was pushed and came where he was pulled – like a feather turning in a strong wind, like a bit of sand in a grinding stone. He was complete and *feied* nothing, acting or still, never erred; never transgressed. ... Even a clod cannot miss the *dao* [i.e. the great *dao*].

... and the Limit of Language

If one is concerned with the actual performance of our social behaviour as a Chinese philosopher does, it seems reasonable to set the actual performance *dao* as the standard for our social behaviour and abandon discourse *daos*. What matters is what actually happens. It is the actual performance that matters. Shendao realised that there is a limit to discourse *daos*. There is a gap between what a discourse *dao* can do and what actually happens. A discourse *dao* may fall short of achieving what

actually happens. It lacks ‘constancy’ in guiding the actual performance of our social behaviour.

Now the problem is that ‘Abandon discourse *daos!*’ is a discourse *dao* (see also Hansen, 1992, pp. 209f.). It is a way of conducting people’s social lives in the form of a discourse. By following Shendao’s (discourse) *dao*, we are led to abandon his *dao*: abandon discourse *daos*. We are led to laugh at Shendao the ‘exalting worthy’.

Here we have the first Daoist paradox of the limit of language. Shendao offers a language which guides us to come to terms with the limit of language and abandon all *daos* that are formulated in language. Yet his *dao* is one of the *daos* that are to be abandoned. Hence his *dao* guides us to abandon his very *dao*. But once we abandon his *dao*, we cannot be guided by his *dao*. So his *dao* cannot guide us. ‘Shendao’s *dao* is a *dao* that cannot *dao*^{guide} us’ (Hansen, 1992, p. 209). None the less, it is his *dao* which guides us to abandon all *daos* including his. Shendao’s language is a language which guides our behaviour; yet it cannot guide us. His language exposes the paradoxical nature of the limit of language.

The Daode Jing

The *Daode Jing* develops the language offered by Shendao.¹¹ Laozi is also against discourse *daos*. He urges us to avoid any discourse *dao*. Laozi, however, does not take refuge in the actual performance *dao*. Instead, he embraces the paradoxical implications of rejecting discourse *daos* (see Hansen, 1992, p. 211).

In doing so, Laozi provides an account of how a language, given in the form of a *dao*, guides people’s social behaviour. He holds that names have their ‘opposites’: opposite terms are ‘born together’.

You^{Have} and *wu*^{lack} [are born] together.

Difficult and easy complement each other.

Long and short contrast each other;

High and low rest upon each other;

Voice and sound harmonize each other;

Front and back follow one another. (Feng & English, 1997a)

Daode Jing, Chapter 2

We make a discrimination based on a pair of opposite terms. Given a pair of opposite terms, we distinguish *shi*^{this} from *fei*^{not this} and behave accordingly. A pair of opposite terms induces in us a *shi–fei* discrimination pattern, for example ‘difficult’ and ‘easy’. The *shi–fei* pattern is then assigned ‘preferences’ for our social behaviour: preference for ‘easy’ over ‘difficult’ for example. Our social behaviour is guided by pairs of opposite terms in this way.

Laozi may not be saying anything new. One can say that he is simply making explicit what was implicit previously in the history of Chinese philosophy. But the insight of Laozi is that the guiding mechanism of a (discourse) *dao* is given by pairs of opposite terms. A *dao* provides a *shi–fei* pattern, giving rise to preferences based

on opposite terms. The preference structure then produces *yu*^{desire}, which influences our social behaviour. We *yu*^{desire} ‘finess’ over against ‘egregiousness’ and behave accordingly.¹²

The First Chapter

The notion of the limit of language is now around the corner. In fact, the most celebrated yet widely misunderstood first chapter of the *Daode Jing* explores the limit of language and its paradoxical nature. Laozi provides a guidance for us to see that language has a limit as guidance of social behaviours.¹³

The fundamental pair of opposites in language as guidance are *wu*^{lack} and *you*^{have} (‘nonbeing’ and ‘being’). *Wu* and *you*, when used as part of language, mark a distinction.

