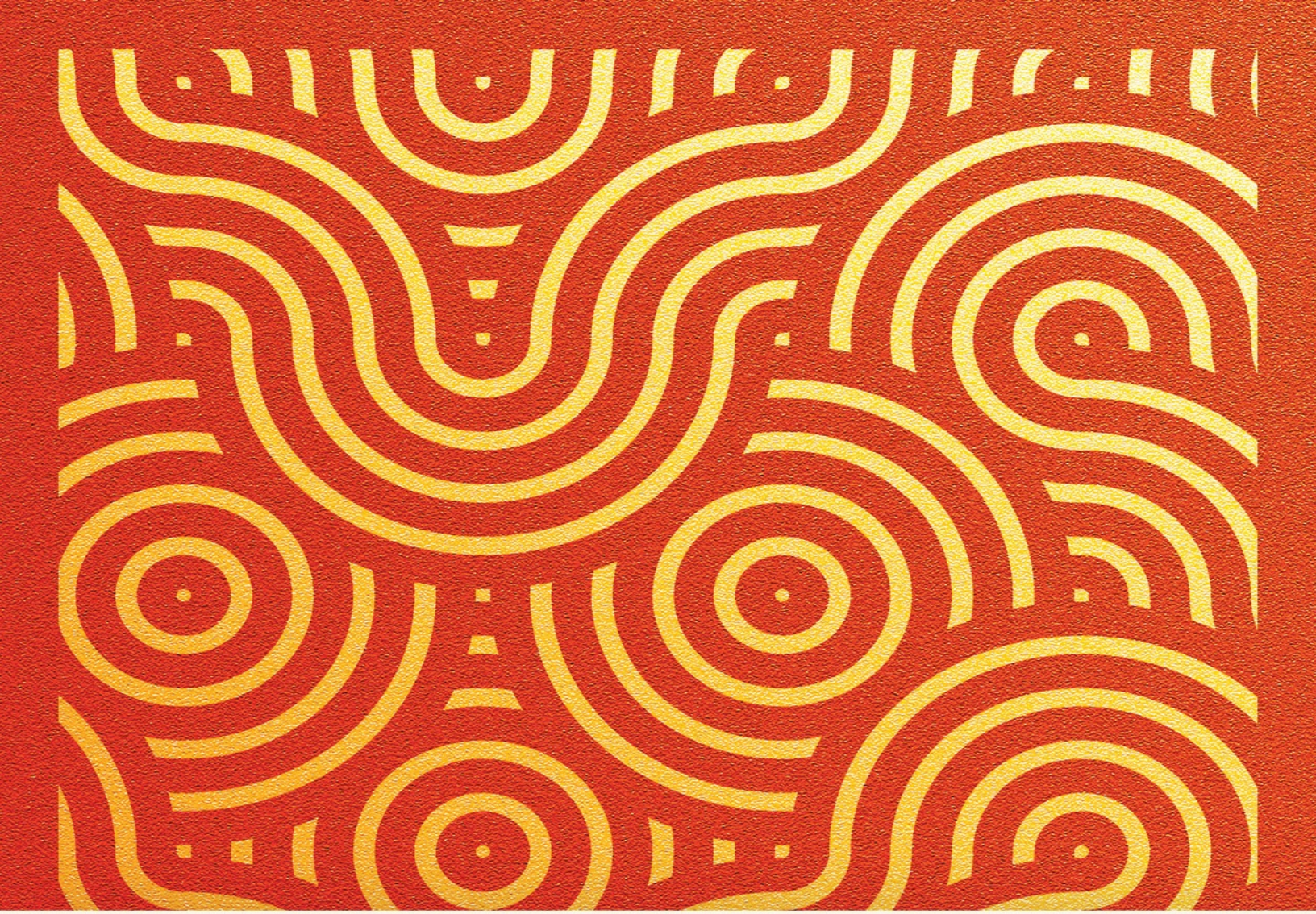


Daodejing

TRANSLATED BY BROOK ZIPORYN

Laozi

LAOZI

DAODEJING

道

德

經

TRANSLATED BY

Brook Ziporyn



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Introduction

The traditional story about this thing called *Daodejing* (also known in English as *Tao Te Ching,* the *Laozi*, or the *Lao-tzu*) is both beautiful and inspiring. We are told that in the sixth century BCE there was a sagely old fellow named Li Er, also known as Li Boyang, Li Dan, or Lao Dan, respectfully called Laozi, literally the "Old Master," who unassumingly passed his days at his post as Keeper of the Royal Archives of the Zhou dynasty, the place where all the teachings of the great sages of the past were collected and preserved. One day a certain upstart named Kong Qiu, known to posterity as Confucius, came to the archives seeking wisdom, brimming with busybody ideas for ethical and political reform, ideas he claimed were rooted in the very traditions reverently stored in the archives' hallowed texts. The sagely old man roundly rebuked the young upstart's shallow moralizing, stingingly satirizing his abysmal ignorance of the Great Way of Heaven and Earth, and sent him on his way. But thereafter matters got worse and worse in the empire, the true Way more and more neglected, the world increasingly poisoned by unscrupulously rapacious leaders on the one hand and well-meaning meddling moralists like Confucius on the other, both equally obsessed in their opposite ways with *improvement*, either of their own lives or of the world—both the oppressors and the moralists alike addicted to *purposive intervention,* to flashy things like *agency* and *words* and *deeds,* precisely those things known to the old sage to be hopelessly counterproductive. Lao Dan decided the situation could no longer be endured, resigned from his post, and made to leave this bungled world of the Zhou dynasty behind forever. Riding his water buffalo to

the Western Pass, he was recognized as a great sage by the border guard Guanyin, who refused to let the empire's last hope slip away, begging the old man at least to leave some final words of wisdom, something that might preserve the remaining shreds of the tradition going back to the Yellow Emperor, so that it might someday be rekindled to save the world. Under duress, Lao Dan dashed off the five thousand or so words we now call *Daodejing,* meaning "The Canon of the Way and Its Virtue," not neglecting to register his protest by asserting over and over in the text itself the ultimate worthlessness of any teaching that can be put into words—that is, any teaching like this *Daodejing* he had been forced to write. Then he disappeared westward, never to be seen again.

Modern scholars generally regard none of this as true. The very existence of the man Lao Dan, not to mention the encounter with Confucius and the stirring tale of self-exile, the grudging ad hoc provenance of the text, the clever explanation of its existence as a text in spite of its insistent protests against verbal teachings, even the idea that *Daodejing* is the work of a single author written all at once, or that it represents an ancient tradition rather than a radical philosophical innovation—none of these traditional talking points is well supported by the historical record. The doubts about the historicity of Lao Dan the man and the legends concerning him are rooted simply in the quite late attestation of any such figure. The broader questions regarding the provenance and nature of the text—whether it was written by a single author, or was perhaps a slow accretion from many hands around a simple root text, or was possibly something else entirely—grew out of what scholars have learned about its textual history through certain spectacular archeological discoveries of recent times.* The oldest of these, the fourth-century BCE cache of bamboo slips known as the Guodian materials, especially invites speculation about the formation of the text.† Less than half of the material known to us from the received version of the *Daodejing* is found there, but this material is all

together in one continuous clump, uninterrupted by any material *not* found in the received version. Is this an early core to which other material was later added, or one among a set of originally independent texts that later merged, or an excerpt from the already existing complete text, or perhaps one among many versions circulating at the time? We don't know. Even more unsettling is the fact that, although there is nothing in the Guodian *Daodejing* corpus for which some analogue cannot be found in the received version‡ (the reverse is not true—again, less than half of the material in the received version is represented in the Guodian corpus), the order of these shared passages is thoroughly shuffled, sometimes with parts of what we have come to know as the same chapter scattered into wildly different places in the sequence, or expected chunks left out so that crucial steps in the previously known sequence of passages are skipped entirely. It is surely significant that nothing unrecognizable from the received *Daodejing* is found interspersed there, nothing that was later winnowed out. But order and continuity are equally significant. When placed in completely different locations in the text, these recognizable chunks invite wildly different interpretations—serving as conclusions to different premises, punch lines to different setups.

Along with these doubts about the nature and origin of the text, and the quandaries raised by its many variants, have come new questions about how to interpret its contents. For this thing called *Daodejing* has always been famously susceptible to wildly divergent interpretations. This was true even during the centuries of classical Chinese commentary, before the additional textual complications brought by the new archeological discoveries described above. The reasons for this lay not only in the alternate versions that were already available to the tradition, but also in the extremely compressed and inexplicit mode of expression that distinguishes this text even from the already notoriously ambiguous corpus of ancient texts written in classical Chinese. For that language is among the most proficient in the world at evading disambiguation—lacking as it does cases, declensions, conjugations, tenses, singular and plural forms, noun-verb agreement, parts-of-speech morphology, prefixes

and suffixes, and gender; lacking the necessity of specifying subjects in sentences, lacking articles either definite or indefinite, lacking punctuation, line breaks, quotation marks, and capitalization. The reception history of the text reflects this ambiguity; among the commentaries and applications purporting to interpret the text over the past two millennia, there is no agreement not just with respect to what claims it is making, but even with respect to what it is making those claims *about.* Some commentators treat its primary subject matter to be the art of effective government, while others take its topic to be metaphysics, or ethics, or alchemy, or the cultivation of physical or spiritual immortality, or hygiene and diet for more modest ends, or sexual yoga, or aesthetics, or guiles for maintaining political power, or religious instructions revealed by a personal deity named Dao, or a combination of some or all of the above. In addition to the absence of consensus about the very subject matter of the text, there are equally divergent interpretations even among those who agree about what the topic is when it comes to what exactly is being said about that topic—for example, among political commentators, there is disagreement about whether it is advocating a highly authoritative form of rulership involving tight control of information and strict regulation of the populace through merciless penal law, or on the contrary a noninterfering laissez-faire politics approaching anarchism. Even in the comparatively brief time since it has become available to readers outside of the Sinosphere (beginning with the first known complete translation into Latin in the early eighteenth century), this text has become internationally beloved in astonishingly diverse circles, said to have been translated a greater number of times than any other text,§ viewed as a classic in such seemingly incommensurate fields as mystical theology, contrarian politics, linguistic philosophy, deconstructive hermeneutics, deep ecology, laissez-faire economics, naturalism, quietism, theosophy, self-help, managerial technique, psychedelic experience, and esoteric magick. We might think here also of the many more books with the words "Tao of" in the title that, while not ostensible translations of the text itself, in one way or another claim to apply its insights to some specific field of human endeavor or

speculation. This diversity of interpretation is not merely a result of exoticization, ignorant decontextualization, or "Orientalism"—this text was *always* subject to quite remarkable hermeneutic divergences, even in the hands of the very earliest of exegetes working in its original language. Adding the new archeological and textual complications to this intrinsic ambiguity, we end up with a highly indeterminate entity—which we perhaps overdetermine by calling it "the" *Daodejing*—that is arguably one of the most ambiguous cultural objects in world history.

But that might be precisely the point of it. The *Daodejing*'s spectacular ambiguity is one of the most consistent things about it: though most likely a composite text, and despite the widely varying styles and cadences of writing in its 81 chapters, the *Daodejing* displays a rather remarkable consistency of tone. For example, the text omits any and all proper nouns throughout; it is the only independently circulating Chinese text of the classical canon that does this. It also consistently eschews context and elaboration, engages in sudden juxtapositions of apparent irrelevancies that jarringly change the subject, skips steps inviting nonobvious connecting of dots, and pirouettes through highly foreshortened and unexpected reversals, all the while returning again and again to certain structurally parallel tropes and motifs. Ironically, this common resistance to definiteness found in all its assembled motifs and pronouncements and rhetorical styles is one of the few things that argues for the meaningfulness of treating it as a coherent text at all.

In truth, we might do better to think of *Daodejing* not as "a text," of which there are a number of variant versions and widely divergent interpretations, but rather as a best-of selection of exemplars of a defunct ancient genre, artfully picked through and rearranged in various ways by inheritors and editors over many centuries. An anthology such as *Best of Congressional Bathroom Graffiti,* or perhaps *Best of New Yorker Cartoons Posted on Dentist Office Doors,* might provide some analogy: one-liners or small clumps of text, written by many (possibly anonymous) authors, but which have a certain identifiable stylistic and thematic signature due to their place of origin or relation to one another, or their relevance to a

certain narrow set of concerns and attitudes defining some group of contributors or collectors—a snowballing tone or stance that gradually ramifies in various directions as more and more contributors join in, but without losing a certain elusive coherence. In our more digitally oriented age, we might also think of some sort of selected collection from an anonymous centuries-long message-thread on a rather specialized and somewhat subversive website, frequented by members who share a sense of being versed in a crucial theoretical insight stubbornly overlooked or marginalized by mainstream culture—perhaps something like "Gender-Fluid Anarcho-Syndicalists" or "Pescatarian Game-Theorists." In the latter case, for example, we would expect to find a lot of riffing on, say, the differences between the nervous systems of fish and mammals, the health benefits of seafood, the structures of cooperation and strategies of anticipation and loyalty and betrayal in both fish and human populations, perhaps considering how schools of fish interact but also how fishermen and fishmongers work together in the market, and who knows what else—but all tied together by a few core concerns and commitments. Certain motifs and riffs catch on, inspire further motifs and riffs taking off at some angle, expressing a further application of what is regarded as a closely related point of view, one that is assumed to be intelligible to the group as what defines that group and sets it apart. Naturally, some of the entries are wittier or better thought through than others, and over time the accumulated spread of new riffs on the key themes pushes the core insight or attitude into more and more applications with more and more complex and sometimes tenuous twists and turns. Bearing in mind the absence of disambiguation of singular and plural in the language, the name eventually given to this collection, "*Daodejing* by Laozi," might then be translated "Classic Passages on the Course and Virtuosity from the Old Masters"—a kind of commonplace book of the best of this genre.

Thus it becomes intelligible to us how, in spite of its highly composite and authorless character, the entire body of sayings in this anthology, when analyzed and collated, can be understood as yielding at least a *minimally discernible position*. How or when it

snowballed into its eventual relatively stable form with its relatively consistent content and range of styles, under the discerning eye of what sort of editorial intervention or tradition, remains unknown. To be sure, viewing the corpus in this way we cannot avoid the idea of some process of selection and curation from that preexisting corpus, some treasure hunting and winnowing according to some sort of standard or point of view. But exactly the account of relative consistency of the point of view of the source material applies *mutatis mutandis* to the consistency of the editorial point of view: it too could be either the product of a single person at a particular time and place, or else a context, a procedure, a tradition shared by many interactive persons over a range of times and places. But in either case, on the basis of this view of the *Daodejing,* we can endeavor, as in this translation, to make use of all available ancient manuscripts as resources for recovering and reconstructing this stipulated "minimally discernible position" that unifies these collected gleanings, tracking the logic and commitments behind the point of view that we find buzzing and blooming through the various images and rhetorical tropes as they wink and gallop and U-turn and intertwine through this oeuvre.¶

So where to begin with this *Daodejing?* There are lots of options. You could begin at the beginning and slide through the whole brief thing with all its half-blank pages in a few hours, tumbling along without pausing, and without getting too caught up for the moment in worries about what it might all add up to, if anything. This approach has much to recommend it. Or you could do that thing usually demanded for serious and culturally monumental texts: read from the beginning all the way through to the end, trying to make thorough sense of each line of text before moving on to the next one—there is probably some value in that approach too. Or, if not in the mood for a full immersion, how about a quick browse? All that would require would be to flip the thing open anywhere and skim through random bits of it whenever the mood strikes. Even then, you might well notice an onslaught of images bubbling up calmly from these whirlpools of dark print in the white of the page—images sometimes newly erupting fast and furious in each fragment and

quip with a violent wrench of direction, at other times echoing an image previously encountered with a gentle tweak. In particular, without worrying too much about it, one thing that you might notice taking shape as these images accumulate and cluster and stack into shifting sandpiles is the *pairings*, implicit or explicit, of presumed values and disvalues: various paired emblems of *light and dark*, *high and low*, *full and empty*, *male and female*, *adult and infant*, *being and nonbeing*, *having and lacking*, *doing and nondoing*, *visibility and invisibility*, and so on. Or you might take special note whenever a seeming non sequitur ensues in adjacent passages, a sudden twist or reversal. Or you might learn to tolerate the ambiguity and vagueness of the text, maybe coming to savor it as an enlivening opening, not curse it as a deadening obstacle. Those blank spaces where meaning has receded from grasp might possibly come to function as empty screens that invite the projection of meanings; they may serve as an invitation to participate in the meaning-making of the corpus. They could well be, who knows, the way that the *Daodejing* not only *talks about* how something valueless and indeterminate can generate and enable all manner of values and contents, but actually *enacts it*, actually shows it happening: exemplifying and performing this very generating and enabling of manifold meanings and contents just by being so insistently slippery, so adamantly resistant to being pinned down, so relentlessly indeterminable.

The mind may sometimes find itself wandering in these contrasting and intertwining images, and in these empty spaces sketched between them. For a wandering like that, the only thing to avoid is something that would stop the wandering—something like a conclusion. Having no straightforward path onward, you might notice now and then the lateral dimension, the nimbus of peripheral awareness, abuzz with barely discernible blotches of hover and throb, thickening and thinning pulses of enframing space. To remain aware of that margin without turning your attention to it—what would that be like? You might instead look up from the page at the unfilled areas in front of you and around you, unfilled future time to live in and unfilled surrounding space to move through, and the

unfilled gaps in comprehension where meaning fails to settle or solidify, the stitches and seams of the world of meaning, open spaces to think and guess and wonder in. Somewhere in there you might go ahead and shift your gaze away from whatever you're looking at and looking for, and see if you can catch a glimpse of what's been left out of it. You might notice the background, see it change to foreground when noticed, see it instantly install a new background around it. You might be able to track the way what is noticed and valued keeps emerging from inchoate blurs of irrelevance, then peaks in value and clarity, then reverts to useless background noise. You might see the leftover trash transform, again and again, to raw material, raw material to value, value to trash, trash to raw material, and on and on—the interlocking roundabout course of all things. There's no telling where that might take you next.

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* In the 1970s, two silk manuscripts were found at the Mawangdui tombs near Changsha in Hunan province, dating to the early second century BCE. These contained alternate versions of the entire text but in flipflopped order (beginning with chapters 38–81 of the standard version, followed by chapters 1–37). In 1993, bamboo slips containing rather different versions of about a third of the material found in the present *Daodejing* were discovered in the Guodian tombs at Jingmen, Hubei province, dating to the mid- to late fourth century BCE. In addition to these direct archeological discoveries, another cache of ancient bamboo slips recovered from antique dealers was donated to Beijing University in 2009, containing another version of all 81 chapters of the text, and also dated to the early second century BCE. We have at our disposal further eye-opening windows into the diversity of ancient versions of the text: on the one hand, the 35 chapters (chapters 3–37) preserved with the Xiang'er commentary (another relatively recent archeological discovery, found at Dunhuang in the early twentieth century), probably dating to around 200 CE; and on the other hand, the version of chapters 38–81 used by the Han dynasty commentator Yan Zun (fl. 83 BCE–10 CE). We must add to this melee the variants already known to the tradition even before all these archeological blockbusters—for example, the variants found in the Heshang Gong text and commentary (c. 200 CE), and the "ancient manuscript version" found in a tomb sealed around 200 BCE and put into circulation by the Tang dynasty commentator Fu Yi (554–639)—not to mention the divergences from the received standard version of the text (that is, the one canonized in conjunction with the commentary

of Wang Bi [226–249] and traditionally associated with his name) that can be deduced to have appeared in the lost edition which Wang Bi was actually using, of which we find evidence in Wang Bi's commentary itself.

† For a detailed examination and masterly complete translation of all the Guodian materials, of which the *Daodejing* fragments are just a fraction, see Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013).

‡ This assumes we consider the *Taiyishenshui* a separate text, although in the Guodian corpus it follows the recognizable *Daodejing* material without interruption.

§ Tallied roughly at two thousand translations in ninety-four languages (not counting the legendary Tang dynasty translation into Sanskrit, allegedly overseen by the great Buddhist pilgrim and philosopher Xuanzang). See Misha Tadd, "Global Laozegetics: Engaging the Multiplicity of Laozi Interpretations and Translations," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 83, no. 1 (January 2022). The Bible has been translated into more languages, but the *Daodejing* has a larger number of translations because more different translations of it are done into certain single languages—for instance, racking up over five hundred translations into English, by a conservative count. See A Note on the Translation, below.