Wu names the beginning of heaven and earth

You names the mother of the ten-thousand thing-kinds.¹⁴

Wu and *you* carve up ‘stuff’ into what there is not and what there is. Based on this distinction, they give rise to a *shi-fei* discrimination pattern.

Yet, how can *wu* and *you* distinguish between what there is not and what there is? In particular, how can they ‘constantly’ be distinguished so that they would provide a constant guide to a social harmony? Every ‘stuff’ belongs to the *you* side of the distinction. It is not possible to draw the constant *wu-you* boundary. For what there is not cannot be.¹⁵ It is puzzling to constantly make a certain *shi-fei* discrimination and perform social interactions based on the *wu-you* boundary which cannot be drawn.

Therefore, constanting *wu* is desiring to use it to observe its mysteries

Constanting *you* is desiring to use it to observe its manifestations.

Yu^{Desire} to see into *wu* leads us to mysteries, since any way of carving up stuff in terms of *wu* and *you* does not deliver anything to be *feied*, although *you* produces *yu*^{desire} to see stuff (and maybe to study science).

None the less, *wu* and *you* are born together. They together arise in a language. A language draws a *wu-you* distinction so long as the language has *wu* and *you* as its components. So a language involving *wu* and *you* leads to mysteries. For the *wu-you* distinction cannot, in fact, be drawn.

These two emerge alike yet have different names

‘Alike’, call it dark.

‘Dark’ it and it is darker.

The mother of the crowd of mysteries.

Since there is in fact no way of drawing a *wu-you* distinction, the boundary that a language draws is conventional. Based on the conventions that a language adopt at the time of formulation, the language draws a conventional *wu-you* distinction.

Since it is a matter of convention, however, it is possible to formulate a language providing another, conventional, *wu-you* distinction. For we can adopt different conventions, or conventions may change over time. So the *wu-you* distinction cannot be fixed once and for all.

To name that can be named is not constant naming.

Therefore,

To guide that can be guided is not constant guiding.

A *dao*, as a language, involves names. Yet names are not constant; there is no way of demarcating a constant *wu-you* distinction by names. But then, depending on the situations, a *shi-fei* pattern based on a conventional *wu-you* distinction may not be suitable to guide our social interactions. In particular, there is no guarantee that a conventional *wu-you* distinction delivers us a ‘guide to behavior [leading to a social harmony] in all circumstances and times’ (Hansen, 1983b, p. 35).

... and the Limit of Language

So we find in the *Daode Jing* Laozi’s guidance. He guides us to see the limit of language: a language does not constantly lead to a social harmony. His famous slogan illuminates Laozi’s guidance:

wu^{lack} *wei*^{do:deem} *er*^{and:yet} *wu*^{lack} *bu*^{neg} *wei*^{do:deem}. (Hansen, 1992, p. 213)

Daode Jing, Chapter 37

The crux in understanding this slogan is the character *wei*. This character can be analysed at different levels. When it is used as a verb, the most appropriate translation is ‘to act’, ‘to make’ or ‘to do’. When it is used as an adjective, we translate *wei* as ‘artificial’ or ‘man-made’. The character can be used as an auxiliary verb, in which case it is translated as ‘for the sake of’ or ‘in order to’ (Hansen, 1992, p. 213). Hansen notes that the unified notion of the character *wei* that is held by Laozi is that to *wei* is to place on stuff ‘categories’ which specifies how to behave in a society.¹⁶ So to *wei* is to act based on socially induced preferences, for Laozi. Laozi’s slogan is to practice the reversal of the way we normally behave. Laozi suggests to avoid being guided by the *yu*^{desire} that is socially induced. And that one can practice the reversal shows that a language is not constant and thus that it has a limit.¹⁷