¶ For a more specific analysis of what that minimally discernible position might be, please see the essay on the translator's "Moretoitivities" webpage (https://voices.uchicago.edu/ziporyn/) under the title "Interpreting the Daodejing: The Minimally Discernible Position."

A Note on the Translation

The *Daodejing* has been translated more times than any other literary, philosophical, or religious work on planet earth, with the exception of the Bible: by one count, two thousand translations exist in ninety-four languages (which would make the present translation number 2001).* Although it has been translated into fewer languages than the Bible (though not by much—and both, I believe, have been translated into the "Klingon" language), it has been translated a greater number of *times* into some of these languages: well over five hundred different versions exist in English and close to two hundred in German, for example—many more times than any other book. A quick survey will reveal to even a casual reader how radically these translations can differ from one another. This astonishing number and variety of published versions is partially due to the text's extraordinary ambiguity, and probably also partially due to its brevity, which makes it an appealing choice for translators. Comparing in tandem the spectrum of differences among alternate translations is perhaps the best way for a reader without classical Chinese reading proficiency to grok the range of the text's ambiguity, with each translation viewed as another voice chiming in to some sort of deranged accelerating roundelay or drunken linked-verse orgy (rather than, say, a final and definitive report notarized for official use)—which is one of many reasons that the disparity among translations should be celebrated and not decried: for it is the harmony and/or cacophony of the whole mass of voices that will give the best glimpse of the nature of the text itself. This applies also to the present translation, which will of course be just one more

voice in this chorus, differing markedly in all sorts of ways from its brother and sister voices out there since, like all translations, it is obviously informed at every step by the translator's own interpretive position†—but also riffing and soloing and vamping and trading fours in ways that identifiably stamp it as taking its place as one more part of that same demented multicentury jam session.

Some attention must be given not only to making sense of the spectrum of alternate interpretations of the text's meaning that inform various translations, but also to the range of attempts to reproduce its style and tone in these renderings. I asserted in the Introduction that the *Daodejing* "displays a rather remarkable consistency of tone," despite the widely varying styles and cadences of writing in its various chapters. When the text was assumed to be the product of a single hand, it made sense to try to give it a consistent style in translation, against the grain of the wide variety of rhetorical styles that emerge in the original Chinese text. Many English translations have attempted this stylistic smoothing out, with varying degrees of success. Not sharing this assumption of a single author or the goal of smoothing out the text's stylistic variability, I have tried to reproduce something of the rhetorical variety that exists in the Chinese text in the English—while at the same time preserving the rather remarkable consistency that so distinctively subtends this variety of literary styles. The consistency is found in tone, stance, structure, and theme—a predilection for surprise juxtaposition, reversal, ironic repurposing, contrarianism, and indirection rooted in a sort of "A/B structure" that contrasts pairs of opposite terms (being/nonbeing, high/low, etc.) that reflect an evaluative assumption rooted in the conventional values prevalent (rightly or wrongly, from the modern point of view) in early Chinese societies. On the one hand, we have terms like "being," "having," "strength," "hardness," "name" (fame), "adulthood," "masculinity," "fullness," "action," "high," "bright," "flavorful," "complete," "formed," and so on. These are all things that were at the time assumed to be *valued* and *sought*. For convenience, we represent all of these valued items as belonging to category A. On the other hand, we have the opposite terms, like "nonbeing," "lacking," "weakness,"

"softness," "nameless," "infancy," "femininity," "empty," "nondoing," "low," "dark," "flavorless," "incomplete," "formless," and so on. These are all things or states it was assumed that readers would *disvalue*, would be trying to diminish or avoid or eliminate. We indicate all of these disvalued things as belonging to category B. Again and again in the *Daodejing*, we find the contrast of the valued A and the disvalued B, in one form or another. And we will instantly notice a tendency to invert their positions: to promote the B and demote the A. This is the consistent through-tone of the text, if there is one at all. The larger question, one that I address in my own interpretive work, is: Why, and with what consequences? But here, we may simply note that it turns out there are a wide variety of rhetorical styles that deploy these effects—from the gnomic to the expansive, from the sublimely poetic to the drudgingly prosaic, from the ominous to the frivolous. It's all there in the Chinese text, and I've tried to maintain that variety through the consistency, and that consistency through the variety, in this English translation.

The interpretation and translation of three key recurring terms, also reflecting this interpretive stance, deserve special exposition here. These are *dao* 道, *de* 德, and *chang* 常. The first two of these are of course the first two words in the traditional title of this text, *Daodejing;* chapters 1–37 have traditionally often been read as addressing specifically *dao* and chapters 38–81 specifically *de,* and the reader will note that the opening chapters of these two parts, chapter 1 and chapter 38, are general statements about the nature of *dao* and *de*, respectively. In these two chapters (1 and 38), the text is making what we call the *ironic repurposing* of these traditional terms explicit: the real *dao* and the real *de* are in some sense not what is normally considered *dao* or *de*, indeed in some sense they are precisely the *opposite* of what is normally considered *dao* or *de.* Because of how much of the point of *Daodejing* depends on both preserving and complicating this double usage, we must be very careful in translating these two terms. The earliest concrete meaning of the term *dao* was a physical road, path, or way that could be traveled on to get from point A to point B. By extension, it

soon came to be used in the more abstract sense of a course of action, usually one designed to achieve some predetermined end: a "way" in the sense of a manner of acting, but also a "way" to get something in particular done. A *dao* is what tells us "how" something acts in the sense of its characteristic style of activity, but also, more emphatically, tells us "how" to reach a particular goal desired in advance. In this latter sense, it is almost a word for *purposive activity as such*. The world-historical gambit we find staged in the *Daodejing* is the deliberate ironic reversal of this meaning of the word, so that it means precisely "nonpurposive activity," or "nondoing." To cover both the highly axiological and prescriptive primary meaning of the term *and* its undermining here, English words like "way" and "course" can both serve as felicitous translations. I have chosen the latter because in English it can better cover the full pivoting range of meanings of the term in its various ironic repurposings, so central to the way this text works. For in English a "course" can denote a prescriptive course of action with a deliberate goal (e.g., "a course in archery," in which one is taught how to use a bow and arrow—the primary pre-ironic value-positive meaning of purposive activity) or a value-neutral series of events directed by no goal (e.g., "when in the course of human events"), but it also can tip toward not only the series but the stuff that goes through a series (e.g., "the main course of the meal," "take the full course of antibiotics") and not only the stuff but the moving of the stuff through the series, functioning as a verb ("I have the blood of kings coursing through my veins"). The pliability and ambiguity of the English word thus recommends it as our best choice to translate *dao* in this text, though by no means in all early Chinese texts. In the *Daodejing*, the new sense of "course" is a course that is precisely not a "course" in the older sense, is the precise opposite of a course in that sense: it is not purposive action or a specific identifiable manner of activity, but rather purposeless process ("nondoing") which takes no single definite form at all. And yet it is precisely by not being that kind of course that it does, ironically, end up being just what that older sort of course claimed to be: a source

of real values and of existences that instantiate those values—the real fulfillment of all purposes.‡

A similar ambiguity is deliberately deployed with respect to *de.* The English words most often associated with this term are things like "virtue," "virtuosity," "power," and "potency." The simplest way to understand the relation of *dao* to *de* in their primary meaning is to think of the relation between a course of study and the results of that course of study. *De* is the ability, skill, or power one attains through the study and practice of a *dao.* If I take a course in archery, I hope to attain virtuosity in archery through it. Indeed, the homonymous word for "attainment" or "success" (*de* 得) is the most often adduced gloss of this word in ancient lexicons, and there is unmistakable wordplay around these two meanings going on in several places in our text (e.g., chapters 38 and 49). The word that most squarely covers these meanings in English is surely "virtuosity," which means a skill that is acquired through practice. The new ironic sense of the term, however, sees this virtuosity not as something acquired through deliberate practice of a course of study and practice, but intrinsic to existent things being just as they are, *without* any such deliberate study and practice: the result not of purposive activity, but of nonpurposive process, of nondoing (*wuwei* 無為). It is thus the *ironic* virtuosity "attained" from the *ironic* course—acquired, as the very life of them, through nonpractice and nonstudy. This nonpractice and nonstudy is the attainment of virtuosity from the course, and the sense of "attainment" continues to operate precisely in that, since these abilities are not the result of one's own efforts, they seem to come as a gift from outside, from the course. Yet the irony is that this is precisely what is most stably and consistently in one's own arsenal of abilities—so we have an irony attached to "attainment": it is really a nonattainment of anything one did not always have. In this sense, the word comes to have a meaning well translated by terms like "power" or "potency" or "efficacy"—what any entity is able to do, finds itself doing well, without having to learn it, without any deliberate effort: for most of us, at the very least, things like beating one's own heart and

digesting food. When we are good at such things, finding ourselves to be virtuoso heart beaters or food digesters, it is not due to our study or effort. This can perhaps help us understand why *de* in this text has also sometimes been translated with phrases like "the life force." The word *de* in other early texts had a predominantly ethical sense, appropriately translated "virtue," particularly among Confucian writers, in the context of a focus on the *dao* of good government, or the *dao* of humankindness and duty. To get good at that kind of *dao* is to be ethically excellent, genuinely kind, truly dutiful. This sort of virtue was at times associated with a highly efficacious kind of moral charisma, an effortless ability to inspire and otherwise positively influence other people, so strong that ideally it could even effect sociopolitical order without the need to resort to laws and punishments.§ The term thus also comes to have this sense of "power" or "efficaciousness." The English word "virtue," the oldest default translation of this term, serves well insofar as it also carries a double meaning: "virtue" in the ethical sense, and "virtue" in the neutral sense of "power" (e.g., "by virtue of . . ."). But the ethically neutral sense of "virtue" has faded so far into the background of decontextualized usages of this word in modern English that I have thought it wisest to revert to the closely related word "virtuosity" in most cases when the word is unmodified. In other cases, when embedding complex wordplay due to modification by an adjective, I have opted for "power" or "potency." For example, the binome *xuande* 玄德, literally dark or obscure *de,* which appears in chapters 10, 51, and 65, can be construed either as referring to a power that is itself unseen or to the power of unseenness, the power that comes from remaining unseen. Here "power," with its more prominent implication of influence on things and creation of effects, clearly works better than "virtuosity," so I render this phrase thus with a double translation as "the obscure power of remaining obscure" or "their obscure power, the power of their obscurity" or "the unseen power, the power of the unseen." Similar cases are handled in an analogous way.

The third of our key recurring terms, *chang* 常, has a range of meanings including "constant," "persistent," "consistent," "reliable," "sustainable," "ordinary," "everyday," "normal," and by extension "eternal," "unchanging," "unvarying," "ever present." It appears in chapters 1 (four times), 3, 16 (four times), 27 (twice), 28 (three times), 32, 34, 37, 46, 48, 49, 51, 52, 55 (twice), 61, 64, 65, 74 (twice), and 79—a total of thirty occurrences. (For comparison, *dao* appears a total of seventy-four times, and *de* a total of forty-four times.) In both Mawangdui versions, in all of these instances we find instead the close synonym *heng* 恒, with the exception of those in chapters 16, 52, and 55, where we have *chang* instead, as in the received version. It can be assumed that *heng* was the earlier variant, replaced in the chapters other than these three to avoid a later Han dynasty taboo around an imperial name. The use of the two different terms in the Mawangdui texts may have been meant to index some difference in meaning, or disparate sources, but there is no scholarly consensus on this. In general, the two words are close synonyms. *Heng* is often used in Confucian texts in an ethical sense: a person is *heng* if he is reliable, or has constant habits, or is consistent in his behavior. I take references to *heng* or *chang* in the *Daodejing* corpus to point to the background, the unhewn, the amorphous B that remains the same throughout the rise and fall of straw-dog-like A items: it starts as raw material (B in the sense of what is prior to the A/B split), is then present as the *stuff* of A once the split has occurred (as a wooden cup is still made of wood), but also as what defines A's reliable course, what gives it consistency as a reliable instance of A and sustains its existence (as the dirt makes the flower sustainable) as well as its predictable trajectory, the "rule" that guides its rise from and fall back toward B; finally, it is present as the B into which A returns—B in its various senses is the one thing that is constant throughout.¶ We can thus see how *heng* or *chang* is an ideal term to point to B, carrying the senses of "constancy," "ordinariness" (i.e., not being particularly valued), "consistency," "sustainability," "reliability," "ever presence." The

translation of the term in various chapters varies according to the needs of context and of English readability, sometimes merely as an adverb like "always" or "ever," but sometimes as "constant" or "ever present" or "sustainable" or "consistent," or even nominalized as "the constant," and so on, but the reader is here reminded to keep all these implications in view in all instances.

We should note here a related term, also romanized as *chang* in some usages (but as *zhang* in others): 長. This word literally means "long," or "long-lasting," but it can also be a noun meaning "elder" or "the one with seniority, having ascendency, in charge—the leader." As a verb, it means to "become or make longer"—i.e., to grow. The term appears often and usually takes one of these straightforward concrete meanings. In chapters 28 and 67, it is used as a noun with the seemingly quite concrete sense of "someone with seniority," implying some sense of leadership or stewardship, over all functionaries (*guan* 官, whether construed as government officials or physical organs) in chapter 28, or over the "vessels" (*qi* 器) in chapter 67 (again implying having a dominant place in a workplace hierarchy of functionaries, here certainly governmental). This ethical or bureaucratic sense is undoubtedly meant to be there, implying the kind of tacit and uncontested authority associated with seniority. But the implication of being "long-lasting," as well as "elder" in the sense of having existed earlier than the others, and "long" in the sense of extending beyond them, and even perhaps the sense of growth, associates this effortless authority and effectiveness with the complex of meanings associated with what I described above as category B, the unhewn that *preexists and postexists* the A items (i.e., the useful and purposive organs and vessels). This would point to the surrounding background beyond the contours of any defined shape beholden to specific purposes, which ironically determines and in that sense "controls" A, and even allows A's growth. Hence it is translated usually as "what has seniority over" all the A items (e.g., in chapter 28 and 67), to be understood as implying the priority and power over the foregrounded activity, A, that come intrinsically from

the apparently powerless indeterminacy and nondoing of the ignored background, B.

There are several other terms that deserve some brief remarks here. The term *shi* 式 appears five times in our text: once in chapter 22, twice in chapter 28, and twice in chapter 65. The basic translation of this term is usually "model," and it undeniably carries a strong normative sense: it is a standard to be met or a model to be emulated. But it has been argued persuasively by Sarah Allan, on the basis of recent archeological discoveries, that the usages in the *Daodejing* corpus rely on a specific sense of this term, referring to an ancient astronomer's tool and fortune-telling device, called in English a "cosmograph" (and in modern Chinese a *shipan* 式盘), consisting of a microcosmic model of heaven and earth. To allow a modeling of the turning of the sky and the shifting position of its constellations, the round model of heaven was set upon a pin fitted into its indented axis, allowing it to rotate over the square and unmoving model of the earth.# With this in mind the odd usages in our text become much more trackable; to be a "model" in this sense is to be a microcosm of heaven, of the sky, rotating and disposing all things around its own empty center, over against the unmoving square of the earth. More specifically, the sky disc of the ancient cosmograph generally seems to have been equipped with a rotating depiction of the Big Dipper to track the spinning sky, while the unchanging axis of Polaris, around which it rotates, was depicted (transposed to the center of the Dipper) at the locus of the pin at the center of the model of the sky. I have accordingly translated the term "microcosmic model" or "model of the microcosm"—with the expected understanding that this is not just any microcosm, but specifically that of the ancient Chinese cosmograph taken as the model for the sage, who is to make himself thereby into a model of the world understood as the relation of the spinning circular heavens and the stationary square earth. For this model embodies (1) the still Polaris star situated as the center around which rotates (2) the spinning Dipper, with both placed in the circular rotating heaven, and also (3) the stationary square earth below. Hence it points to the

embodying of the still and the moving, the invisible center and the manifest periphery, the empty and the solid, the B and the A, converging in a microcosmic model of heaven and earth.

Shan 善 is usually translated as "good" or "skillful." The text is playing on these two meanings, particularly in chapters 8, 27, and 49, in a way that I have tried to capture with the English "good/good at."

Shiyi 是以, literally "using this, by means of this," is one of two phrases that appear quite frequently as a connective and transition between chunks of our text and which are often translated as "thus," "therefore," "so" (the other is *gu* 故). Both of these are generally construed as indicating *logical* or *causative* connections between what precedes and what follows. This has led to much confusion, since very often these conjunctions seem to be blatant non sequiturs. In many cases, however, the phrase can be rendered as answering not a "why?" question but a "how?" question, meaning "in this manner" (in the sense of "by means of this," where "this" refers to whatever process or structure was just described). As such, I have in those instances translated both these connectives not as "therefore" or its synonyms but rather as "just so," "in just this way," "in the same manner," or the like.

There are two terms used in addressing the topic of *language* in the text which deserve some brief comment: *yan* 言 and *ming* 名. *Yan* is often translated as "speech" or "words," and *ming* is usually translated simply as "name." These are certainly appropriate in most contexts. But there is also a distinctly *normative* dimension to these terms that is often relevant in the present text. *Yan* can mean descriptive speech, but is at least as often meant to imply *prescriptive* speech—i.e., instruction or injunction. References to being "without *yan*" in this corpus are often best understood not as implying reticence in general, but more specifically refraining from giving instruction—from enunciating a *dao* in the nonironic sense, telling someone what to do as a way to deliberately pursue a sought-for value. *Ming* means "name," but first and foremost in the

sense of "fame" or "renown"—again implying eminence, value, social approbation. The general theory of naming even in a not explicitly normative context—simply assigning a designation to a definite entity—bears the marks of this association: to name as a definite thing is to cognitively carve out from the unhewn background in accordance with human desires or values. "Name," "fame," and "determination"—the setting of the termini, the limits or boundaries, that define the named thing, cutting it out from a background—are all adopted as translations of the term in this sense, depending on context.

One of the distinctive rhetorical techniques found in *Daodejing* may be called *ironic repurposing:* taking a common expression, meant in a "straight" way, and recontextualizing it in such a way that a previously unnoticed reverse meaning becomes obvious—somewhat in the manner of a double entendre (e.g., "If I told you you had a beautiful body, would you *hold it against me*?"). Ironic repurposings are the kind of statements that may at first seem innocuous and pass unnoticed until given special emphasis or repeated, after which one sometimes remarks, "Oh, *now* I hear it!" We have instances of this sort of citation of presumably well-known sayings explicitly in chapters 22, 39, 41, 42, 50, 69, and 78, and we can also speculate that something similar is going on in chapters 12, 21, 38, 39, 45, 65, 72, and 79. To mark this, the translation puts the statements judged likely to be quotations of an earnest ancient cliché in quotation marks, and, if necessary, translates in both senses, with the straight sense given first in quotes and the ironic reverse meaning of the same phrase then given in italics and without quotation marks—unless it is possible to capture the ambiguity in an equally ambiguous English expression.

In general, in cases where an ambiguity is judged likely to be intended, and it is impossible to capture both senses in a single English phrase, the method of "double translation" is adopted—two translations of English are given for the single ambiguous Chinese phrase, reflecting the double meaning. When this is done outside of the "ironic repurposing" cases, it will be mentioned in an endnote.

Another interesting effect of the mix-and-match bricolage technique found in this text is the repurposing of the same tropes and pericopes in different contexts, sometimes with different grammatical antecedents that can radically alter their meaning. One example is the refrain built in various ways around *sheng er bu you* 生而不有 ("producing but not possessing," but also conceivably "born without possessing anything" or "alive but not existing," depending on whether the verbs are construed as transitive or intransitive, which largely depends on the antecedent subject); this appears in chapters 2, 10, and 51, and with some variations in chapter 34. Because this cluster is preceded in the chapter 2 example with *wuweizhishi* 無為之事 ("the work of nondoing") and *wuyanzhijiao* 無言之教 ("the teaching of noninstruction"), which is followed by *wanwuzuoyan* 萬物作焉 ("through this all things arise"), we are compelled to take the implicit antecedent embedded in *yan* 焉 as "the work of nondoing and the teaching of noninstruction" embodied by the sage, in or through or by which all things arise (or, if we follow the Mawangdui variant, the *heng* 恆 or constancy of the fact of mutual generation and inseparability of opposites, especially value opposites, described at the beginning of the chapter). This compels us to construe the *subject* of the verbs in this instance of the pericope in question as this selfsame antecedent, "the work of nondoing and the teaching of noninstruction" (or else, in the Mawangdui version, "the constancy of mutual generation of opposites"), and the implicit *object* of the verbs the selfsame antecedent, "all things." Hence "For it is through this that all things arise . . . through this that all get their birth and have their life . . . through this that all move and act and become. . . ." The very same cluster of characters in the other chapters mentioned (10, 51, and 34), in the absence of these antecedents, has to be interpreted and translated very differently. The same applies for many of the other stock phrases that are recycled and shaken into different contexts in the kaleidoscope of the *Daodejing.*

Similarly, the assumption is made that relevance must be tracked for every grab-bag combination of fragments as it appears (and the ones we are tracking in this translation are not the juxtapositions found in the Guodian materials, but those found consistently through all other known [later] versions: the received version, the Mawangdui manuscripts, the Fu Yi manuscript, the Beijing University manuscript, and so on). It is to track these relevances that the translation sometimes adds tweaking conjunctions marking a perceived contrast ("but," "and yet," "nevertheless") and other times ones marking a perceived intensification or doubling down ("and indeed," "and," "for"), as a way of indicating what sort of connection is being surmised to possibly have moved someone to juxtapose precisely these particular pieces with each other into a coherent and indeed artfully constructed larger point in the *Daodejing*'s conceptual mosaic.

I have kept "heaven" and "earth," as well as both "course" and "virtuosity," lowercase throughout, against the prevailing habit among translators of capitalizing all of them; this is again intended to capture the wordplay and deliberate ambiguity sometimes at work between the ironic and nonironic senses of these terms. When the new cosmically ironic course, the true A and true B of all things, is undeniably meant, the definite article is added: "the course." I have used both "the ten thousand things" and "all things" to translate the same conventional Chinese term, *wanwu* 萬物, choosing one or the other as seemed to be demanded stylistically or rhythmically by different contexts. But it is useful to keep both the term's visceral sense of concrete multiplicity and its abstract sense of all-inclusiveness in view in every case.

In preparing this translation, I have engaged closely with the full range of well-attested alternate ancient versions of the text: the received version (sometimes referred to as the Wang Bi edition, though recent research suggests it is not identical to the version used by Wang Bi when writing his commentary), as well as the

Guodian bamboo slip materials (fourth century BCE), the Mawangdui silk manuscripts (second century BCE), the Beijing University bamboo slips (second century BCE), the Yan Zun edition from the Daoist Canon (probably first century CE), the Heshang Gong edition (second century BCE), the Xiang'er fragment from Dunhuang (second to third century CE), the Fu Yi manuscript (second century BCE, recovered in the seventh century CE), all as found reproduced in the definitive printed recensions charted side by side in *Beijing daxue zang xihan zhushu,* volume 2 北京大学藏西汉竹书 [贰], edited by the Beijing University Institute for the Study of Excavated Texts, 北京大学出土文献研究所编 (Shanghai: Shanghai Gujichubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2012), pp. 174–205. The huge pallet of alternatives presented by these materials provides a field for close comparison and detailed cross-checking, tracking the variants and contexts operative at each textual locus. My criteria and justifications for selecting the variants I finally settled on for the translation from among these alternatives are bound by (1) the hermeneutic circle of the "minimally discernible position" abstracted from a close and extended engagement with the entire body of textual variants,** and (2) the text-critical position argued for in the Introduction, which regards this entire extant corpus as a collection of gleanings and remnants of a defunct ancient genre rather than as alternate versions, of disparate levels of corruption and reliability, of a single-authored book. Which variant this process finally landed on in each case should be obvious to any reader who is familiar with the options (i.e., anyone to whom this question is relevant), but where it seemed possibly not completely obvious, I have indicated in an endnote which version of the text was followed in that particular case. The general default choice when not otherwise indicated can be assumed to be the received ("Wang Bi") version (not least in the arrangement of the text as divided into these 81 chapters, placed in this particular sequence)—not because I regard this version as in any way preferable to the others with respect to authenticity, coherence, or antiquity, but only because this has been historically

what is meant when speaking of an English translation of "the" *Daodejing.* Needless to say, I have again and again been awakened to the range of options available for the thorniest knots in the text by consulting and considering what I could of two millennia of Chinese commentary, as well as the hermeneutic choices made by my hundreds of predecessors among translators and the arguments made by modern interpreters, both academic and popular. They are too numerous to mention them all, and I would not want to list some of these brilliant ancient and modern precursors while being so ungracious as to leave out others, so suffice it to say that my gratitude and debt to them is enormous. Specific interpretive choices are addressed in the notes to the individual chapters.

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* See Misha Tadd, "Global Laozegetics: Engaging the Multiplicity of Laozi Interpretations and Translations," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 83, no. 1 (January 2022).

† The curious reader who desires to learn more about this interpretive position can find more about it on the translator's "Moretoitivities" webpage (https://voices.uchicago.edu/ziporyn/) under the title "Interpreting the Daodejing: The Minimally Discernible Position."

‡ See previous note to be directed to a further explication of this point.

§ See, for example, *Analects* 2:1, 2:3, and passim.

¶ See note 2 above.

Sarah Allan, "The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*: New Light from Guodian," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 89, fasc. 4/5 (2003): 237–85.

** Again, see note 2 above.

DAODEJING

道

德

經

1

Any course can be taken
as the right course to take,
but no course like that
can be the course taken always.

Any name can be named
to determine what is or should be,
but no name like that
can be what determines them always.

Nameless, undetermined:
any beginning of the ten thousand things.
Determined with a name:
"the mother of the ten thousand things."

Thus is desirelessness always maintained,
enabling a view of the mystery
in each of them and all;
and thus is desire always maintained,
enabling a view of just what it is
that each of them strives and cries for.

These two emerge together as one,
but when named are determined as different.

Their oneness is something truly obscure,
more obscure than obscure,
obscuring even obscurity—

a gateway into the manifold mysteries
of each of them and all.

2

When all in the world know the beautiful to be beautiful,
there already is the ugly.
When all know the good to be good,
there already is the bad.

Just so do presence and absence generate each other,
difficult and easy complete each other,
long and short contrast each other,
high and low collapse each other,
tone and noise harmonize each other,
ahead and behind follow each other.

This is why the sage abides in the work of nondoing,
practicing the teaching of noninstruction.

Through this the ten thousand things arise,
none declining it and none declined;
through this all get their birth and have their life,
none possessing it and none possessed;
through this all move and act and become,
none counting on it and none it counts on:
for, its achievements complete, it claims no credit,
never dwelling on its finished works—

and precisely because never dwelling
never gone.

3

Not esteeming the worthy
prevents the people from contending.
Not valuing rare goods
prevents the people from thieving.
Not displaying desirable things
keeps hearts and minds undisturbed.

Just so does the governing, the treatment,
administered by a sage
empty hearts and minds
but fill bellies,
weakening aspirations
but strengthening bones—

always leaving the people untouched
by knowing and desiring,
so no intentional actions are ventured
by the knowing.

Doing nondoing,
all is ordered,
everything heals.

4

The course:
a gushing through
a jumbling together
an emptying out—
yet harnessed for use
by every random unfilled space.

So deep an abyss it seems
the very source of all the ten thousand things—
blunting their edges
untangling their knots
blending with their shines
merging with their dusts.

So translucent,
a mere semblance of a presence,
something without known parentage:
an image of what precedes
even the highest deity.

5

Heaven and earth are not humane.
To them all things are straw dogs.
The sage is not humane.
To him all the people are straw dogs.

But is not the space
between heaven and earth
itself like a bellows?

Empty it is but never exhausted.
With each and every movement,
more and more emerges.

Where instructions are many,
blind alleys multiply.
Maintain instead the center within.

6

The spirit of the valley, imponderable and undying:
an obscure she-beast.
The gateway of this obscure she-beast:
the root of heaven and earth.
A gauzy fabric ever spreading,
a mere semblance of a presence—
but gently active,
and activated gently.

7

Heaven long endures.
Earth long persists.

Why can heaven so long endure,
earth so long persist?

It is because they do not live themselves
that they teem so enduringly with life.

Just so does the sage put himself behind
but find himself ahead,
cast himself out
but find himself still there.

Is it not precisely because he has no private interests
that all his private interests are fulfilled?

8

The highest good is like water—

Water, so deft,
so good at benefiting things
by never competing with them,
by putting itself
where none want to go.

That is why it is so close to the course:

In dwelling
so good at finding the place.
In centering
so good at finding the depths.

In interacting
so good at being kind.
In babbling
so good at ringing true.
In aligning
so good at shaping up.

When put to work
so good at gaining the power.
When making a move
so good at finding the moment.

Because never contending,

ever beyond reproach.

9

Better to stop short than to fill up all the way.
A blade polished keen cannot be long preserved.

When gold and jade fill the hall
no one can defend them.

Wealth and rank hoarded with arrogance
call forth their own reproach.

To retreat once the work is done—
that is the course of heaven.

10

In the midst of the physical vigors bearing you up
and those borne up by you,
can you hold them together in a single embrace?
In unifying all your energies of life and breath,
can you stay as supple as a newborn?
In rinsing clear your obscure purview,
can you wipe away every last speck?
In caring for the people and ordering the nation,
can you remain free of all knowledge?
In opening and shutting the gates of heaven,
can you take the role of the female?
In seeing clear through all the four directions,
can you keep on doing nothing at all?

This is the birthing and rearing of things
that never possesses what it produces,
never expecting anything from its deeds,
growing things but never controlling them—
the obscure power of remaining obscure.

11

Thirty spokes share a single hub—
the function of the cart happens where the absence is.
Clay is molded to make a vessel—
the function of the vessel happens where the absence is.
Doors and windows are chiseled out to make a room—
the function of the room happens where the absence is.
So profit lies in the having of something,
in properties possessed,
but function lies in the having of nothing—
in possession of no properties at all.

12

The Five Colors blind the eyes.
The Five Tones deafen the ears.
The Five Flavors distort the palate.
Chasing and hunting madden the mind.
Hard-to-get goods trip up the stride.

So it is that the sage
tends to the stomach,
not to the eye—
"Discarding that over there,
they take up this over here."

13

Being favored, as much as being disgraced,
should come as a terrible shock.
But great calamity should be valued
exactly as much as one's own body.

Why should being favored come as a terrible shock,
just as much as being disgraced?
To be favored is to be subordinated.
To gain it is one shock,
to lose it will be another.
That is why being favored, as much as being disgraced,
should come as a terrible shock.

Why should great calamity be valued
exactly as much as one's own body?
It is owning a body that makes us
subject to calamities.
If we possessed no body of our own,
what calamity could we have?

So it is that one whose valuing
lies in regarding his own body as the entirety of the world
may be entrusted with the world.

And one whose cherishing
lies in regarding his own body as the entirety of the world,
may be given charge of the world.

14

If when trying to see we find nothing there,
still we name it: “smooth.”
If when trying to hear we find nothing there,
still we name it: “faint.”
If when trying to grasp we find nothing there,
still we name it: “subtle.”

Three names, three determinations,
in which nothing further can be sought.
Just so are they blended into a oneness,
neither dark on the bottom nor bright on the top,
extending on and on,
never definite, always unnamed,
reverting to what is no thing at all.
This is called the shape of the shapeless,
the very image of no-thing.
This is called the vague and indistinct.
Meeting it we see no front,
Following it no back.
So it is that by holding to the course of ancient times
we ride and steer through all that is present now.
Ability to know this ancient beginning
is called the threading that runs through the course.

15

The ancient adepts of the course—
a mystery so subtle were they,
a pervasiveness so obscure,
that none could really know them.

Precisely because unknowable,
we make tentative descriptions
of their many seemings:

Ready for anything, as if crossing a frozen stream in winter.
Tentative and unsure, as if fearing their neighbors on all four sides.
Serious and respectful, like strangers who were only passing
    through.

Pliant and fragile, like ice just about to melt.
Solid and weighty, like raw blocks of unhewn wood.

Broad and open, like empty mountain valleys.
Muddled and mixed, like pools of muddy water.

Does anyone still know how to be muddy like that—
so muddy that through stillness
all slowly comes clear?
Does anyone still know how to be settled like that—
so settled that through long waiting
fresh motion slowly emerges?

Those who keep to this course desire no fullness.

Just by remaining unfilled,
they are well and truly covered—
for their cover takes no finished shape.

16

Extend vacuity to the utmost,
maintain stillness to the very depths.

As beings spring up on every side,
through this we view whither all return.

For however lushly they may flourish and grow,
all things return, each reverts to its root.

This reversion to the root is the real stillness:
the return to the given in them.

This return to the given in them is the real constancy.

Knowing this constancy is the real illumination.
Ignoring it means heedlessly creating calamity.

To know this constancy is to be capacious.
To be capacious is to be unbiased.
To be unbiased is to be sovereign.
To be sovereign is to be as the heavens.
To be as the heavens is to be as the course.
To be as the course is to last
unendangered through the very ending of the body.

17

The very highest are not even known to exist.
The next highest are loved and praised like a parent.
The next highest are feared.
The next highest are insulted.

Not trusting enough, they are not trusted.

How distant those seemed,
giving instructions so sparingly.
When their work was done and their tasks were accomplished,
the people all said,
“This is how we are,
this is what we did—
of ourselves,
all on our own.”

18

When the great course is abandoned,
humankindness and duty arise.
When wisdom and acuity emerge,
vast swindles begin.
When the six relations are at odds,
filial piety and parental love are born.
When the nation is disordered,
loyal ministers appear.

19

Cut off sagacity and discard wisdom;
the people will benefit a hundredfold.
Cut off humankindness and discard duty;
the people will return to filial piety and parental love.
Cut off skill and discard profit;
thieves and robbers will vanish.

But these three remedies are merely the outer ornament;
of themselves they are never sufficient.

There must be also that which they adorn,
to which they all belong:
vision of the undyed blankness,
embrace of the unhewn rawness—
reducing biased agendas,
lessening definite desires.

20

Cut off study, the emulation of others,
and all worries will cease.

What is the distance between a “Yes sir” and a “Yeah sure”?
What is the distance between “good” and “bad”?
“But” (they say) “what other people respect
you cannot afford not to respect!”
How absurd, how far off point!

For the mass of people are so happy and cheerful,
as if enjoying a great festival,
as if strolling the terraces in the springtime.
I alone seem nervous and circumspect,
unclear about which way to go,
like a clueless newborn not yet able to smile,
all torpid and slack, as if belonging nowhere.

The mass of people all have more than enough.
I alone seem lost and abandoned,
my mind the mind of an idiot,
a mass of muddle this mind of mine.

The ordinary folks are so bright and lucid.
I alone seem to be so dark and so dim.

They are so precise and clear.
I alone am confused and bewildered,
drifting around on what seems an ocean,

blown along as if utterly unmoored.

The mass of other people—they act with such *purpose*.
I alone am a thing so dense and inert, so base and so low.

I alone, unlike the others,
see no value in anything
but feeding at the breast
of the mother.

21

"Those who grand powers of virtuosity have shown
followed their course and their course alone."
But what kind of thing is this course, with which we are called to comply?
Naught but confusion, pure indistinction, is there to meet our eye.
So very unclear, so very confused!
In this itself is an image construed.
So very confused, so very unclear!
In this itself does a something appear.
So very unreachable, so very dimmed!
In this a kernel, an essence, is limned.
A life-giving kernel so real and true—
for in it is something reliable too.

From ancient times until today
such names as these don't fade away—
for they reveal incipience of every kind to our survey.

How do we discern all the many shapes and forms of incipience?
Through just this.

22

"Partial then whole"—
bent then straight,
hollow then filled,
worn then renewed.
Having little then gaining.
Having much then muddled.

This is how a sage embraces unity,
a microcosmic model for all the world:
By not displaying himself he shines.
By not justifying himself he emerges preeminent.
By not congratulating himself he achieves glory.
By not aggrandizing himself he grows great.

For it is only due to his not contending
that none in the world can contend with him.
As the ancients knew,
"Partial then whole"
is no empty saying!
For they saw that genuine wholeness
belongs to just this.

23

Left to themselves all words fade to silence
like a gust of wind outlived by the morning,
like a driving rain outlived by the day.

Now the rain and the wind are the doings of heaven and earth.
If even the doings of heaven and earth cannot be long sustained,
how much less can the doings of humans?

Just so do those who endeavor on the course,
in practicing the course, merge with the course,
in gaining virtuosity, merge with virtuosity—
and in losing, in loss, merge with the loss.

Merging with the course there is joy in the gain of the course.
Merging with virtuosity there is joy in the gain of virtuosity—
and merging with loss there is joy in the gain of the loss.

It is those who don’t trust a thing sufficiently
who will find something not to be trusted there.

24

"Up on tiptoes one cannot stand.
Overstepping one cannot walk."

Self-displayers have no shine.
Self-justifiers gain no preeminence.
Self-congratulators achieve no glory.
Self-aggrandizers accomplish no greatness.

Voyagers on the course call such things as these
spoiled leftovers or tumorous growths—
things that inspire disgust.
That is why those with the course before them
never stay where they are.

25

Something formed through undivided muddle,
there since before the birth of heaven and earth,
so desolate, so isolated, standing alone unaltered,
yet proceeding through everything everywhere unendangered—
such may be considered the mother of the world.

Not knowing its name,
we nickname it "the course."
But if forced to determine a proper name,
it would have to be called "the vastness."

Vastness means passing on and on.
Passing on and on means distancing.
Distancing means returning.

Just so is the course so vast,
the sky so vast,
the earth so vast—
and the sovereignty of a ruler so vast as well.
In all the realm there are these four kinds of vastness.
The sovereignty of a ruler is but one of them.

For humans conform to the earth,
the earth conforms to the sky,
and the sky conforms to the course;
but the course conforms to how everything is
when left to itself—
conforming to nothing at all.

26

The weighty is the root of lightness and ease,
the still the ruler of action and deed.
This is why the sage stays near the weighty supply carts,
throughout each day of his travels.
Although surrounded by glorious sights,
tranquil and distant he perches there unmoved.
Why then would a ruler of ten thousand chariots
treat the needs of his kingdom
more lightly than he treats his own?
Making light, he loses the root of his ease.
Always active, he loses the ruler of his deeds.

27

Good is the travel that follows no ruts and leaves no tracks.
Good is the speech that knows no errors and finds no flaws.
Good is the reckoning that uses no tallies and does no counting.

Good is the closure that uses no bolting and lock,
for it can never be breached.
Good is the knotting that uses no ropes or restraints,
for it can never be untied.

In just this way are sages so constantly good,
so good at rescuing people,
so good at considering them good—
finding not one to be worthless,
abandoning none.
For being so constantly good,
so good at rescuing things,
so good at considering them good,
not one thing is found worthless,
not one is abandoned.

This is called extending the illumination.

So it is that the good are the teachers of the bad,
and the bad are the raw material of the good.
Failure either to value the teacher
or to cherish the material
is the vast confusion found even in "wisdom."

For this is the wondrously unseen agreement
binding the two together.

28

To know the masculine
while also maintaining the feminine
is to be a channel for all the world.
Being a channel for all the world,
the power of what is constant remains undivided—
a reversion to the state of a newborn child.

To know the lucid
while also maintaining the opaque
is to be a microcosmic model of all the world.
Being a model of all the world,
the power of what is constant remains unwavering—
a reversion to the boundlessness of utmost absence.

To know the honorable
while also maintaining the disgraceful
is to be a valley for all the world.
Being a valley for all the world,
the power of what is constant remains ever sufficient—
a reversion to the unhewn.

When the unhewn gets shattered,
it is made into vessels and tools,
each with its purpose.
But as instead used by a sage,
it is what has seniority
over all such functionaries.

For the vastest of all structures is formed
by the great cutting and carving
that severs nothing.

29

Every attempt to seize the world and control it
shows us that it simply cannot be done.
The world cannot be stopped.
The world is a numinous vessel
beyond anyone's making, beyond anyone's control.
To control it is to wreck it.
To hold it is to lose it.

Things in this world
sometimes lead and sometimes follow,
sometimes blow warm and sometimes cold,
sometimes stand mighty and sometimes fall frail,
sometimes crush and sometimes are crushed.

So it is that the sage avoids excess,
avoids extravagance,
avoids greatness.

30

One who assists a ruler by means of the course
will not use military might to strong-arm the world—
such deeds too easily turn back upon their doer.

Wherever an army is stationed,
thorns and briars are sure to grow.
In the year after a great battle,
a bad harvest is sure to show.

The real skill is persistence
that never resorts to force:

Persistent but not proud.
Persistent but not aggressive.
Persistent but not arrogant.