Laozi provides practical advice in the rest of the text based on the background given in chapter 1. It is not clear where Laozi tries to take us to. Perhaps, the utopia of Laozi is a primitive society which is ‘small’, ‘food is plain and good’, ‘clothes fine but simple’ and so on, as is described in chapter 80 of the *Daode Jing*.¹⁸

But, now, Laozi’s *dao* turns its head and guides us not to follow his *dao*. After coming to the limit of all languages, we seem to be led to abandon all *daos* which induce *yu*^{desire} in us to behave in certain ways. Yet, what is discoursed in the *Daode Jing* is a *dao*. Laozi gave the language of the *Daode Jing* as a guidance. His *dao*

induces a *shi-fei* pattern, which then produces *yu*^{desire} to avoid being guided by any (discourse) *dao*. We perform social behaviours based on this socially induced *yu*^{desire}.

Being guided by Laozi's *dao*, thus, we *yu*^{desire} to abandon his very (discourse) *dao*. Being guided by Laozi's *dao* leads us not to be guided by his *dao*. As in the case of Shendao, Laozi's *dao* is a discourse at the limit of language. It guides our behaviour; yet it cannot guide us. Laozi's discourse *dao* crosses the limit of language, which cannot be crossed. In doing so, Laozi's *dao* makes itself into 'another *dao*^{guide} that cannot *dao*^{guide}' (Hansen, 1992, p. 214).

The Zhuangzi

Having an anti-language attitude, Shendao and Laozi face a paradoxical situation. The discourse *daos* that they offer guide our social behaviour such that they cannot guide us. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, seems to go a step further. He seems to realise the paradoxical nature of the limit of language. His *dao* seems to not only demonstrate but also practice the paradox of the limit of language.

The main theme of *The Zhuangzi* develops in chapter 2 of the text.¹⁹ Zhuangzi playfully and poetically puts his main discourse at the end of the chapter.

Once Zhuang Zhou dream-regarded [himself] as a butterfly – a fluttering butterfly fulfilling its desires and purposes who did not know Zhou. Suddenly he woke and plainly was Zhuang Zhou. We do not know if Zhou dream-regarded himself as a butterfly or a butterfly dream-regarded himself as Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhunang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some division. This is called the transformation of things. (Hansen, 1992, p. 296)

The Zhuangzi, ch. 2

Unlike Shendao and Laozi, Zhuangzi wonders about a second-order *shi-fei* discrimination. Is there one way of *shii*ng or *feii*ng that it is Zhuangzi who *shis* or *feis* himself as dreaming or that it is a butterfly who *shis* or *feis* itself as dreaming?²⁰ Since one can and does make a first-order *shi-fei* discrimination between Zhuangzi and the butterfly, there must be some way, a special *shi-fei* discrimination, which we can apply to settle the issue once and for all.²¹

But is there? Given the computer analogy, we can show Zhuangzi's point by the halting problem of the contemporary formal theory of computation.²² As we saw before, what a language is for us is what a program is for a computer. A program discriminates input in a specified way and guides the computer's behaviour. Now, let us take some arbitrary programs as input and try to write a program that discriminates the programs based on their ability to halt eventually. Can we write a program that provides a second-order *shi-fei* discrimination that *shis* programs which do not show blank behaviour by eventually halting and *feis* those which show blank behaviour by getting forever caught in a loop existing in the program? It can be shown that it is impossible to write a computer program that can discriminate whether or not an arbitrarily given program eventually halts. It is impossible to formulate, in general, a way of discriminating the behaviour of a computer.²³

Similarly, there is no *dao* that discriminates whether or not an arbitrarily given

dao can constantly guide us. There is no ‘view from nowhere’ that constantly guides us to *shi* constant *daos* and *fei* non-constant *daos*.²⁴ Even the second-order *dao* that shows just this cannot be shown to be constant for the same reason. So no *dao*, not even any second-order *dao*, has a special status. Therefore,

When we dream, we do not know to apply the term *dream* to what is going on. Within a dream, we may treat part of our dream as *dream*. When we wake, we know to *dream* the whole episode. How do we know that we will not come to a perspective from which we will *great dream* all of this? And only the stupid regard it as *awake*?²⁵

The Zhuangzi, Chapter 2

... and the Paradox of the Limit of Language

If there is no *dao* that has a special status, what are we to take Zhuangzi’s *dao*? Surely, Zhuangzi *shis* his *dao* and *feis daos* of others such as Mencius, Neo-Mohists and even earlier Daoists.²⁶ Is his *dao* another example of the *daos* that cannot guide our social behaviour while guiding it just as Shendao’s and Laozi’s *daos*? Zhuangzi goes a step further than Shendao and Laozi. He applies his sceptical language to his very *dao*. He realises the paradoxical nature of the limit of language and incorporates the limit into his language, his *dao*, and ‘play’ with its paradoxical nature ingeniously.

Unlike Shendao and Laozi who seem to want to go beyond language and thus *daos*, Zhuangzi argues that it is impossible to escape from language and *daos*.

Our words fly off like arrows, as though we knew what was right and wrong. We cling to our own point of view, as though everything depended on it. And yet our opinions have no permanence; like autumn and winter, they gradually pass away. We are caught in the current and cannot return. (Feng & English, 1997b, p. 22)

The Zhuangzi, chapter 2

So, however convincing it is, Zhuangzi’s *dao* is only one of many *daos* none of which has any privileged status.

There is a beginning. There is not yet beginning to be beginning. There is not yet beginning to be not yet beginning to be beginning. Suddenly we have not having and we do not know if having not having is having or not having.

Now I have just said something but I do not know if what I have said really counts as saying something or not saying anything. (Hansen, 1992, pp. 290–291).

The Zhuangzi, chapter 2

But then, he wonders about what his *dao* can do. Just like Shendao and Laozi, he realises that a *dao* in a language has a limit. But what he provides in the text is yet another *dao*. So his *dao* also has a limit, since every *dao* as a guidance has a limit. In particular, Zhuangzi’s *dao* guides us to see the limit of language that allows us to discriminate various *daos* such as his own. We then come to the point where Zhuangzi’s *dao* itself may also be undermined.

Gaptooth asked Wang Ni, ‘Do you know what all things agree in affirming?’ Answer: ‘How would I know it?’ ‘Do you know that which you do not know?’ Answer: ‘How

would I know it?' 'In that case, nothing has knowledge?' Answer: 'How would I know that? Still let me try to word it. How could I know that what I call *knowledge* is not *ignorance* and what I call *ignorance* is not *knowledge*?²⁷

The Zhuangzi, chapter 2

None the less, we cannot escape from the 'current' of the society. We cannot but follow some *dao*. One can follow Zhuangzi's *dao* as we have done and see the limit of language and its paradoxical nature. One is then thrown into the abyss of infinitely many languages, none of which has any special status including Zhuangzi's own *dao*. His *dao* is the platform from which to jump off only to land on a *dao*. If we land on a *dao* other than Zhuangzi's, this must be because his *dao* has guided our behaviour to realise the limit of language. Thus, we are guided by his *dao* even if we abandon his *dao* and follow another *dao* such as Confucius. But, if we land on his *dao*, then we are again led to jump off the platform in order not to jump off: his *dao* guides us not to be guided by it. So what Zhuangzi's *dao* guides is not to guide us.

So, Zhuangzi provides a *dao* in language which shows us the way to see the limit of language. His *dao* allows us to *shi* the way a language guides us and the way a language cannot guide us. It induces a (second-order) *shi-fei* discrimination pattern for languages. Yet the *shi-fei* pattern induced by Zhuangzi's *dao* unstabilises the entire pattern of our *shi-fei* discriminations given by languages. Zhuangzi provides a second-order *shi-fei* discrimination to *fei* all *shi-fei* discriminations including the *shi-fei* discrimination that Zhuangzi's *dao* itself provides. But once we *fei* his *dao*, we are no longer guided by it. Hence Zhuangzi's *dao* does not guide us.