Persistent in what cannot be stopped.
Persistent but never coercive.

When things get too strong
they begin to grow old.
This is called being set off course.
What is set off course
soon ends.

31

Good weapons are ill-omened tools,
always odious to someone concerned.
That is why a voyager on the course
never dwells where they are.

In the leisure of their homelife
noble people prefer the left side.
But in their usage of weapons
they must value the right side as well.

A weapon is an ill-omened tool,
not the proper tool for a person of nobility—
to be used only as a last resort.
Calm and bland times are best to him.
When he must win a victory,
he finds it an ugly thing.
To find it a beautiful thing
is to delight in killing others.
One who delights in killing others
can never realize his aspirations in the world.

In the ritual for auspicious occasions, the place of honor is on the left,
while for inauspicious occasions, it is on the right.
In the army, the second-in-command stays on the left,
while the supreme commander stays on the right—
the exact ritual positions of a funeral.

He who has killed multitudes of people
should weep for them with grief, with sorrow—
to live through a victory is indeed just like conducting a funeral.

32

The constancy of the course
lies in its namelessness—
its being indeterminable, unhewn.
Although vanishingly minute,
none in the world can subordinate it.
If lords and kings could hold on to it,
all things would yield of their own accord.
Just as the sweet dew settles when heaven and earth come
    together,
all the people would align themselves without being ordered to.

When it gets carved up the names appear.
Once there are names,
know that it is time for the cutting to stop.
Knowing when to stop averts the danger.

The course is present throughout the world,
just as the stream's surge to the valley
is there
in the river's surge to the sea.

33

Wise are those who know others.
Illumined are those who know themselves.

Powerful are those who conquer others.
Strong are those who conquer themselves.

Wealthy are those who know what is enough
while those who force their way are merely ambitious.

What never loses its place is what truly endures.
What is unlost in death is what is truly long-lived.

34

The vast course, how it overflows all banks,
drifting in all directions,
to the left, to the right!

All things depend on it for birth,
none declining it and none declined,
but it gains no fame for what is thus accomplished—
cannot be named as any being at all.

It clothes and feeds the ten thousand things,
yet never plays their lord and master,
ever and always beyond all desiring:
it can be named the vanishingly small.

Never playing their lord and master,
the ten thousand things are yet always drawn back to it:
it can be named the vast and great.

It is precisely never making much of itself
that makes it so very great.

35

Where the great image is held fast
all the world comes together,
coming together yet all unharmed—
the vastest form of safety, of peace.

Music and other lures will stay passing guests,
but when the course passes the lips—
how flavorless, how bland!
Gazing at it there is nothing worth watching,
listening to it there is nothing worth hearing—
yet wherever put to use
nothing can exhaust it.

36

To be shrunk something must first be fully expanded.
To be weakened it must first be fully strengthened.
To be cast down it must first be fully raised up.
To be taken it must first be fully given.

This is called the illumination of the barely visible:
the soft and yielding overcome the firm and strong.

Just as the fishes must not leave their depths,
the sharp weapons of a nation must never be displayed.

37

The constancy of the course lies in doing nothing
yet leaving nothing undone.

If lords and kings could hold fast to it,
all things would transform of their own accord.

If desires arise during these transformations,
we settle them down with the nameless unhewn.
For the unhewn, free of all names,
will spell freedom from desire as well.
Not desiring, becoming still,
all the world will settle itself.

38

The highest virtuosity is not grasped as virtuosity.
That is why it has such virtuosity.

Lower virtuosity never loses its "virtuosity."
That is why it so lacks virtuosity.

Highest virtuosity *does* nothing,
for it harbors no motives or purposes.
Lower virtuosity is something done—
always with some motive or purpose.

Higher humankindness is something done,
yet without any specific motive.
Higher duty is something done,
but always with some specific motive.

Higher ritual propriety is something done—
and when others fail to respond as expected,
out comes the muscle to coerce compliance.

So it is that virtuosity appears when the course is lost.
Humankindness appears when virtuosity is lost.
Duty appears when humankindness is lost.
Ritual propriety appears when duty is lost.

Ritual propriety is the thinning out of loyalty and trust, the beginning of disorder.

Foreknowledge is the ostentatious flowering of the course, the
beginning of foolishness.

Just so do the truly great stay with the thick and not with the thin,
stay with the fruit and not with the flower—
"Discarding that over there,
they pick up instead this over here."

39

“Those who achieved unity long ago:
heaven achieved unity and is thereby clear,
earth achieved unity and is thereby tranquil,
the spirits achieved unity and are thereby numinous”—
just as the valley achieves unity and is thereby filled.
Indeed, it is through achieving such unity that all things are born and live.

But when lords and kings achieve unification,
they take it as a demand for the whole world’s unwavering fealty.

If such were brought to bear in every case,
heaven, robbed of what brings its clarity,
would ever be in danger of splitting;
earth, robbed of what brings its tranquility,
would ever be in danger of collapsing;
the spirits, robbed of what makes them numinous,
would ever be in danger of destruction;
the valley, robbed of what allows it to fill,
would ever be in danger of running dry;
all the ten thousand things, robbed of what gives them life,
would ever be in danger of extinction;
and the lords and kings themselves, robbed of what alone makes them exalted,
would ever be in danger of downfall.

For exaltation is rooted in debasement,
and loftiness is rooted in lowliness.

Just so do lords and kings make sure to call themselves "the lonely,"
"the orphaned," "the destitute."
Is this not because lowliness is their true root?
Is it not because one's honor is destroyed
by enumerating one's honors?

They desire not to be gleaming and glossy like the jade,
but rather clumpy and coarse like the rocks.

40

Reversal, opposition: the activity of the course.
Weakness, fragility: the functioning of the course.

All things in the world are born from what is there,
but what is there is born from what is not there.

41

When the highest type of gentleman hears the course,
he diligently puts it into practice.
When the middling type of gentleman hears the course,
he sometimes keeps it and sometimes loses it.
When the lowest type of gentleman hears the course,
he simply bursts out laughing.

Anything that causes no laughter
cannot be considered the course.

It is there in the statements they make:
"The course's clarity looks like darkness.
Its advance looks like retreat.
Its smoothness looks like a tangle."

Indeed:
The highest virtuosity is like a low-lying valley.
The greatest purity is like disgrace.
The broadest virtuosity is like inadequacy.

The most firmly established virtuosity seems only furtively gained.
The most solid realness seems always to be fading away.

The greatest square has no corners.
The greatest vessel is slow to completion.
The greatest tone is faint of sound.
The greatest image has no form.

The course hides in nameless indeterminacy.
But that is why it is so good
at lending itself to things—
coming to completion
by completing them.

42

The course generates continuities.
Continuities generate polarities.
Polarities generate triplicities.
Triplicities generate the ten thousand things.

All the ten thousand things bear the darkness of shadow on their backs
as they hug the brightness of sunlight to their breasts—
and in the intermingling of these two energies
all their harmonies are formed.

Being orphaned, widowed, destitute is what everyone most detests —
but kings and princes describe themselves using just these words.

Just so are things
sometimes increased by diminishment,
sometimes diminished by increase.

What others teach, we also teach:
"The violent never die a natural death"
—*and the strong bridging must never be destroyed*.
We have made this the father of all our teachings.

43

The softest things in the world run roughshod
over the firmest things in the world.

What has no presence enters where there is no gap.

This is how I know that nondoing has its benefits.

The teaching of noninstruction,
the benefits of nondoing—
few things in the world extend as far as these.

44

Which is more dear,
your name or your body?

Which is worth more,
your body or your things?

Gain or loss—
which is the sickness?

Extreme thrift leads to great expense,
and vast hoards lead to heavy losses.

Knowing what is enough protects from disgrace.
Knowing where to stop protects from danger.
Thereby does one long persist and endure.

45

Great completeness seems defective,
yet when put to use it never wears thin.
Great fullness seems empty,
yet when put to use it never runs out.

Great straightness seems bent.
Great skill seems clumsy.
Great eloquence seems tongue-tied.

"Activity overcomes the cold,
but stillness overcomes the heat"—
and through clarity and stillness
all is made right with the world.

46

When the world is faring on the course,
the galloping steeds are sent back to draw carts of manure.

When the world is not faring on the course,
war-horses are bred in the borderlands.

There is no disaster greater than not knowing when to stop.
There is no error more massive than desire for gain.

So it is that the satisfaction
of knowing to be satisfied
with just enough
is always enough.

47

Not exiting the door,
all the world is known.
Not looking out the window,
the course of heaven is shown.

The farther one goes,
the less one knows.

Just so does a sage
know without traveling,
identify without seeing,
achieve without doing.

48

"The work of learning is daily addition."
But the work of the course is daily subtraction,
subtracting and further subtracting until nondoing is reached—
a nondoing that leaves nothing undone.

It is the constancy of having no task to do
that allows one to gain the world.
Wherever there is anything to do,
no amount of doing is ever sufficient
to gain the world.

49

The sage, steadfast in having no intentions of his own,
takes all the people's intentions as his own:

"I regard the good as good,
but I also regard the not-good as good.
For virtuosity is to be good
at finding them all good.
I trust the trustworthy,
but I also trust the untrustworthy.
For virtuosity is to remain trustworthy
in finding them all trustworthy."

The sage goes through the world
breathing all of it in, absorbing each and all—
the mixer and the melder
of all the world's intentions.

As all the people come pouring
into his ears and his eyes,
a smile comes to the face of the sage
with the dawning recognition
of a child.

50

"Of what emerges in life and sinks back in at death,
all thirteen are followers of life."
But all thirteen are also followers of death.

For all the activities of human beings,
when they value only life as the very life of them,
come instead to a place of death.

Why is this?
Precisely because they so relentlessly value only life
as the very life of them.

Often are heard such claims as these:
"Those who skillfully consolidate the life in themselves
never encounter tigers or rhinos when traveling,
need no swords or armor when among the troops.
For they have nowhere for rhinos to thrust in their horns,
nowhere for tigers to slash through with their claws,
nowhere for swords to lodge their blades."

But why would this be?

Because for them there is no place of death.

51

Whatever the course generates
is reared and raised by virtuosity,
is shaped and formed by other things,
is brought to completion by the propensities of every circumstance.

This is how all things without exception
honor the course and esteem virtuosity.
The honor they give to the course,
the esteem they give to virtuosity,
happen of their own accord
without being imposed,
obeying no command.

So it is that the course in generating them,
and virtuosity in rearing them,
are also what grow them, nurture them,
shelter them, protect them,
nourish them, cover them—

Producing them but not possessing them,
making them but not requiring anything of them,
growing them but not controlling them.

Such is their obscure power,
the power of their obscurity.

52

That all in the world has a beginning—
take that itself as the mother of the world.

Having found the mother,
know thereby her children.

Having known the children,
maintain and protect their mother.

Then even at the demise of your body,
nothing is endangered.

Blocking its exchanges,
closing its gates,
it is forever free of toil.

Opening its exchanges,
completing all its tasks,
it never can be rescued.

Seeing the vanishingly small is called clarity.
Preserving and protecting the softness is called strength.

Making use of the shine but always returning it to this sort of clarity,
you expose your body to no harm—
this is to put into practice what is constant.

53

If we understand anything at all
about walking so vast a course,
adding to it will be our only fear.

The vast course is very even and smooth.
But most people have a liking for the constraint of narrower lanes.

When the courts are severely weeded,
the fields get severely weedy.
When the granaries are severely emptied,
the garments get festively ornamented—
with the dangling of sharpened swords.

To be sated with food and drink while hoarding wealth and property
—
this is called the coarse, not the course!

54

"The firmly established is what nothing uproots."
And the firmly embraced is what nothing evades.
It is through this that the devotions of sons and grandsons
continue without cease:

Cultivated in the self, its power is found genuine.
Cultivated in the family, its power is found abundant.
Cultivated in the community, its power is found expansive.
Cultivated in the nation, its power is found copious.
Cultivated in the whole world, its power is found ubiquitous.

So it is that selves are contemplated through the experience of
    selfhood,
families through the experience of family,
communities through the experience of community,
nations through the experience of nationhood,
world through the experience of world.

How do I know the world is thus?
Through just this.

55

When virtuosity runs deep, one becomes like a newborn:
never stung by poisonous insects,
never seized by fierce beasts,
never snatched up by birds of prey.

A newborn infant:
weak of bones and soft of tendons,
yet firm of grip;
not yet knowing of the union of male and female,
yet penis fully erect—
such is the ultimate potency.
Howling all day long,
yet never growing hoarse—
such is the ultimate harmony.

Knowing such harmony is real constancy.
Knowing such constancy is real illumination.

Augmenting life, called a good omen,
I call the same: ominous.
The mind controlling vital energy, called strong,
I call the same: strong-arming.

For when they become big and strong
all things start to age.
This is called going off course.
What goes off course
soon ends.

56

Those who know do not speak.
Those who speak do not know.

To block the exchanges,
close the gates,
dull the points,
untie the tangles,
harmonize with the glares,
merge with the dusts—
this is called merging into the obscure,
the obscure merging.

This is something there is no way to get:
no way to get near and no way to get away from,
no way to get benefit from and no way to get harmed by,
no way to get valued and no way to get debased—

and for that very reason
the most valuable thing in all the world.

57

A state is governed by doing what is normal and right.
A war is won by doing what is unexpected and strange.
But it is by doing nothing at all about it
that the whole world is gained.

How do we know this is so?

The more taboos and prohibitions there are,
the poorer the people become.
When the court of an empire is full of sharp weapons,
its nations and clans grow ever more muddled.
When people are full of skills and tricks,
strange goods begin to proliferate.
When rules and laws increase,
thieves and robbers start to multiply.

So a sage would only say,
"I take no action and the people transform themselves.
I love staying still and the people rectify themselves.
I do nothing and the people enrich themselves.
I am free of desire and the people, of their own accord,
revert to their unhewn simplicity."

58

When a government is dim and confused,
its people are pure and unsullied.
When a government is clear and precise,
its people wallow in penury and want.

“A disaster, such a disaster!”
But on it depend the coming blessings.
“A blessing, such a blessing!”
But in it are hidden the coming disasters.
Who knows where they all end up?
There is no way to rectify them all with a single norm.

The correct and normal becomes the unexpected and strange.
And the good becomes the monstrous—
confusion for everyone since time immemorial.

Thus a sage squares the edges without trimming away the corners—
uncorrupted but never severe,
genuine but never self-indulgent,
bright but never dazzling.

59

To govern men and serve heaven,
best just to cherish whatever you already have.
Cherishing what you have means devotion to it without delay.

Devoted to it without delay,
the store of virtuosities soon doubles.
Doubling the virtuosities and doubling again,
there is nothing that cannot be overcome.
Able to overcome everything
you are free of any known limits.
It is those who are free of any known limits
who are fit to possess an entire nation.
But it is possession of the mother of the nation
that gives a strong root and a firm foundation—
the course of long life and enduring vision.

60

Ruling a large country is like frying a small fish.
When the course is applied to the care of the world,
the demons lose their spiritual powers.
Their spiritual powers are not really gone—
they simply cease to be harmful to others.
It is not only the spiritual powers of the demons
that then cease to be harmful:
the sages too then harm no one.
Because the demons and sages
no longer do each other harm,
they exchange their powers back and forth,
until each has also the power of the other.

61

A large country is a downstream region,
a low-down place
where all the world goes for intercourse—
the she-beast of the world.

The she-beast always falls back on her stillness
to defeat the male:
she uses her stillness to get herself beneath him.
Just so does a large country come to possess a small country—
by putting itself below it.

By already being below it,
the small country has gotten a hold on the large one.
The one takes possession by putting itself low;
the other gets a hold by being already low.

The large country most desires
to take in and nurture the other;
the small country most desires
to render its services to the other.
So for both to get what they desire,
the great must put itself low.

62

The course:
the innermost spout of the ten thousand things,
the vanishing point
whence and whither they are ever pouring;
what is cherished by good men
and what protects the bad.

Beautiful words can be mere marketing,
lofty deeds can be irksome impositions,
but the human bad—
why should that ever be abandoned?

So it is that when an emperor or duke is installed,
rather than offering magnificent tributes of jade
drawn by a team of horses,
it is better to stay settled right where one is,
thereby offering this course.

What was the reason the ancients valued this course?
Was it not that those who seek it always find it,
while those who do wrong are through it freed from blame?

That is what makes it the most valuable thing in all the world.

63

Do nondoing.
Serve what imposes no task.
Taste what has no flavor.
See the greatness of the small,
the muchness of the scant.

Respond to hatred with virtuosity.
Plan the difficult when still easy.
Manage the vast when still minute.

Even the most difficult tasks in the world
begin as something easy.
Even the vastest affairs of the world
begin as something minute.

So it is that sages achieve their greatness
by never doing anything great.

To promise lightly is to be little believed.
To take it easy is to have many difficulties.

So it is that sages,
by regarding all these things as difficult,
have no difficulties at all.

64

The secure is easy to preserve.
The unsprouted is easy to plan.

The brittle is easy to break.
The tiny is easy to disperse.

Handle a thing when it is not yet there.
Order it before it becomes disordered.

A tree that fills a man's embrace begins as a tiny sprout.
A nine-story tower begins as a lump of soil.
The journey of a thousand miles begins underfoot.

To do something with it is to ruin it.
To hold it is to lose it.

And so a sage does nothing and thus ruins nothing,
holds nothing and thus loses nothing.

But the way most people go about their work
is to always ruin it just before completion.
Take as much care about the end as about the beginning,
and there will be no such ruin.

Just so does a sage desire the undesired,
placing no value on hard-to-get goods.
He studies the unstudied,

returning to what everyone else passes by
unnoticed.

This is how he helps each thing be as it is of its own accord—
never venturing any doing at all.

65

The ancient masters of the course used it not to enlighten the
people but to befuddle them:

"The people are hard to govern because they have so much *wisdom*.
Thus to use wisdom to govern a state is to pillage that state.
To refrain from using wisdom to govern a state is to bless that
state."

But to really understand these two extremes,
we must test them against the model of the microcosm.

Knowing always how to accord with that model
is called the unseen power, the power of the unseen.

The unseen power of the unseen goes deep, goes far,
revolving and reverting together with things,
and contrary to each of them—
for only thus is the great compliance attained.

66

Why are rivers and oceans able to reign over every stream?
Because they are skilled at getting below them all.
That is why they can reign over every stream.

In just this way, if you want to be above the people,
in your words you must put yourself below them.
If you want to be first among the people,
in your personal behavior you must place yourself behind them.

This is how a sage can be positioned above the people
without becoming a burden to them;
can be positioned in front of the people
without becoming a nuisance to them.

That is why all in the world delight in thrusting him forward,
never tiring of him.

Because he does not contend,
none in all the world can contend with him.

67

All in the world say our course is so great
yet appears not to measure up,
so vast
yet appears always outmatched.

Its greatness and its vastness are exactly why
it seems not to measure up to others—
exactly why it is always unmatched.
For if it had ever matched or measured up to others
It would long have become something meager and small.

We have three treasures by which to maintain and protect it.
One is loving care.
One is frugality.
One is never venturing to put ourselves first.

Loving care is what enables us to be brave.
Frugality is what enables us to be generous.
Never venturing to put ourselves first
is what enables us to be senior and leader
to all who serve as functionaries.

Nowadays people try to be courageous without loving care,
to be generous without frugality.
to be first without putting themselves last—
a recipe for certain death.

Loving care in battle brings victory.

Loving care in defense brings security.

Whatever heaven would rescue
is safeguarded with the gift of loving care.

68

A skillful knight does not wage war.
A skillful warrior does not get angry.

The most skillful victory over enemies is never to engage them at all.
The most skillful deployment of others is to put oneself below them.

Such is the power that comes from not contending,
such is the force that truly deploys others—
and such is the ultimate principle, as old as heaven itself.

69

The military strategists have a saying:
"I dare not play the host but would rather play the guest.
I dare not advance an inch but would rather retreat a foot."

This is called advancing the nonadvance,
rolling up the sleeves to bare the nonarms,
seizing the nonopposition,
wielding the nonweaponry.

There is no disaster greater than to undervalue the enemy.
Undervaluing the enemy puts us in danger of losing—
our own treasure.

So when two combatants clash,
the one whom it pains
is the winner.

70

Our words are so very easy to understand,
so very easy to put into practice
that no one in all the world
can understand them
or put them into practice.

For there is a guiding source for such words,
a ruling master for such deeds.

It is our *nonunderstanding* itself—
because of which no one can understand us.

The understanding of us is meager indeed!
So it is that those who find a model in us
are precious indeed.