However, Zhuangzi's *dao* does guide us to *shi* some *shi-fei* discrimination pattern, viz. the one induced by his *dao*. It *shis* a way of *fei*ing all discrimination patterns. None the less, by the limit of language, his *dao* guides us to realise the limit of his own *dao* and thus *fei* it. But if we *fei* his *dao* so that we are not guided by it, this is because we are guided by his *dao* to see the limit of all languages. Hence we are guided by his *dao*: Zhuangzi's *dao* does guide.

While staying within the limit of language by guiding us, thus, Zhuangzi's *dao* goes beyond the limit by not guiding us. But not guiding is what his *dao* guides. Hence his *dao* goes beyond the limit by staying within it: it crosses the limit of language which cannot be crossed while staying within the limit. Zhuangzi's *dao* is a *dao* that *can dao*^{guide} in order to not *dao*^{guide}. So it cannot *dao*^{guide}, yet it *daos*^{guides}.

Conclusion

We understand the Daoists as being concerned with the paradoxical guidance that can and cannot guide. The paradox that they 'play' with pops us at the limit of language. This is not the only way to understand the Daoists, however. Being guided by the discourse of Hansen (1992), I have *shied* a particular way of reading the Daoists' texts while *fei*ing the mystical reading mentioned at the beginning of the paper. But this is one of many possible ways of reading the texts. We may not have a *shi-fei* discrimination that can settle the issue of how one should read the texts once and for all. In any case, I have been guided by the paradoxical guidance of the

Daoists. Perhaps, the discourse contained in this paper is paradoxical: my language itself may be the limit of language.

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Notes

- [1] See Hansen (1992). I own much of this paper to the works of Chad Hansen on Daoism and Chinese philosophy in general, in particular Hansen (1992). This does not mean that I agree with everything Hansen says about Daoism and Chinese philosophy. I share some of the critical comments made by Ames (1994).
- [2] One may explain the prescriptive function of language as 'performative or evocative', as Fleming (1998, p. 149) does.
- [3] This does not mean that classical Chinese lacks the function of description. There is no doubt that it represents extra-linguistic reality. However, that is not the function of language which fascinated classical Chinese philosophers.
- [4] The terminology 'stuff' is from Hansen (1983a).
- [5] This may suggest, as Hall and Ames (1987) note, that *ming* are referential. Even if they have only prescriptive function, *ming* still refer to 'stuffs' which have been carved up. See Hall and Ames (1987, pp. 267f). Hansen (1983a) sometimes talks about *ming* as picking out 'stuffs'. For example, Hansen (1983a, p. 31). However, I take it that the purpose of using the term 'stuff' is that it is a mass noun. So a *ming* does not pick out 'a stuff' among many. It is a way of carving up the mass 'stuff' instead of 'stuffs'.
- [6] This point may be debatable. There is a question of where hardware ends and software begins. Are the computer chips just hardware or do they also have a software component? I leave the computer experts to carve up the computer.
- [7] For this way of cashing out the notion of *dao* in classical Chinese philosophy, see Hansen (1992, p. 18).
- [8] I resist the temptation to describe the limit as contradictory. As we saw earlier, I agree with Hansen (1983a), Hansen (1985) and Hansen (1992) that the question of semantics does not arise in classical Chinese philosophy. A contradiction is a *proposition* of the form $A \wedge \neg A$ where \wedge is a conjunction forming operator, \neg is a negation forming operator and A is a proposition. Being true or false is a feature of a proposition; not a feature of a guidance. For this reason, I present the limit of language as paradoxical instead of contradictory.
- [9] The translation for the relevant passages of Shendao quoted in this paper is from Hansen (1992, p. 206), unless indicated otherwise.
- [10] The translation of the second sentence is a slightly modified translation of Graham (1981, p. 279).
- [11] At least this is how the *The Zhuangzi* tradition holds. See Hansen (1992, p. 211).
- [12] For this analysis of the notion of *yu*^{desire} in the *Daode Jing*, see Hansen (1992, p. 212).
- [13] The dominant view of the first chapter of the *Daode Jing* is that the chapter is an *expression* of the metaphysical entity *the Dao* that *the Dao* cannot be spoken. For critiques of this view, see, for example, Hansen (1992).
- [14] The translation of the first chapter of the *Daode Jing* in this paper is based on the translation of each character of Hansen (1992) and the translation of the *Daode Jing* by Hansen (2002).
- [15] The pre-socratic philosopher Parmenides makes a similar point. See, for example, Barnes (1987, ch. 9).

- [16] Hansen (1992, p. 213). Note that a ‘category’ for Laozi is something which we acquire through our social interactions. Unlike the ‘categories’ of Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reasoning*, there is nothing pre-societal about Laozi’s ‘category’.
- [17] See Hansen (1992, pp. 222ff). For the traditional analysis of the notion of *wu wei*, see, for example, Loy (1985).
- [18] For this suggestion, see Hansen (1992 pp. 229f).
- [19] As Hansen (1983b) notes, this point has been contested, for example by Fu (1936) who claims that the chapter is not the work of Zhuangzi. See Hansen (1983b, p. 52 f10) But I follow the almost universally held view that chapter 2 contains the main theme of *The Zhuangzi*.
- [20] For this way of understanding the passage, see Möller (1999). But see Chinn (1997) and Chinn (1998) who seem to read the passage in a different way.
- [21] Note that this is not a metaphysical issue. The issue is not whether or not there is a *shi-fei* discrimination in ‘reality’. Although Zhuangzi is not incompatible with being a realist like a Neo-Mohist, he is here concerned with an ‘epistemological’ issue of how to make *shi-fei* discriminations. See Hansen (1992, pp. 292ff). Even if the issue here is epistemology, Zhuangzi is not asking a question about our ‘judgement’ on ‘truth’ corresponding to ‘an extramental or extralinguistic independent reality’ or ‘categorisation’ of reality. Soles and Soles (1998) take this to be the main question and present Zhuangzi as an ‘epistemological nihilist’. If Zhuangzi was interested in the issue of truth, I would agree with their conclusion. However, the concern of Zhuangzi is *not* with truth, so I argue. The epistemological issue of Zhuangzi here is about how to carve up stuff based on *shi*^{this} and *fei*^{not this}.
- [22] Another, though maybe rude, way of putting the point is that Western scholarship is very slowly catching up with Chinese, or Asian in general, scholarship. After more than 2000 years, Western scholars, during the 20th century, finally discovered the problem which is, *ipso facto*, the problem that Zhuangzi was pointing out.
- [23] For a formal treatment of the halting problem, see Boolos and Jeffrey (1989, pp. 28ff) and Jeffrey (1991, pp. 107ff).
- [24] The notion of ‘view from nowhere’ suggested here is different from that given by Nagel (1986). For Nagel, a ‘view from nowhere’ seems to be tantamount to no view whatsoever. For Zhuangzi, a ‘view from nowhere’ is still a view. It is a second-order, or some higher-order, view which settles the issue of constancy of first-order views.
- [25] Hansen (1992, pp. 294–5). One may find Zhuangzi to be reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigation* (at least the later Wittgenstein of Kripke (1982)). Wittgenstein’s concern is with ‘meaning’, however. This is why I resist the temptation to cash out Zhuangzi in light of the later Wittgenstein.
- [26] For Zhuangzi’s refutation of them, see Hansen (1992, ch. 8).
- [27] Hansen (1992, p. 293). Note that *knowledge* here does not mean descriptive knowledge; it is rather procedural knowledge with respect to guidance.

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