In just this way
the sage keeps the treasure in his breast
covered over with the coarsest cloth.

71

To understand nonunderstanding—
that is the supreme.
Not to understand understanding—
that is a sickness.
Precisely by regarding sickness as sickness,
one is no longer sick.
Sages are not sick:
because they regard their sickness as sickness,
they are no longer sick.

72

Allowing the people to live without fear of the authorities
is what wins one the greatest authority.

Do not restrict their dwellings,
do not weary of what sustains their lives.
Because you do not weary of them,
they will not weary of you.

Just so do sages know themselves without displaying themselves,
cherishing themselves without exalting themselves—
"Discarding that over there,
they take up instead this over here."

73

Courage in daring kills.
Courage in not daring lets live.

Each of these is sometimes advantageous,
sometimes harmful.
Who knows why heaven seems sometimes to hate one and
    sometimes the other?
This remains a problem even for the sage.

The way of heaven
does not contend but deftly prevails;
does not instruct but deftly responds;
does not summon anyone
yet all things are drawn to it of their own accord.

So lax and so loose,
yet so good at plotting.

Heaven's net, so vast and broad,
though loose, loses nothing.

74

If the people had no fear of death,
it would be useless to threaten them with death.

Yet if the fear of death were truly constant,
given that some of us have the power to apprehend and execute
all who violate the norms,
who would ever have dared do so?

What is truly constant is the executioner
already doing all the killing.

To kill in the place of the executioner
is to hew in the place of a great carpenter.

He who hews in the place of a great carpenter
rarely fails to hurt his own hands.

75

The hunger of the people
is indeed due to a ravenous greed.
For it is due to those above them
gobbling up their taxes.

The unruliness of the people
is indeed due to a deep resistance to correction.
For it is due to those above them
willfully engaging in purposeful endeavors.

The people's disregard of the threat of execution
is indeed due to a deep neglect of death.
For it is rooted in those above so avidly seeking
to enrich their own lives.

For it is only those that have no ideas
about what life could possibly be good for
who well and truly value life.

76

People are weak and soft when born,
strong and hard when dead.

All things, even grasses and trees,
are soft and fragile when born,
but dried out and rigid when dead.

So it is that the hard and strong are followers of death,
while the soft and weak are followers of life.

And so it is that when any weapon grows too strong
it ceases to be the victorious one,
as a strong tree is the one chopped down—
by weapons, to make weapons.

The great and strong take their place below,
the soft and weak above.

77

The course of heaven, is it not like the stretching of a bow?
The high is brought low,
the low is raised up.
Reducing what is too much,
increasing what is too little.

The course of heaven is to take away where there is excess
and add where there is lack.
The course of man is just the contrary,
taking from those who have too little
and giving it to those who have too much.

But who has the ability to take what is more than enough
and give it as an offering to all the world?
Only those faring the course.

So it is that a sage
acts but expects nothing from his deeds,
accomplishes but takes no credit—
for he never desires worthiness displayed.

78

Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water.
Yet in attacking the hard and rigid none can outdo it,
for nothing at all replaces it.

That the weak overcome the strong,
that the soft overcome the hard,
is known by all but practiced by none.

That is why the sages say:
"He who receives the filth of the land
is called ruler of the altars of grain.
He who receives the misfortunes of the land
is called king of all the world."

Straight words always seem reversed.

79

When great enmity is resolved,
some enmity always lingers—
can this be considered true goodness?

So when sages are creditors in an agreement,
they demand nothing from the other party.

Having virtuosity, one's concern is the agreement.
Lacking virtuosity, one's concern is the payment.

"The course of heaven has no favorites—
it is constantly with good people."

80

In a state kept small, its population low,
even if there are all sorts of gadgets and tools,
no one has any use for them.
Even if the people take death quite seriously,
no one runs away from it.
Even if they have boats and carriages,
no one rides in them.
Even if they have weapons and armor,
no one displays them.

There the people would once again use only knotted cords,
relishing their food,
enjoying their clothing,
at ease in their homes,
delighting in their customs.

A neighboring state may be within viewing distance,
so near that the sounds of its chickens and dogs can be heard.
But the people there would grow old and die
without ever traveling from one to the other.

81

True words are not beautiful.
Beautiful words are not true.

The skilled do not dispute.
Disputants are not skilled.

The wise are not learned.
The learned are not wise.

The sage is one who accumulates nothing.

Having used all he has for others,
he finds his own self enhanced.
Having given all he has to others,
he finds his own self enriched.

For to benefit some one thing
yet without harming any other—
that is the course of heaven.
And to take action for some one purpose
yet without striving against any other—
that is the course of the sage.

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NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1 **any beginning of the ten thousand things**: Following both of the Mawangdui manuscripts, which have *wanwu* 萬物 "the ten thousand things" in both this line and the next one. The received version has "heaven and earth" *tiandi* 天地 instead of "the ten thousand things" in this line, but keeps "the ten thousand things" in the next one.

1 **"the mother of the ten thousand things"**: These two sentences can and often have been parsed so as to mean "Nonbeing is named the beginning of all things [or of heaven and earth]. Being is named the mother of all things."

1 **Thus is desirelessness**: "Desirelessness" is an uninflected translation of *wuyu* 無欲, but it is important to note the sense here of maintaining what is beyond all desiring in both the objective and the subjective sense, implying both the presence of what is "undesir*able*" and, therefore, the presence of what is "undesir*ing*." This provides a key connection to the previous lines about names and namelessness, rooted in the assumed connection between names and desires. What is unnameable and indeterminable is ipso facto incapable of being experienced as an object of desire (cf. chapters 34 and 37, the latter being traditionally the other bookend to this half of the text), hence something literally undesir*able*, but this also makes available an aspect within ourselves that is not doing any desiring—perhaps even at the same time as we are also engaged in desire. It is suggested here that this aspect of ourselves allows us to perceive the mystery, the wondrous sublimity of the namelessness of all things, untouched by whatever we may desire from them or determine of them. And at the same time, this nameless aspect of things, the course never taken as a course, is itself entirely devoid of desire: it does what it does only by "nondoing," i.e, without any deliberate intentions or purposes.

1 **in each of them and all**: The translation emphatically points to a plurality of the mysteries, a specific dimension of sublimity pertaining to each of the ten

thousand things considered severally ("in each of them and all" translating a simple possessive pronoun), on the basis of the final line of the chapter, which specifies that we are talking not about a singular mystery but 眾妙 *zhongmiao* "the *multitude* of mysteries" or even more emphatically, as in the translation here, "the manifold mysteries of each of them and all."

1 **that each of them strives and cries for**: The translation follows the Mawangdui texts, both of which here have *suojiao* 所噭. This can mean literally either "what they cry" or "that which cries," which might imply either what they cry for or what they quest after: either the object of their desires, or that which impels their cries, i.e., their desires themselves. "What they cry" might also mean simply what issues from them, what they express. "Enabling a view of just what it is that each of them strives and cries for" exploits the ambiguity of the English word "just" to capture a delicate double implication in the original text, highlighting both the positive and the negative sides of desire: it suggests that desire enables us to see *only* that which is desired, but on the other hand also *precisely* what is desired. Desire is what narrows vision, excluding the unwanted unhewn background, single-mindedly focusing on the object of the quest, so that beings see just what they want to see: what they focus on is only what their language can name as things in their valued "A category" and the shadowy disvalued "B category" defined only in contrast to it, really seeing only what they strive and cry for (for further explication of this "A/B" schema, please see A Note on the Translation as well as the online essay "Interpreting the *Daodejing"* at https://voices.uchicago.edu/ziporyn/). Yet this is also the process by which any things at all are brought to light, carved out, defined, or manifested. Here we can discern a clarifying resonance with the received version, which has *jiao* 徼 in place of the *suojiao* found in the Mawangdui versions, a character meaning "to trace" or "to seek," usually here interpreted to imply "what they tend toward," "their end," "their boundaries or contours," "the divisions between them," or "their outermost manifestations." What they cry for is what they desire, and this desire is what carves out individual objects of desire for the "eye" (see chapter 12), making boundaries between them—so all we see are clear, definite, and distinct (named) objects, carved out of the unhewn by our desires. But at the same time, the choice of the word "cry" to denote the realm of desire not only links it to oral expression and thence to the creation of names, but also refers us back to the motif of the mother in the previous lines: the namelessness itself, if it must be given any name at all, can be given only the name "mother"—a positive designation for a negative (compare chapter 14), a substantialization of the fertile and nourishing void of the womb, of a female person who is devoid of socially sanctioned "name" or identity in the patriline but who is the actual source of birth. An infant's desire for the mother's breast is what is figured here (see chapter 20): the inchoate desire in the cries of a newborn for something not even known as a

person or even an object at all. So in spite of whatever the ten thousand things may seem to be doing, whatever is expressed by all their actions and in all the names they give and all the words they utter, whatever results are manifested by all their processes, what they are obscurely crying for without knowing it, desiring in this alternate "stomach" way that does not explicitly posit a conscious object of its desire (see chapter 12 and chapter 52), is the "mother."

CHAPTER 2

3 **there already is the bad**: We have three related ideas suggested here: (1) By understanding a particular concept, the opposite concept is also necessarily understood, as a contrast. (2) Knowledge of a value, clear awareness of it, the specifying of it as a definite goal or ideal, undermines the value of that value, makes it bad, for by making it the object of deliberate pursuit, "nondoing" becomes "doing": hypocritical fakery and artificial effort attempt to force behavior to conform to the ideal, thereby undermining the true source of the value, which is assumed to lie in spontaneous nonpurposivity. (3) What generates the problem is not just a single individual's awareness of the ideal, but the fact that *all under heaven agree* about these ideals, these values: the meaning in this case is that the very fact that all people agree to a value concept is itself what generates the anti-value, not merely conceptually but pragmatically and concretely, and not merely as an individual undermining of the true source of virtue (nonpurposivity) but on a social level. For then everyone strives for the same goal, they fight to attain the same rare goods (see chapter 3), to attain the same small space at the top of the hill, or the same few positions of reputation (name, fame) earned for preeminence in this particular virtue. Their fighting for it, as much as their deliberate efforts for it, falsifies, undermines, subverts the stated value. Everyone knowing the good makes the world into a constant war—undermining the good. (This of course assumes that "war" is not what was conceived of as "good." But let's say "war" is designated as the good. Everyone agreeing to it still undermines it—for their agreement itself would in this case be the larger "peace" that subtends all their warfare, the "evil" they cannot escape!) The meaning of these opening lines of chapter 2, then, is at once cognitive, ethical, and social. The point is not merely that establishing a concept simultaneously establishes its anti-concept, but also that there are self-undermining effects of becoming aware of a concept of value, and further, that *when all agree* to a shared concept of value, precisely when alternate concepts of value are forgotten, this itself is bad and ugly. This involves the structural feature sometimes later epitomized as *wujibifan* 物極必反 ("when a thing reaches its extreme, it reverses"), and also accords well with the proclamation in chapter 40 that "Reversal, opposition: [is] the activity of the course," as well as with the logic of the chapter to follow (chapter 3): making a value recognized, and then further universally recognized, is what causes everyone

to strive for the same goal, and this is intrinsically bad (causing competition and mutual antipathy among them on the one hand and unnatural conformity to a single standard on the other). All these senses of the principle of value reversal would then apply also to the following lines about mutual generation and indivisibility of opposites. The rich ambiguity of the line in the original, then, is best maintained by keeping in mind all three meanings: (1) that establishing any concept requires the conceptual presence of its opposite, such that establishing a standard of goodness always implicitly calumniates whatever falls outside it, and also posits a possible alternative vision of the good (a direction developed in some parts of the *Zhuangzi*); and also (2) that deliberately trying to be good makes one bad; and finally (3) that the success of the attempt to universalize a value even further undermines its value. We can now see how this develops the ideas already foreshadowed in summary form in chapter 1: a guiding course or a name, a method or a value, that can be taken explicitly and normatively as guide, as value, ceases for that very reason to be a reliable course or value. When a value is *always* recognized, when it becomes constant either for an individual (meaning 2) or worse, for everyone in a society (meaning 3), it ceases to be valuable and instead generates the opposite. Anything brought to full awareness, and then to universal recognition, undermines itself: the more a "name" or determinate entity successfully becomes itself, the more it becomes its opposite.

3 **ahead and behind follow each other**: If we were to follow the Mawangdui manuscripts, this passage would be translated as: "Hence the mutual generation of presence and absence, the mutual completion of difficult and easy, the mutual contrast of long and short, the mutual collapsing of high and low, the mutual harmonizing of tone and noise, the mutual following of ahead and behind—*this is the constant*" (emphasis added). For in those versions, all of these declarative statements are replaced with possessives that turn the verbs into abstract nouns (e.g., *youwu zhi xiangshengye* 有無之相生也—the fact *that* presence and absence generate each other—instead of simply *youwu xiangsheng* 有無相生, the simple declarative statement that they generate each other), making one long subject clause in an uncharacteristically long sentence, to which is then added, at last, the full copulative predicate, which is not found in the standard version of this chapter at all: "this is the constant"—or "sustainable" or "reliable" (恆 也 *heng ye*). This gives us a direct recapitulation of the key term "constancy" from chapter 1 (*heng* 恆 in Mawangdui instead of the synonymous *chang* 常 in the received version) so central to that chapter: *changdao* 常道, *changming* 常名, *changwuyu* 常無欲, *changyouyu* 常有欲, i.e., the constant course, the constant name, constantly desiring, constantly desireless (rendered by "always" in our translation). This would make this "the constant" a strong candidate for the antecedent for the pronoun embedded in the pronoun-preposition contraction *yan*

焉 two lines down. The meaning would then be not "It is through this work of nondoing, this teaching of noninstruction, that all things arise" and so on, but rather "It is through this constancy—the reason also for the sage's abiding in the work of nondoing—that all things arise. . . ." and so on. But "the work of nondoing" and "the constancy of the mutual generation of opposites" are obviously closely related in this text. Here we hang them together on the little word "this" ("This is why . . ." and "Through this").

3 **never gone**: Because it doesn't dwell on its achievements, those achievements are lasting and never depart—and because it never dwells anywhere in particular, it too—i.e., the generative power of nondoing itself—never departs from anything.

CHAPTER 3

4 **the treatment**: *Zhi* 治. The word can mean both to govern, in a political sense, and to treat or heal, in a medical sense.

CHAPTER 4

5 **an emptying out**: Triple-translating *chong* 沖: a rush of water, a blending of elements, and an emptiness. These three go together: the image is of a gush of water that unsettles everything it touches, mixes it all together in its whooshing tumble, and finally flushes everything out and streams it all away. The aspect of blending or intermixture is rendered with the rather violent and chaotic-sounding phrase "a jumbling together" here in accordance with earliest usages, which denote the mutual involvement and scrambling of things that collide or crash into each other (associated with such things as colliding pendants on ritual garments, axes hewing out chunks of ice, soarings into the sky, stumbling and scraping haphazardly through a situation, and so on); the term later gets associated with "harmonious" blending, as in the common term *chonghe* 沖和, but that is likely an implication that took shape under the influence of chapter 42 of the *Daodejing* itself, which is making a then novel point about how the crashing together of the two contrasting value elements of sunny and shady, on the front and back of creatures always facing and chasing the light, forms its own kind of (ironic) harmony.

5 **merging with their dusts**: This phrase here could mean either that the apparent source is "creating blends using the shines of all things, causing mergers among the dusts of all things" (i.e., merging them all together, thereby directly echoing the previous line about blunting edges and untangling knots) or else that

it is "itself blending *with* the shines of all things, itself merging *into* the dusts of all things" (which adds a new twist of meaning). In the former case, this apparent source causes all things to blend and merge with one another while possibly remaining aloof from them. In the latter case, it itself thereby becomes merged into the things. Taking both meanings as relevant, the translation attempts to capture the hint of both by exploiting the ambiguity of the English usage of the word "with": "blending with them" is meant both in the sense in which we say "using them as the raw materials from which to make new blends" and also in the sense of "blending into them." Similarly, "merging with them" is meant in the sense of "using them to make lateral merges" and also in the sense of "becoming merged with them." These two meanings—the transcendent and the immanent—are meant to bleed into each other here through a kind of double vision. Note that "shine" and "dust" are contrasted, occupying the A and B position respectively: the shining diverse A items are harmonized as the dark neglected B at the root of each of them is fused into one. Compare chapters 11, where thirty spokes share a single empty hub, and 14, where the shining diversity of the seen, heard and felt is harmonized in the indistinguishability of their vanishing points into one.

CHAPTER 5

6 **Heaven and earth are not humane**: "Humane" here renders *ren* 仁, the primary Confucian virtue. When the term is construed as a noun, we render it "humankindness."

6 **all things are straw dogs**: According to chapter 14 of the *Zhuangzi,* straw dogs were effigies used in religious ceremonies—constructed by assembling worthless straw into a divine figure temporarily to be worshipped during the ceremony, but then returned to worthless straw and trampled underfoot afterward. This valueless-value-valueless three-step process (from valueless nonexistence to a brief period of valued existence and then back to valueless nonexistence, or from indeterminate formlessness to determined form and then back to indeterminate formlessness) is what is elsewhere described as "reversal" or "returning," the characteristic motion of the course, and indeed the characteristic career trajectory of all values and beings.

6 **itself like a bellows?**: Operating and giving forth abundantly through its very emptiness—emptiness, that is, of any value preferences, such as humankindness.

CHAPTER 6

7 **an obscure she-beast**: *Pin* 牝, female members of livestock species, rather than humans.

7 **gently active, / and activated gently**: A double translation: its own action is gentle and effortless, and it is through gentleness that it is accessed.

CHAPTER 8

9 **The highest good**: This whole chapter plays on the range of meanings of the word *shan* 善 (good, good at, skillful, deft), which appears in it nine times. (See A Note on the Translation.) The various "skills" of water are punningly analogized to what the text stipulates to be the greatest human forms of goodness.

9 **In centering**: *Xin* 心, literally, "heart," the physical organ, which in ancient China covers also "mind," meaning the seat of both affective and cognitive functions. But "heart" also means the very center of something, which is the basis of the wordplay here. This chapter plays on the ambiguity of each of these phrases, which on the one hand describe the physical behavior of water and on the other hand describe the ways in which human virtues are best achieved when one is waterlike. So more expansively: "in centering the heart and mind, good at finding the depths."

9 **so good at being kind**: "Kind" here renders *ren* 仁, the primary Confucian virtue. When the term is construed as a noun, as in chapters 18 and 19, we render it "humankindness." Cf. also chapter 5, where the same adjective is rendered "humane."

CHAPTER 10

12 **together in a single embrace?**: The line is obscure, and many commentators suggest that *ying* 營 (literally "to encamp") is an error for *hun* 魂 ("spiritual soul"), the standard counterpart for the next character, *po* 魄 ("physical vigor, bodily vitality, earthy soul"). The first character *zai* 載 (literally "to carry") would still be out of place and hard to construe after this substitution (it has been suggested that is a corruption of a misplaced *zai* 哉, a marker functioning like an exclamation point, which properly belongs at the end of the previous chapter), but the meaning would then be something along the lines of "Holding the physical vigor and the spiritual soul together in one embrace"—a notion highly congruent with certain later Daoist practices. The Beijing University bamboo slips have *ying* 熒, meaning "glimmer, shine," instead of the *ying* for "encamp," which would give us "holding the shimmer and the bodily vigor together in one embrace"—again, quite hard to construe. Be that as it may, the second of the two Mawangdui manuscripts (known in English as Mawangdui B), the only

other place among ancient excavated texts where this line is intact, is exactly the same as the obscure received version here, which we accordingly endeavor to translate just as written. "Encamping" is thus construed to be the reverse of "carrying," so that the pair of terms are meant to indicate "both carrying and carried by," i.e., pointing on the one hand to those energies of the body that support or underlie the conscious agent and on the other hand to those the conscious agent must support and manage, hence both those "bearing you up and those borne up by you."

12 **all your energies of life and breath**: "Energies of life and breath" translates *qi* 氣, a term that will come to play a very central role in subsequent Chinese metaphysics of both the Daoist and the Confucian schools, but which is mentioned only glancingly in the *Daodejing,* with a total of only three occurrences (see chapters 42 and 55). The general senses of breath and life energy are likely already associated with this term, with mainly meteorological, physiological and medical implications, but the elaborate cosmological and correlative schemata charting its role in the formation of all existences and the phases of its transformations, so crucial to so much of later Chinese thinking, are not yet in evidence anywhere in the letter of this text.

12 **your obscure purview**: For this mysterious term we follow the received version's *xuanlan* 玄覽 ("obscure overview"), taken to indicate the panorama seen from an elevated vantage point. Mawangdui A has *xuanlan* 玄藍 (literally "obscure indigo" but conceivably a loan for *lan* 籃 "obscure basket") while Mawangdui B has *xuanjian* 玄監 ("obscure surveil"). Commentators have often suggested that what is the intended character here is actually *jian* 鑑 ("reflecting water pan, mirror"), taking the "obscure mirror" to be a reference to the mind, and this surmise has been partially corroborated by the Beijing University bamboo slips, dating to the Han dynasty, which is the only ancient text to have this character here. But any way you slice it, the reference is abrupt and unprecedented (i.e., not a previously known and accepted term for the mind or any particular faculty of the human person attested in contemporaneous sources), so we leave it deliberately vague.

12 **the obscure power of remaining obscure**: *De* 德, often translated "virtue" or "virtuosity," the second character in the traditional title of this text, *Daodejing*. (See A Note on the Translation.) In its original sense, *dao* means a course of instruction and practice, and *De* is the virtuosity acquired by practicing that course. The *De* of archery is acquired by practicing the *Dao* of archery. When *Dao* is flipped to its ironic sense, as in this text, coming to mean a course that is not deliberately practiced, which is operating at all times and places, then *De* is

the virtuositylike power that all things spontaneously display in being as they are. It is the spontaneous virtuosity or power of *Dao*, the course: the effortless inborn skill and efficacy that constitutes the individual original nature of every function of *Dao*. The translation "virtue" is avoided to discourage an association with the moral sense of virtue. But the reader is asked to take note that "virtuosity" should not be misconstrued to exclude the *inborn* natural function of any entity in succeeding to be itself and to do whatever it does, for that is precisely the main referent here. Here *xuande* 玄德, literally "obscure virtuosity," is double-translated: the point is that the effectiveness of remaining obscure is itself inexplicit, hard to discern, obscure.

CHAPTER 11

13 **no properties at all**: "Having properties" is playing on the multiple valences of *you* 有 ("to be, being, presence, to possess") and *wu* 無 ("not to be, nonbeing, absence, to lack"). Possessing things, ownership of them, is what makes them profitable to us. But also it is what a thing "has," its "properties," its discernible characteristics, its presences, its "being," that makes it profitable, while it is its absences, its lacks, its "nonbeings" as described in the previous six lines, that make it functional, that make it work. Literally, the verb-object structure of the last line suggests that our lacking it, or treating it as nothing, is what makes a thing functional for us.

CHAPTER 12

14 **The Five Flavors distort the palate**: The Five Colors are blue, yellow, red, white, and black. The Five Flavors are sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, and salty. The Five Tones are the notes of a pentatonic scale. These are here construed as ways of selecting certain points in the spectrum of the perceivable, singled out in the traditional systems of ritual as particularly valuable and constitutive of civilized orderings of experience, at the expense of any other colors, tones, or flavors that might fall between them. They stand here for the systems of categorization which determine what things are named and defined as real and as valuable.

14 **"this over here"**: This phrase appears three times in the text (see also chapters 38 and 72). It seems to be a common saying that the text is taking up and quoting in a context which precisely reverses its usual meaning. A similar technique is used in other chapters. (See A Note on the Translation.) In all such cases, the suspected common saying being subverted by the context is put in quotation marks.

CHAPTER 13

15 **subject to calamities**: I.e., something to protect.

15 **given charge of the world**: The unmodified present progressive forms "valuing" and "cherishing" are each meant to cover the ambiguity of the original: implying both that his own body is "the one thing he actively values and cherishes" and that his own placing of value on that body (rather than waiting for others to place value on it) is "the one and only way he gets his value, gets valued and cherished." We may perhaps have expected this conclusion to go just the other way, e.g., "it is only one who cherishes the whole world as he cherishes his own body who should be entrusted with the world," and so forth—a kind of extension of self-love into universal love, viewing all things as one's own body such as we find in some forms of Confucianism, or seeing that one's own true benefit lies in benefiting all beings, as in some forms of Buddhism. But the logic of the text goes the other way: it is the fact that one does not need favor and is untroubled by disgrace, caring instead only about one's body rather than one's names or possessions or achievements, caring only for the "stomach" and not for the "eye" (see chapter 12), that makes one a worthy caretaker of the world.

CHAPTER 14

16 **vague and indistinct**: *Huanghu* 恍惚. The same two characters in chapter 21 are translated (for the sake of the rhyme there) as "unclear" and "confused."

CHAPTER 15

18 **their cover takes no finished shape**: There is much controversy about how to interpret this last line. Many commentators take *bi* 蔽 ("cover, block" as by an overgrowth, hence "obscured, unseen") as a loan for *bi* 敝 ("worn out" as of clothing, which is usually regarded as what is intended by the *bi* 弊, literally "lowly, base," that occurs in chapter 22 of the received version, where it is also linked to *xin* 新, "new": *bizexin* 弊則新, thus meaning "If worn, renewed"). With that modification, the meaning would be "It is just because they remain unfilled that they can be worn out without [any need for] being remade anew." In addition, some modern commentators follow Yi Xunding 易順鼎 (1858–1920) in finding the negative *bu* 不 in this sentence unintelligible and suggest it was a textual error for the visually similar *er* 而. (Mawangdui B has both *er* and *bi* 敝 here, meaning "and yet not," but it also omits the *xin* 新 "new," rendering the meaning as "worn out and yet never completed.") If this modification is adopted,

the original sentence could be translated: "For it is just because they never become full that even when they are worn away, they are ever new and complete." If both of these amendments are adopted at once, the meaning might be "Thus they are able to be worn out and yet remade anew."

CHAPTER 16

19 **to be as the course**: "Be as the heavens" translates the unmodified *tian;* "be as the course" translates the unmodified character *dao.* In most contexts, the use of these bare characters would compel us to translate them as nouns, sometimes even regarded as proper nouns: *tian* is "heaven," *dao* is "the course." But the context here seems to demand that these be taken as adjectives ("heavenlike, courselike"—perhaps "heavenly, coursing"), and to track the concrete metaphor of the sky in its linkage to the meaning of "course." The sky is thought of as open and empty, like a course or road—a space that allows all to traverse it. But the sky is also conceived as rotating constantly and as vigorously transforming through the weather of the four seasons, generating growth and life: a course in the sense of not only the space through which processes travel, but the processes themselves.

19 **the very ending of the body**: This line is ambiguous, meaning either "unendangered *even when* the body perishes" or "unendangered *all the way until* the body perishes." The translation is meant to capture this ambiguity.

CHAPTER 17

20 **not even known to exist**: Following the Fu Yi version, which has *bu* 不 instead of the received version's *xia* 下. The latter character would yield the meaning "To those below, the very highest is known [only] to exist." Though the highest *what* remains unspecified, the passage is usually taken to refer to rulers.

20 **"of ourselves, / all on our own"**: A double translation of *ziran* 自然.

CHAPTER 18

21 **the six relations**: The six relations refers to the proper roles to be played in three types of relationship, according to Confucian role ethics: the relationships between father and son, elder and younger brother, and husband and wife.

CHAPTER 19

22 **thieves and robbers will vanish**: The Guodian equivalent of this passage is quite different, most notably in that the flagship Confucian virtues of humankindness and duty are not mentioned at all: "Cut off wisdom and discard

disputation; the people will benefit a hundredfold. Cut off skill and discard profit; thieves and bandits will vanish. Cut off pretense and discard calculation; the people will return to filiality and parental love."

CHAPTER 20

23 **a clueless newborn not yet able to smile**: The reference is to an ancient custom of giving a name to a child only after it has shown its viability for survival and responsiveness to its social environment, after a ritual test at the age of three months to see if the infant knew how to smile in response to parental attention. So an infant who has not yet smiled is also an infant not yet given a name, not yet assigned an identity in the social order, and not expected to survive very long before returning to the lifeless state from which it had so recently emerged: a nameless face, the face of namelessness. Compare to the final line of chapter 49.

CHAPTER 21

25 **"their course alone"**: The formal and archaic diction of this line, rhymed in the original, suggests it is quoting a known saying. The following lines, repurposing this old saw in light of the new "ironic" sense of *dao* not as a definite normative path but as intrinsically indeterminable, undermining its straightforward normativity, mimic the rhyming structure. See A Note on the Translation on "ironic repurposing."

25 **so very unclear!**: "Unclear" and "confused" here translate *huang* 恍 and *hu* 惚, the same terms that were translated in chapter 14 as "the vague and indistinct." In this chapter the two terms are separated grammatically from each other so that each stands alone as its own exclamation, while in chapter 14 they form an unbroken binome proposed as a name for the entity or phenomenon being discussed. The difference in translation reflects both the different settings and the need to preserve the rhyme in this chapter, but the connection should not be overlooked.

25 **an essence, is limned**: I.e., the lack of anything definite, which we call "confusion, unclearness, dimness, obscurity," is itself a something, a kind of image, a kind of thinghood, a kind of vital kernel, essence—the "form of formlessness." Compare chapter 14, where failure-to-find-anything-to-name itself gets a name.

25 **such names as these**: I.e., the names "unclear," "confused," "obscure," and "dark." These name in various ways what is constant, but here it is suggested that these names, these determinations themselves, are also constant—an affirmation of the value and indeed inescapability of namings of a certain kind, echoing the parallelisms of chapter 1 (e.g., the name "the mother of ten thousand things"

there—also a name for an absence, for searching and finding nothing there but a fertile void, a space through which things may enter and exit—a "course"). These determinations are the ones that can never be eliminated—precisely because they are names for the lack of any determination. They are named even in failing to find a name, and thus whether we find any name for something or not, as long as there is anything at all not yet named, these names, these determinations, are present to us. Only in this sense does there "exist" an absolute and eternal something, that is, a something that is equally nothing: the course.

25 **to our survey**: These three lines rhyme in the Mawangdui versions, but the received version reverses the direction of *zijinjigu* 自今及古 (literally "from the present all the way to ancient times") to the more intuitive *zigujijin* 自古及今 ("from ancient times all the way to the present"), thus losing the rhyme with what follows (though it now implies a rhyme with the preceding two lines).

CHAPTER 22

26 **Having much then muddled**: "Partial then whole" is apparently another ancient saying, expanded and riffed upon in the rest of the chapter. The straight or nonironic meaning is that what is partial, or incomplete, or bent, will become complete, or perhaps even that one *should* labor to complete it: "what is partial is to be completed"—a moral imperative for endeavoring to improve whatever remains imperfect. But the grammar of the phrase is so ambiguous that, when read a second and third time, the very same words can mean either (again) that what is incomplete *will become* complete, suggesting the inevitable cyclical processes of growth and decline often alluded to, or even that *to be incomplete is itself perfection.* The subsequent lines all follow the same form, exploiting the ambiguity between (1) a seeming moral imperative about how to respond to and remedy being a certain way, (2) a prediction of cyclical process that follows from being that way, and (3) a second-order statement about the state of being that way. More expansively, we might transcribe the meaning like this:

> "What is partial is completed."—
> *And to be twisted is to remain truly intact.*
> What is bent is straightened—*and to be bent is to be truly upright.*
> What is hollow is filled—*and to be empty is to be truly fulfilled.*
> What is worn out is renewed—*and to be lowly is to be truly new.* (Note: The two homonyms *bi* 敝 [base] and *bi* 弊 [used up] are often switched in this text in its various versions, and in early times were likely cognate. What is disvalued B is the nascent state and source of the valued A: to be lowly is to be newly formed, as an infant is lowly compared to the adult: the true

newness or freshness. What has not appeared before will always begin as something seeming lowly and base to advocates of the old values.)
What has little gains—*and to have little is to truly gain.*
What has much gets muddled—*and to have much is to be truly muddled.*

26 **a microcosmic model**: *Shi* 式. Originally the name of an astronomer's tool and divination device sometimes called a cosmograph, where a stationary square model of the earth surrounds a central rotatable turntable modeling heaven (or the sky), on which was a depiction of the Big Dipper and sometimes also of a (transposed) Polaris positioned at the central pin upon which the turntable pivots. The model thus represents (1) the rotation of the Dipper, and (2) Polaris around which it rotates, adapting to the times through orientation around an empty center, as well as (3) the square stationary earth beneath the rotating sky. The term came to be used to mean "model" in general, also in the sense of "exemplar worthy of emulation," or even a rule or standard. (See A Note on the Translation.) Mawangdui A and B have instead "serves as a shepherd for all the world."

CHAPTER 23

27 **all words fade to silence**: *Xiyan* 希言 is often taken to mean "few words," so that this first line is construed to mean something like "It is natural for words to be few." But here we take this as a reference to the same usage of this term *xi* 希 that appears above in chapter 14, signifying the fading to inaudibility. So, more literally, we might translate as "The fade to inaudibility of words is what they do when left to themselves." Elsewhere we have translated *yan* ("words") as "instruction" (e.g., in chapter 2, in "the teaching of noninstruction"). This implication that words not only describe but, more important, instruct, and do so in a way that presupposes and consolidates value judgments, is to be noted here as well, for it allows us to understand the coherence of this chapter: a more expansive translation focusing on this aspect might be "Left to themselves, all directives, all instructions, all valuations fade to silence." Both all determinations of what things *are* and all valuations of what things *should be* soon fade—which is what allows us to take joy even in merging with loss, to experience the joy the loss must have in gaining us as we merge into it.

27 **merge with the loss**: Taking each of these three topics, *daozhe* 道者, *dezhe* 德者, *shizhe* 失者, to be puns, pivoting on the central one, where the verb and the homonymous noun are compressed into one term. *De* 德 is thus taken to stand for both "virtuosity" and *de* 得 "gain, success," its common

gloss, which explains the turn in the next line to *shi* 失 ("failure, error, loss"), the standard antonym of *de* 得 but not of *de* 德. *Daozhe* 道者 is thus read to mean "those who practice (i.e., are guided by, take as their guide, 導) a course"; *dezhe* 德者 is taken to mean "those who attain (得) a virtuosity—as a result of succeeding (得) in practicing a course," and *shizhe* 失者 is taken to mean "those who fail (失)—in practicing a course and attaining its concomitant virtuosity, which is to say, really, any failure of any endeavor at all—and thereby suffer loss (失)—of their course and its virtuosity, but more generally of anything at all."

27 **there is joy in the gain of the loss**: The diction here is odd, and tempts a wild anthropomorphizing of the abstract qualities of "the course, virtuosity, and loss"—read this way, the last line of this stanza literally says that Loss is itself joyful, as if it, Loss, is delighted to gain one who merges into loss. This is not so outlandish, perhaps, if we take the "merge" very very seriously; for once merged, the feelings of the person who got merged into Loss belong equally to the Loss and to that person—for they are merged as one. What one feels the other feels—so his joy in merging with Loss is also Loss's joy in merging with him. Something of this sense is thus essential to retain here, and an attempt has been made to do so with the ambiguous "there is joy" and "gain *of*" of our translation, leaving it vague as to whose joy this is, and as to what is gaining whom, or whom what. For we can also, with a bit of squinting and stretching, take this as a clumsy and strangely cumbersome way of spelling out a simple point with an embedded "topic/comment" structure, rather than an embedded subject/object structure. That would be literally "For those who merge with a course, as for that course, they are delighted to attain it. For those who merge with a virtuosity, as for that virtuosity, they are delighted to attain it. And for those who merge with loss, as for that loss, they are delighted to attain it." We want to retain the intended presence of both possible directions of what gains what here.

CHAPTER 25

29 **the sky so vast**: *Tian* 天. Elsewhere translated as "heaven" or "the heavens."

30 **conforming to nothing at all**: There are broadly speaking two schools of thought about the last sentence of this chapter, *dao fa ziran* 道法自然. Our translation takes this line to be developing the motif from earlier in this chapter of

"passing on and on" (*shi* 逝) leading to "distance" (*yuan* 遠) leading to "return" (*fan* 反). Humans follow earth, earth follows heaven, heaven follows the course —this describes "passing on and on," a hierarchical series of determiners, a one-way series of constraining entities with sovereignty over what they constrain—picking up also the theme of the "four vastnesses" and the nature of sovereignty. But then there is a "return," at the top level: the course is constrained by what is at the lowest level, the "self-so" spontaneity of each thing, including humans (but also including, it would seem, whatever is "below" humans, i.e., simply whatever is spontaneous: how things are when left to themselves, conforming to no external or internal standard). The two characters *ziran*, literally "self-so," are thus translated expansively here, to catch this contrast, as "how things are when left to themselves, conforming to nothing." The series of determinations thus goes not in a straight line but in a circle. The course determines heaven, but the course is itself determined by the unconstrained (*ziran*) activity of each thing, which is here construed as standing in deliberately sharp contrast to the verb *fa* 法, "conform to, emulate, take as one's standard or rule." This ties nicely to the previous stanza about the vastness of the ruler's sovereignty: all may conform to the ruler, but the ruler must conform to the earth, the earth to the sky, the sky to the course—which ultimately conforms only to each thing's *ziran*, which is by definition devoid of all regulation or conformity. Hence the vastness of each is offset by the other vastnesses. The second school of thought, not adopted here, takes *ziran* to mean not the self-so of all things, but the self-so of the course itself: the course follows its own self-so, its own intrinsic nature. This reading has resonance with certain theological and philosophical notions of *causa sui*, the self-caused nature of the divine, which is determined to exist only by its own intrinsic essence rather than by anything external.

CHAPTER 27

32 **abandoning none**: "Good" translates *shan*, which can also mean "good at," or "skillful." (See A Note on the Translation.) Because of the "good man/not good man" contrast that concludes the chapter, I translate throughout with the more full-throated "good," leading to more controversial results, as I think are intended. For what is described here as being "constantly good" is in a way the exact opposite of what is normally regarded as "good," i.e., the kind of good that involves *knowing* what is good and what is not good, as in the good that is "*known* by all the world to be good" in chapter 2. Good in that sense is something that serves as a standard to exclude or judge something else—the bad. Here, the first part of this chapter speaks of "good" (skillful) travel and so on, but each case points to a goodness that results from no deliberation, no dividing of the better from the worse. Similarly, anything deliberately closed or knotted easily comes

apart, while what has always been joined, or grows shut without being forcibly made so (what has become naturally closed or sealed through *wuwei*), is truly and firmly sealed. The sage is able to rescue people and things because he has the skill of this kind of constancy, so his treatment of people is like that: not deciding whom to see as good and whom to see as bad, not deciding whom to treat well and whom to treat poorly, thus abandoning none. As in chapter 49, he treats both the good as good and the not-good as good, and he is good to both (indeed, regarding them both as good is exactly what he is most distinctively good at, and this skillfulness is what alone counts as his own goodness!)—but only because, like the "good traveling" and "good speech" and "good reckoning," he is *not keeping track*. The sage's "good" here could also be translated as the adverb "skillfully" (which would then give us "In just this way the sage is ever skillfully saving people," or "In just this way the sage is ever skillful at saving people"), which would be more natural grammatically, but would lose the pun playing off the usage of *shan* in the opening lines of the chapter and thus also lose the point of the whole juxtaposition. The point seems to be rather that the goodness of the sage comes entirely from the "constancy" itself, i.e., the ignoring of goodness and badness.

33 **binding the two together**: Following the Beijing University and Mawangdui versions, reading *miaoyao* 妙要 in place of *yaomiao* 要妙.

CHAPTER 28

34 **a microcosmic model**: *Shi* 式. See the note on this microcosmic model in chapter 22 and A Note on the Translation.

34 **the boundlessness of utmost absence**: *Wuji* 無極. *Wu* is absence or nothingness, but can also function simply as a negative modifier. See chapter 11. *Ji* originally means the topmost horizontal roof beam, down from which the two sides slope; the extended meaning could therefore mean "the zenith, the extreme point, the ultimate limit," or "the interface and center separating and joining opposed sides, the pivot where the reversal between them occurs" or all of the above. So the term *wuji* can be interpreted to mean "the utmost nothingness," "the limitless," "what is without divisions," or "the pivotless." *Ji* can also mean "standard, rule"—so *wuji* could also mean "the ruleless, the unruled." This term will be adopted in a much later stage of Daoist and Confucian thought, in contrast and delicate continuity with *taiji* 太極 ("the great ultimate, the great pivot" that defines, divides, combines, transforms, and unifies yin and yang), a term derived from the "Great Commentary" to the *Book of Changes* (易經繫辭傳), traditionally ascribed to Confucius.

34 **made into vessels and tools**: *Qi* 器, meaning "vessels" and "tools," is a term commonly used for a functionary in an organization who is employed because a ruler sees value in him. Confucius had famously said, "The noble man is not a tool," *junzi bu qi* 君子不器 (*Analects* 2:12). The reference below to *guan* 官—primarily meaning "government officials" or, as here translated, "functionaries"—plays on this connection.

34 **all such functionaries**: *Guan* 官, here translated as "functionaries," means primarily government officials (see previous note), but in Chinese medicine and physiological cultivation it is also a term for the physical organs of the body, often conceived of as structured on the model of a microcosmic state. In general, this refers to functionaries in the body or the state which are there only to serve a single function or purpose. "What has seniority over" translates *zhang* 長; see A Note on the Translation.

35 **that severs nothing**: "Structure," and "cutting/carving" double-translate *zhi* 制, a term that means "shaping through tailoring, regulation, imposition of limitations," with a reference to cutting also embedded in the knife radical in the Chinese character, as well as the resulting shape; and thus by extension, "system, institution, organizational structure." The latter meaning refers us back to *guan* as "government officials" (see previous note), but the text here plays on the term's base meaning of "carving out" (etching boundaries between things) to draw out the deeper point in relation to the motif of the unhewn: this is a sort of cutting that does not sever. Things are delineated, boundaried, limited, articulated into a structure, but not by cutting through to the point of separating them off from their background or from one another. All things are bas-reliefs, always still embedded in and attached to their unhewn background, not freestanding statues.

CHAPTER 29

36 **The world cannot be stopped**: Double-translating *budeyi* 不得已.

36 **beyond anyone's control**: "Control" here translates *wei* 為, elsewhere translated "doing," the opposite of *wuwei* 無為, nondoing. Another possible translation would be "to make something of it." The same phrase in chapter 64 is translated "to do something with it."

36 **avoids extravagance, / avoids greatness**: Taking *tai* 泰 in the sense it has in the context of the *Book of Changes*, where it is the antithesis of *pi* 否.

The two hexagrams signify total success and total failure respectively. Another translation might be "avoids perfection."

CHAPTER 31

38 **the right side as well**: According to Heshang Gong's commentary, the left is the side of gentleness and weakness, the right the side of hardness and strength —presumably with a right-handed person in mind.

38 **the exact ritual positions of a funeral**: Another sort of ironic repurposing: the general ritual rule that the place of honor in the rites of mourning is on the left rather than the right, as in celebratory rituals, is here juxtaposed to the observation that the military custom is for the supreme commander to stand to the left of his second-in-command. The author points this out as a subtle embodying of his own distaste for warfare: even the military customs themselves encode the fact that a military victory is to be viewed as a kind of funeral, a sad affair, a rite of mourning.

CHAPTER 32

40 **the river's surge to the sea**: Following the received version, which gives us a "fractal" structure: the relation between *Dao* and world is compared to (1) the relation between stream and valley, (2) the relation between river and sea, and (3) the relation between these two relations. In other words, the stream flows into the valley; the river flows into the sea; and the stream-into-valley flow flows into the river-into-sea flow. Thus is the presence of the course everywhere in the world, where the "names" or determinate beings are compared to the streams and the "unhewn" from which they are cut is compared to the gorge—but the stream-valley system is as it were cut out from the river, and the river cut from the sea. In each case, they remain connected—knowing to stop cutting before severing the connection, to use the image from chapter 28—which manifests as the direction, the "course," of the flow in each specific microlevel manifestation. The translation leaves room for both the comparison between the two relations and for the comparison of both relations to the relation between names and the unhewn out of which they are carved, as long as one knows when to stop the carving—the great carving that does not sever. (The image is further enriched by linkage to the "pouring" metaphor in the opening lines of chapter 62, Mawangdui version, as well as to the references to valleys in chapters 6, 15, 28, 39, 41, and 66.) The Guodian and Mawangdui versions lack this doubled structure and thus are much more straightforward; all of these have "small stream" instead of "stream-valley," thus omitting the implication of two relations which are themselves related. The meaning there could be rendered simply "The presence of the course in the world is like the relation of a small valley stream to the river and the sea." The stream

flows into the river and thus into the sea, and this is how their constant presence is felt in it. The world flows into the course, and this is how the presence of the course is experienced flowing everywhere through the world.

CHAPTER 34

42 **any being at all**: The last two lines of this stanza are a double translation of *gongcheng bu ming you* 功成不名有.

42 **vanishingly small**: Since it neither makes any demands on existent beings nor appears to them as something to serve or get something from, those beings see nothing there at all.

42 **so very great**: Literally, "because it never makes (or considers) itself great that it is able to accomplish its greatness."

CHAPTER 36

44 **it must first be fully given**: There is considerable controversy about this passage, much of it revolving around the interpretation of the fifth character in each of these four sentences. In all four of them, the received version has *gu* 固 (which usually means "firmly" or "definitely," but can also mean "priorly"). Both Mawangdui texts have *gu* 古, which means "ancient, former." But the passage is often interpreted through character substitution here, in accordance with a known ancient saying from the *Zhoushu* 周書 as quoted in the *Hanfeizi.* That ancient saying is almost identical with the fourth line ("To be taken . . ."), but has *gu* 姑, meaning "temporarily, for the time being," as its fifth character instead of either of the two previously mentioned characters. A similar passage using the same formula, again with the character 姑, appears in the "Weice" 魏策 chapter of the *Zhanguoce* 戰國策, also as a quotation from the *Zhoushu*. With this character in place, the passage seems to refer to a kind of cunningly contrarian strategy for attaining success, which could be translated as follows:

> *Wanting to shrink something, you must for a time stretch it.*
> *Wanting to weaken it, you must for a time strengthen it.*
> *Wanting to cast it down, you must for a time raise it up.*
> *Wanting to take it, you must for a time give it.*

Hugely influential Neo-Confucians such as Cheng Mingdao 程明道 (aka Cheng Hao 程顥) (1032–1085) have seen in this a morally suspect advocacy for the

use of deception to jockey for power, to sneakily entrap and defeat one's enemies by pretending to yield to them, making this chapter a cornerstone for the Confucian critique of Daoism as fundamentally selfish and manipulative. This reading is certainly possible. In fact, all of these characters (古, 固, 姑, and also the tricky 故, meaning everything from "prior condition" to "deliberately" and "accident") are often interchanged in ancient texts; they were likely homonyms, perhaps at the time often not even distinguished in writing by the radicals subsequently incorporated into them, and their meanings, though distinguishable along the lines just mentioned, are closely allied. Our approach here, having noted the preponderance of what we've been calling the ironic repurposing of ancient sayings in the *Daodejing* genre, is to view this passage as another instance of that technique, via the deliberate use of an alternative cognate character in the key position: not the one primarily meaning "temporarily," but either the one meaning "formerly" (古 as in the Mawangdui versions) or the one meaning not just "priorly" but "firmly, definitely, solidly" 固 as in the standard version)—which we here translate, combining these senses, as "fully."

Read in this way, the distinction is first of all between the future and the past: that regardless of one's own desires or actions, every state of any entity has a past in a different state, that whatever is either "going to *become* X" or that one might "*desire to make* X" (for the word *yu* 欲 before any X allows both of these meanings) had priorly been *non-X.* The meaning can thus be construed in this more "passive" or observational sense: before something is *about to* become X, it must reach its peak of non-X. However, the diction in English of "to be shrunk" is meant to also catch the more active, prospective sense; indeed, the passage here speaks of this *yu,* "desire," the key term in so many other chapters, in a neutral or perhaps even affirmative way. That active desire might combine with a still observational bystander position: if one happens to desire X, at least *be aware* that for that to happen, there must priorly be the full unfolding of non-X to its peak before "reversing" to X. Or we can read the passage as indicating both active desire, active participation, in making something happen, bringing it about by deliberately developing the opposite side from what one desires—and doing so insistently, persistently, in a completely committed way that follows through to the end: doing so "fully." If we want to tilt the interpretation more toward the "agency" reading, stressing the sense of "desire" and "firmly" as concerning something to do rather than something to be observed, we might interpret the passage as follows:

If you desire to shrink something, you must first resolutely expand it.
If you desire to weaken something, you must resolutely strengthen it.
If you desire to cast something down, you must resolutely raise it up.

If you desire to seize something, you must first resolutely bestow it.

The "resolutely" here implies both firm and undaunted commitment to expanding, strengthening, and so on, and also that one does so in a thorough way: expanding and strengthening the thing fully, bringing it to its breaking point and thus reversal to the opposite. Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE) seems to be taking the passage in something like this way.

There is a further possibility here, given the indetermination of tenses, at the opposite extreme from the "active manipulation and deception" reading: the passage can be read as a simple dissuasion from active attempts to control things, a straightforward pessimism about any deliberate effort to do anything having a chance of succeeding, a rather slapstick invocation of how every attempt to do anything has exactly the opposite effect, an ancient precursor to Murphy's law that "whatever can go wrong, will go wrong":

Trying to shrink something, you will surely all the more expand it.
Trying to weaken something, you will surely all the more strengthen it.
Trying to cast something down, you will surely all the more raise it up.
Trying to seize something, you will surely all the more bestow it.

This reading mirrors the sentiment of the opening line of chapter 29, where we find exactly the same rhetorical form, beginning with the *jiangyu* 將欲, meaning literally "whenever there is a desire to." There the thrust was the more global point that any desire to control the world as a whole is doomed to fail. Here, on this reading, we would have a more detailed expression of the same sentiment: trying to control *anything* is doomed to fail.

CHAPTER 37

45 **leaving nothing undone**: This famous phrase, *wuwei er wubuwei* 無爲而無不爲, is translated here according to its dominant traditional interpretation. But it might also be read to mean "It is without action and without inaction." Read in this way, it perhaps echoes the rather proto-Daoist sounding pronouncement attributed to Confucius in the *Analects* (19:22): *wukewubuke* 無可無不可: "There is nothing I approve, and nothing I disapprove," usually taken to mean Confucius was not doctrinaire in his commitments but changed with circumstances. This motif of timely transformation between two seemingly mutually exclusive extremes is in any case well developed in later Daoist literature, notably in the more colorful "both/and" formulations applied to apparently bivalent pairs of opposites in the *Zhuangzi,* for example, *liangxing* 兩行 "Walking two

roads," *yilong yishe*一龍一蛇 "Now a dragon, now a snake," and too many more to list them all.

45 **we settle them down**: The received version has *zhen* 鎮 here, meaning "to press down" or "settle down." Interestingly, the Guodian version has *zheng* 正 ("to rectify, to align") instead, which would give us the meaning "If desires arise during these transformations, we align them with the nameless unhewn." The manuscript is damaged here in Mawangdui A, but Mawangdui B has *tian* 闐 ("to flourish, enrich, grow lush"), generally understood to be just a phonetic loan for 鎮, although such a substitution is not well attested elsewhere. If it is not a substitution, though, a rather different direction of meaning opens up: "If desires arise during these transformations, we just enable them to flourish with the nameless unhewn."

45 **freedom from desire as well**: On the relation between names (implying both determinate identities and ideals) and desires, see chapter 1 and its notes.

CHAPTER 38

46 **not grasped as virtuosity**: The text is playing on the slippage between *de* 德, meaning virtue or virtuosity, and its ancient homonym *de* 得, meaning "to attain, to gain, to succeed." The latter is commonly used as a gloss of the former. The preceding negative *bu,* rather than *wu* (i.e., *bude* 不德, not *wude* 無德), indicates that the word *de* is being grammatically construed as a verb rather than a noun here. This usage is common enough in contemporaneous texts for *de* to be considered a "stative verb": *bude* in that sense means simply to not be virtuous. Here, however, the double meaning is deliberately brought out by the contrast to *shi* 失, the direct antonym of *de* 得, in the next, contrasting, line. The same punning contrast of *de* and *shi* appeared in chapter 23.

47 **"they pick up instead this over here"**: The same phrase appears, variously repurposed, in chapters 12 and 72.

CHAPTER 39

48 **in danger of downfall**: Mawangdui A and B both have *wuyi* 毋已 ("unceasing") instead of *wuyi* 無以 ("have no way to") throughout this section, yielding a very different meaning: "If heaven were unceasingly clear, it would be in danger of splitting" and so on. This connects quite directly to the lines that follow this stanza: "For exaltation is rooted in debasement, and loftiness is rooted in

lowliness." To attempt to constantly maintain a single positive quality (clarity, stillness, miraculousness, exaltation, loftiness, etc.) undermines the ability of that quality to be sustained or constant—one of the key themes of the entire *Daodejing* corpus, almost a direct paraphrase of the opening lines of chapter 1, which is fitting if we consider this chapter the opening chapter of the *De* half of the text (i.e., chapters 38–81 in the received version), whether placed first as in Mawangdui or placed second as in the received version. Clarity must be rooted in unclarity, rather than being unceasingly clear. The same meaning does however emerge from the standard version if interpreted as it is here: the first three examples (concerning heaven, earth, and spirits) are taken as likely a traditional affirmation of things that have exemplary unity and consistency. The fourth example, concerning the valley, provides the ironic *Daodejing* twist: we must understand these unities not as the homogeneity of a single consistent character, but just the opposite: in the way that the emptiness of the valley makes the valley continuously and consistently "filled"—allowing things to constantly be pouring into it. The unity is thus far from the maintaining of a constant quality, but is rather the opposite: keeping fullness and emptiness always together, rather than "unifying" in the sense of maintainence of just one quality to the exclusion of the other. To be unified it must embrace its opposite rather than excluding it. But lords and kings take it instead as meaning that all must show consistent fealty to themselves. (Mawangdui has "[standard of] correctness" 正 instead of "unwavering fealty" 貞, but the point is effectively the same, and in both versions the changed diction in this line as compared to the previous lines is essential.) On this reading, the present section is claiming that if *this* (misguided, exclusive) form of homogeneous unity is implemented, real unity, the ironic unity of the valley's fullness through emptiness, the unity of loftiness rooted in lowliness and exaltation rooted in degradation, is in fact unattainable.

49 **"the destitute"**: Ritually proper self-designations of rulers, implying that they are in power only because, to their sorrow, their fathers—the late king from whom they presumably inherited their throne—are dead, and they have no one to feed them. See also chapter 42.

CHAPTER 41

51 **"looks like a tangle"**: These are perhaps jibes originally meant to ridicule the type of course propounded here, in effect saying, "The clarity brought by this course of yours seems a lot like darkness to me," and so on. Here these very statements are ironically adopted and endorsed as expressing the real meaning of the course's clarity and so on.

52 **by completing them**: Double-translating *cheng* 成—to mean both coming to completion or perfection itself and also bringing other things to their completion

or perfection.

CHAPTER 42

53 **the ten thousand things**: We could also render the opening sentence without the definite article and without limiting it to the singular, as a general statement about "courses" as such: "Courses generate continuities. Continuities generate polarities. Polarities generate triplicities. Triplicities generate the ten thousand things." In other words, any passage from one place to another connects those two places, making them two ends of a single course, and the two extremes plus the passage between them, no matter what the ends are and no matter how we get from one to the other, reveal the basic structure that allows all things to come to be, develop, operate, live. A tip of the hat to David Hall and Roger Ames in their *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation* (2010) for inspiring a thinking-through of the meaning of "unity" in the context of a language that has no singular or plural cases and does not distinguish verbs from nouns, with a tendency toward process rather than substance ontology—more consistent with a translation as "continuity" than with substantized terms like "the One" or "oneness." The statement can certainly be construed as referring to "the" course, but to understand in what way this is so, it is best to see this as an extension from the more general point about what any course qua course does. The extended meanings of the numbers here, literally simply "one, two, three," and sometimes translated, "the One, the Two, the Three," or "unity," "doubleness," "triplicity," to mean respectively "continuity or consistency, contrast or doubleness, multiplicity or diversity or participation on both sides" (cognate with *can*  , as in *can yu tiandi* 參於天地 or *yu tiandi can* 與天地參, "to form a trinity with heaven and earth" in Confucian texts like *Xunzi* and "The Doctrine of the Mean"), are also well attested in early texts.

53 **harmonies are formed**: "The darkness of shadow" and "the brightness of sunlight" translate "yin" and "yang," here used not as the full-fledged philosophical vocabulary they would become in later times, but still as a live metaphor, literally the shady and sunny sides of a single entity. This is the only appearance of yin and yang in this text. Creatures face the light, pursue what they regard as good, turning their back on the dark, but by that very act take the dark on their own back, becoming themselves a harmony bridging the two sides—a new thirdness generated by the twoness that emerges from the original continuity of the light and dark. This illustrates how polarities generate triplicities with the presence of a third thing which participates in both of the two opposites, bridging them. "Energies" here is *qi,* also not used in the full-fledged philosophical sense it would later take on, but in its original sense of "breath" or "atmospheric condition of the

air and weather," and by extension "style" or "mood." See also chapter 10, and its second note, and chapter 55.

53 **using just these words**: See chapter 39, and its second note.

53 ***must never be destroyed***: A double translation of what appears to be a sly pun. *Qiangliang zhe bu deqisi* 強梁者不得其死 is a conventional phrase, quoted in several early texts as the first half of a longer proverb, structured as a parallelism that makes its meaning unambiguous: 強梁者不得其死, 好勝者必遇其敵 "a violent person never dies a natural death; a man who loves victory will sooner or later meet his match." Here we have only the first part of this two-part proverb, taken out of the context of that parallelism. The remaining seven-character phrase has two parts, *qiangliang* and *budeqisi,* each of which, taken literally, is subject to pungently ironic repurposing. *Qiangliang* is a conventional phrase for a violent person, but taken literally, it means "a strong bridge"—evidently taken here to describe the "bridging" of enhancement and diminishment, of sunny and shady, of yin and yang, described above. *Budeqisi* means "do not attain their own death," i.e., the death appropriate to them, which is generally understood to mean a natural rather than a violent death. But *bude* can also mean "must not," and by ignoring the common normative implication of the pronoun *qi* here, taking it instead in its literal neutral sense, the phrase can be reread as in the italic translation.

CHAPTER 44

55 **persist and endure**: Knowing where to stop allows one not to stop continuing to exist—makes one unstoppable.

CHAPTER 49

60 **no intentions of his own**: Reading *wuhengxin* 恆無心 (literally "constantly without mind") as in Mawangdui B, rather than *wuchangxin* 無常心 ("without constant mind") as in the received version.

60 **"in finding them all trustworthy"**: Double- and triple-translating throughout these two paragraphs, and regarding the arresting usages of *de* 德 ("virtuosity") here as deliberate puns on *de* 得 ("attainment of, ability to"), as so often is the case elsewhere in the *Daodejing*. Hence the cryptic *deshan* 德善 means "virtuosity is good," "virtuosity sees things as good," and also 得善 "it thus attains goodness," and "it is ability to be good" and "it is ability to see as good." Similarly, *dexin* 德信 means "virtuosity is trustworthy," "virtuosity sees

things as trustworthy," and also 得信 "it thus attains trust/trustworthiness," "it is ability to trust/be trustworthy," and "it is ability to see as trustworthy."

60 **recognition / of a child**: The last three lines of this verse translate the final line of this chapter. In the received version, this is written *shengren jie hai zhi* 聖人皆孩之. The penultimate character 孩 means "child," or more specifically, a child who has lived long enough to reach the stage of smiling in response to other people. According to ancient ritual, it is only when a child reaches this stage of recognizing the interpellation of others in the form of the grasp of a hand and knowing to respond with a smile, suggesting that the child will survive, that he or she is given a *name*, and with it a social identity. See chapter 20, and its note. 孩之, using this noun as a verb, would mean literally "childs them all." This is often read to mean "considers them all his children." That is certainly a legitimate interpretation, and it is often read as a summary of the line of thought in the preceding lines: as a loving parent loves both his nice and his naughty children, the sage regards both the good and the bad, the true and the untrue, with equal care and concern. Alternately, it can be, and has been, read to mean this in a somewhat different sense: the sage as ruler has a paternalistic attitude toward the people, regarding them all as little children who understand nothing, and don't need to understand anything—for whom he can legitimately make decisions. However, this interpretation stands in some tension with other chapters (like 10, 20, 28, and 55) that tend to cast the ideal person, presumably the sage, in the role of an infant, not that of the parent. That line of thought suggests reading the verb-object here in a less usual way, so that the "X verb-Ys them" means not "X considers them to be Y" but rather "X plays the role of Y with respect to them." This is the grammar that is operative in some set phrases that use the verbal sense of what is more usually a noun, like *wang tianxia* 王天下, which means "to play the role of king over the whole world," not "to consider the whole world one's king." On this reading the line would mean "The sage makes himself a child of them all." This would also accord somewhat well with the opening lines: the sage has no mind of his own, his mind is empty like that of a newborn, and is the product, the child, of all the minds of all the world pouring into him, because he is open and receptive like an infant. But this character 孩 actually does not appear at all in the Han dynasty dictionary *Shuowenjiezi,* nor in the Mawangdui manuscripts. In both cases, we have the close analogue 咳 instead, with the "mouth" radical rather than the "child" radical, suggesting that the latter variant was perhaps unknown in pre-Qin times, and what we now see written as 孩 in early texts was in all cases originally 咳. The *Shuowen* definition of this character is "the smile/laughter of a child." In the present translation, we follow this Mawangdui variant, which more smoothly functions as a

verb before a pronoun. The literal meaning would be "to laugh and coo at them like a child." The term is also often cognate with *kai* 欬 (the same phonetic root but this time with the "blowing" radical rather than the "child" or the "mouth" radical), which is glossed in early lexicons to mean "breath going the wrong way" *niqi* 逆氣, or "the breath of digesting food" *tongshiqi* 通食氣—so perhaps burping or belching. Putting these all together, we have the image of the contented gurgling sound of a child digesting a heavy meal—all those minds and hearts pouring into him—and cooing with satisfied giggles as he gazes wide-eyed at his feeders, all of whom he considers good and trustworthy purveyors of nourishment. Again the translation here exploits the salutary ambiguity of the little words "with" and "of" in the English language: the phrase "with the recognition of a child" here can be read to mean "as he recognizes others to be his own children" or else "in a way that is characteristic of the recognition that children have of others, perhaps of their parents." This "dawning recognition of a child" is thus that moment when the newborn passes the ritual test and is recognized as a human who can smile in recognition—the moment of transition that straddles both what precedes the symbolic order of social identities and what enters into it freely and comprehensively, remaining free of any fixed intentions even though now engaging in every intention. This is meant to convey some of the multidimensional complexity of reading this line of the original text. To expand the resonances still more, compare to the feeding metaphor at the end of chapter 20, in relation to the usage of 孩 in the same chapter already mentioned—a further twist, perhaps.

CHAPTER 50

61 **"all thirteen"**: According to our earliest commentary on this passage, in the *Hanfeizi*, "the thirteen" refers synecdochically to the entire human body: its four limbs (the solid parts, the "presences") plus its empty nine orifices (the empty parts, the "nothingnesses").

61 **there is no place of death**: According to chapter 76, in death all things are hard and rigid, while in life they are soft and supple. So "place of death" might mean rigid and hard places, resistances with which these claws and horns and blades might clash. The people described here are instead "alive" everywhere—yielding, supple, soft like water—and thus for them there is also no place that is "dead." Like water they trickle out of every seeming dead end. Alternately, "having no place of death" might mean they see all things equally as places of life, and thus avoid none, since they are not overly lavish in taking only life as the very life of them and thus do not seek out life in some specific places at the expense of others. Wang Bi's interpretation is not too far from this idea: he thinks "place of

death" means desire for profit or for more life, which lures one out into greedy adventures that expose one to danger. Ironically, this means that valuing and thus avoiding nothing in particular is what allows one to avoid dangers—a model Daoist position. This chapter also seems to be an example of ironic repurposing: the quotation, probably from claimants to supernatural invulnerability through the hygienic or supernatural cultivation of "life," which happens to use a locution stressing "place" to describe this invulnerability (*wusuo . . . ,* "have nowhere . . ."), is reinterpreted in terms of this conception of "place of death"—which now is seen, ironically, as a consequence of just such attempts to "consolidate the life in them."

CHAPTER 51

62 **but not controlling them**: The verbs can be read either transitively or intransitively. Hence we could also find here the sense "Producing them but without being present as a being to be possessed, acting on them but without being relied on by them, growing them but without being in their control." *Zhang* 長, "growing" here, literally "making long," can also be read as "being the longest one, being the elder, seniority" in the conventional sense of "leading, stewarding." (See chapter 2 and A Note on the Translation.)

62 **the power of their obscurity**: A double translation, with *de* (elsewhere rendered as "virtuosity") rendered here as "power," and with *xuan* as both an adjective modifying *de* ("obscure") and as the noun ("obscurity") which possesses such unusual *de*. (See A Note on the Translation.)

CHAPTER 53

64 **not the course!**: Literally, this is thievery (*dao* 盜), not the course (*dao* 道).

CHAPTER 54

65 **Cultivated in the self, its**: I take the antecedent referred to here and throughout this chapter to be "the firmly embraced," i.e., "that which is nowhere evadable"—what is elsewhere referred to as "the constant" or "the constancy," the ever present but unseen unhewn that both pervades and surrounds any given entity, the B to every A.

65 **its power is found ubiquitous**: "Power" here translates *de*, elsewhere translated as "virtuosity" or "virtue." (See A Note on the Translation.)

CHAPTER 55

66 **strong-arming**: Another example of ironic repurposing, built around what appear to be two very sly and deliberate puns in these four lines: the word for "auspicious" (祥) also means "bad omen," and the word for "strength" (*qiang* 強) also means "coercion." (As an extra bonus, these two words also rhyme.) The text is playing on the built-in axiological ambivalence of these terms to make its point—as it did in chapters 39 and 42 for the terms "orphaned, widowed, unsupported," which are terms that on the one hand indicate bereftness but on the other hand are the customary self-descriptions of rulers.

CHAPTER 56

67 **no way to get debased**: "No way to get" translates the repeating phrase *bukede* 不可得—a phrase that incidentally was borrowed many centuries later to great effect in translating Buddhist texts. The first phrase of the stanza means that "it"—presumably "the obscure merging" of the previous line—precisely because it is obscure, cannot be drawn near to or moved away from, which is also to say that it can be determined neither as moving close to anyone nor away from anyone. The next two phrases can also be read in either direction, meaning either "it cannot be benefited or harmed, it cannot be valued or disvalued"; or else "one can gain no benefit from it nor be harmed by it, one can be neither exalted by it nor debased by it."

CHAPTER 60

71 **frying a small fish**: According to Heshang Gong's commentary, in cooking a small fish one should not gut it or descale it, nor constantly disturb it by flipping and poking at it, for fear that it will dissolve into mush. It is a delicate structure that falls apart if an attempt is made to manage it.

71 **sages too then harm no one**: Because now, ruling the state as if cooking a small fish, they have stopped interfering and micromanaging the people.

71 **until each has also the power of the other**: "Power" here is *de* 德, elsewhere translated "virtuosity" or "virtue." "Spiritual powers" in the third line of this chapter translates *shen* 神, spiritual or magical effectiveness. In using the same word "power(s)" here, in one case modified and in the other case unmodified, I am construing *shen* as the specific *de* of ghosts and demons, so that *de* is, as it were, the inclusive genus that includes the species *shen.* The word translated as "demons" here, *gui* 鬼, can also mean simply ghost, the spirit of a deceased person, which is not necessarily malevolent. But the more strongly negative meaning is to be preferred here because of the sharper contrast it gives

with "sages"; the point of the chapter is lost if we do not have the two extremes of value and anti-value, which are usually assumed to be trying to harm one another. When neither harms the other, the demons and the sages each give their distinctive power or virtuosity over to the other, and each receives the other's virtuosity back in return, so that both are enriched. The demons thus gain sagely powers and the sages gain spiritual powers—i.e., creepy, demonic, ghostly powers. Hence each ends up with both sagely and ghostly powers. The implication is also that each treats the other with virtue in the moral sense, lenience and kindness as opposed to violence and punishment (as *de* 德 is contrasted to *xing* 刑 as a method of governing, meaning with mercy and moral influence rather than with strict punishment—the latter presumably what the sages tend to apply to the demons when not adopting the recommended noninterference approach to governing, i.e., when trying to manage and regulate the world rather than leaving it alone as if "cooking a small fish"). The final line could also be read, following the *Hanfeizi*, to mean the virtues of the sages and demons intermingle and then revert *to the people*. This would be consistent with reading the *ren* 人 in the previous lines not in the extended sense of "others" but in the literal sense of "human beings." We would then have: "It is not that the demons lose their powers, but that they cause no harm to humans; not only the demons do no harm to humans, but the sages do no harm to humans either. When these two do no harm to them, all the virtuosities of both revert to the people as their own." In either interpretation, the demons can cause no harm once the sages—now ruling the realm as if cooking a small fish, rather than gutting and scaling it, extirpating the evils—stop trying to harm the demons.

CHAPTER 61

72 **the she-beast**: *Pin* 牝 denotes female livestock, not a human female.

72 **a hold on the large one**: Or "and it is just in having thus lowered the great country that the small country has taken possession of it." In either reading, the exact same construction is read in two different senses to yield opposite meanings, a unique feature of Chinese grammar. X *xia* 下 Y can mean "X puts itself below Y" or "X brings Y low" or "X is below Y." If we adopt the last reading, as we have in the translation here, the *qu* 取 must also be understood as being used deliberately in two senses: the large state "takes possession" of the small state in the literal sense of annexation, and the small state "takes hold" of the large state in the metaphorical sense of getting the large state thus to have to lower itself in order to woo it.

72 **its services to the other**: Continuing the sexual metaphor, where the large country plays the role of the female and the small country the role of the male.

The word translated "to take in" here (*jian* 兼) can also mean "to be together with," "to combine with," "to include," "to absorb," or even "to annex."

CHAPTER 62

73 **whither they are ever pouring**: The translation attempts to track the common thread of both of the Mawangdui versions, where the crucial term is *zhu* 注 ("pouring"), as well as the received version, where it is instead *ao* 奧 ("innermost corner, hidden shrine"). The Mawangdui variant taken by itself would mean literally "The course is the pouring of the ten thousand things." The received version alone would mean literally "The course is innermost corner of each of the ten thousand things," meaning the secret, unseen, or mysterious but sacred innerness of things. These two alternate images together converge into a beautifully compressed emblem of the A/B structure, the importance of which is deemed worth the price of attempting to render the complete thought here with an unusually expansive degree of poetic license.

73 **what protects the bad**: We follow the received version here, but with close attention to the structural mirroring found in the Mawangdui A and Beijing University versions, which have 善人之保也, 不善人之所保也: "what is protected by the good man and what protects the bad man." The received version uses two different homophonous verbs (i.e., it has *bao* 寶, "to treasure or cherish," in place of the first *bao* 保, meaning "to protect"), whereas the Mawangdui and the Beijing University versions have the same verb applied to the good man and the bad, differentiated only by a nominalizer *suo* 所 that here functions as a passive construction. It is worth noting that here, as in many pre-Buddhist texts, the *suo* before the verb and after the noun clearly must be construed not as "that which the noun verbs" but "that which verbs the noun"—otherwise the two contrasted phrases would be literally synonymous in these versions, which would make no sense.

CHAPTER 64

75 **To do something with it is to ruin it**: The same phrase appears verbatim in chapter 29—translated there instead as "to control it is to wreck it," due to the different context.

CHAPTER 65

77 **these two extremes**: The two extremes are presumably "enlightening the people" and "befuddling the people."

77 **the model of the microcosm**: See the second note to chapter 22.

77 **contrary to each of them**: Double-translating a particularly apt and clever double entendre: *yuwufan* 與物反. The juxtaposition of *yuan* 遠 ("distancing, going far") and *fan* 反 ("reversal, return," or "oppose, be contrary") here echoes the same juxtaposition in chapter 25, which tilts the meaning toward "revolving together with things." But the contrast to *shun* 順 ("compliance"), the antonym of 反 in its meaning of "oppose," in the big surprise punch line, tilts us toward the latter meaning, i.e., to be opposite or contrary. Bringing the two together—revolving around an orbit and also opposing every point in the orbit as the still "unseen" center which links to the opposing position 180 degrees away—we perfectly mirror the image of Polaris and the rotating Dipper enfolded in the image of the "model of the microcosm" above.

CHAPTER 67

79 **always outmatched**: A double translation. The term *buxiao* 不肖 literally means "does not resemble" but is an idiom generally taken to imply an unfavorable comparison either to a standard or to other more worthy people, hence generally meaning "is no match for, is not as good as, is less worthy."

79 **something meager and small**: This sentence could also be construed as a general statement: "For so has it always been: whatever measures up to others is thereby made meager and small."

79 **who serve as functionaries**: *Qizhang* 器長, literally "master of all tools," "tools" meaning also men valued for their specific talents and employed in government. More generally, anything that is fit for only a single function. Compare the similar phrase *guanzhang* 官長 in chapter 28. On the implications of *chang/zhang* 長, see A Note on the Translation.

CHAPTER 69

82 **wielding the nonweaponry**: This gloss on the relatively conservative military maxim cited at the beginning of the chapter is another instance of ironic repurposing. See A Note on the Translation.

CHAPTER 70

83 **precious indeed**: The parallel grammar on this sentence is usually fudged a little to make it mean the slightly less mysterious "That is why we are so valuable."

The Mawangdui B variant would support this reading, since the parallelism is broken there by the lack of the *wo* in the first phrase and lack of the *zhe* in the second (知者希, 則我貴矣, translatable as "because there is little understanding of us, we are valuable"—meaning either "because our own understanding is so little" or "because so few understand us"). But taken as written in the other extant versions of the text, we have a strict parallelism here, with two parallel transitive verbs, *zhi* 知 (to know or understand) and *ze* 則 (to take as pattern or model). To pattern after an unknowable, which is not susceptible to being known as a pattern, is structurally just like taking as a guide the course that is indeterminate and nameless, and hence provides no guidance, as in the opening trope of chapter 1. Read in this way, the next chapter scans as a further development of the same theme.

CHAPTER 72

85 **"they take up instead this over here"**: The same phrase appears verbatim (in Chinese) in chapters 12 and 38; I've translated each instance slightly differently to suit the particular context.

CHAPTER 75

88 **to enrich their own lives**: In this chapter, three "straight" talking points are subjected to three ironic repurposings, rendered in English with three double translations. Imagine a ruler complaining of his populace's ravenous greed, resistance to being put right, and brazen dismissiveness of the threat of execution, perhaps to justify increasingly draconian law-and-order countermeasures. Our text in effect says yes, it's just as you say, the problem with the people is indeed ravenous greed, resistance to being put right, and neglect of death—but on the part of you the rulers, not on the part of the people. It is the governing powers' own greed, willfulness, and neglect of death that have made the people hungry, unruly, and dismissive of the threat of death.

88 **well and truly value life**: This last line could also be read as a comparative: "Only having no use for life makes one worthier than those who cherish it."

CHAPTER 76

89 **to make weapons**: Double-translating *bing* 兵 to capture the intricate level-jumping mirroring going on here. This same character used in the metaphrand, meaning weapon, now makes a stark appearance in the metaphier, standing alone as a single character in the resultative position of the sentence for maximal ambiguity. A literal character-by-character rendering is: "Tree strong then weapon."

This could be interpreted to mean either that, as a result of a tree's firmness and strength, weapons like axes and saws are drawn to it to cut it down, or that, for the same reason, a tree is made into weapons like wooden clubs and daggers—or, for maximum irony, both. Note too that *bing* can also mean "soldier" or "army"—anything serving as a tool that inflicts coercive force. The sense would then be that any kind of entity that is strong enough to serve as a coercive tool and thereby win impressive victories draws forth even stronger entities that win victories over it, and further, take control of it, reshape it, and repurpose it into tools subordinated to themselves.

CHAPTER 78

91 **nothing at all replaces it**: Another sly repurposing pun lurks here: the conventional phrase "nothing can be used to replace it," meaning simply that something is unchangeable or irreplaceable, can also be read, bearing in mind the play on "nothing" we have seen elsewhere in this corpus (e.g., in chapter 11), to mean "and it is due to the nothing of it, its lack, that it wreaks such changes in the hard and rigid." The water uses its weakness, its shapelessness, its insubstantiality, its lack, its nothingness, to wear away the stone. Translated very literally, we would have here "uses its nothing to change it." Further, in this sense "nothing" can be used as a stand-in for "water," for it is the nothing of the water that is really doing the work of the water, just as in chapter 11 it is the nothing of the hub and the nothing of the room and the nothing of the vessel that do all the work: nothing can be used to replace it.

CHAPTER 79

92 **they demand nothing from the other party**: There is disagreement among commentators about the meaning of "holding the left-hand side of the tally," here interpreted as a reference to the tallies used as debt agreements, with the left-hand side held by the creditor. The sense on this reading is that the sage doesn't collect on his debts even if he is a creditor. Wang Bi and many others take the left-hand side as the side held by the debtor. On this reading, the sense is that the sage takes the role always as the debtor. In any case, the overall point seems to remain more or less the same on either of these opposed readings: the sage avoids regarding himself as entitled to gain anything from others.

92 **"constantly with good people"**: Taking this last line as one of the text's frequent ironic repurposings (quotations of an ancient cliché), but turning it on its head by contextualizing it in such a way that an ambiguity in the original wording is revealed, reversing the original sense. "Heaven has no favorites, it is constantly with the good person" would originally have meant that heaven has no special relationships with any particular clan or person, but rewards whoever is morally

good. Since this idea of the exclusive value of goodness, and even of a world arranged so as to reward it alone, flies so directly in the face of what the *Daodejing* generally has to say about preference for the "good" over the "bad," we may take the line as also presenting to us the opposite meaning, simply by reading the *shan* as a transitive attributive verb ("to regard as good") rather than an adjective. Like the sage who demands nothing from others, treating them all as guiltless and free of debt, heaven treats all as good. In other words, *changyushanren* 常與善人 is here playfully construed, with a bit of grammatical squinting, to mean that heaven is constantly there together with people 與人, treating them all as good 善人, or even that heaven is "there together with [the sage] participating with him in considering [all] people good." In this ironic repurposing, then, the sentence no longer says, "Heaven always stands with the good people, not the bad," but rather that, to heaven as to the sage, all people are good, and heaven is thus always with good people. Alternately, 與 can mean "to bestow," so 常與善人 could be taken as a compression of 常與善於人, meaning that it "constantly bestows goodness on people." Compare chapters 27 and 49.

CHAPTER 80

93 **only knotted cords**: For their records, instead of writing. That is, as a reminder of *one thing* beyond what is presently going on and no more.

CHAPTER 81

94 **the course of the sage**: These last two sentences are more complex than they initially appear. In the most straightforward reading, they simply announce that the course of heaven is to benefit rather than to harm, and the course of the sage is to do what he does (*wei* 爲) without contending against others *(zheng* 爭, the same term used in chapters 3, 8, 22, 66, 68, and 73, variously translated as contending, competing, struggling or striving against). This would certainly accord with many of the ideas found in the rest of this text. We might think here of the famous phrase found in chapters 37 and 48: *wuwei er wubuwe* 無爲而無不爲: "doing nothing yet leaving nothing undone." Echoing this idea, the claim here would be that by not "doing" in the sense of not taking any effortful purposive action, and thus not struggling, the sage, like the course itself, gets done everything that needs to happen, bringing benefit rather than harm. That is the simplest meaning, and it is certainly true that the first of these two parallel phrases *can* be read straightforwardly, though redundantly, in this way.

The conjunctive sense of the connective *er* 而 can indeed accommodate this kind of straightforward "and also" meaning—but it would be unusual for it to be used for a banal redundancy of this kind, which would amount to an uncharacteristically emphatic repetition: "It is hot and not cold," for example, where the second half hardly needs saying. A more strongly contrastive understanding of this connective particle suggests itself precisely because the negated *ha i* 害 ("harm") is such a standard and flat-footed antonym of *li* 利, benefit. The parallelism means we should seek to read the two verbs in the second sentence, *wei* and *zheng,* also as direct antonyms. Now *wei* 爲 can signify not only "to do, to take purposive action" but also, when preceding a noun, the related idea of "being or acting for the sake of" that noun. The parallelism with the previous antonyms pushes us toward this alternate connotation of *wei,* i.e., "being for the sake of" something—which, it so happens, is exactly the sense in which the word is used in the preceding stanza (*weiren* 爲人, "being or doing for the sake of other people"). The antonym of *wei* in this sense of "being for the sake of something" would plausibly be "striving against, contending against, struggling against, opposing something," precisely *zheng* 爭, the negated verb in this sentence following the connective *er*. Hence we have good reason to stress the sense of *wei* as "doing *for*," because it is the sense of the term that is specifically contrasted to "striving *against*." This means that we must take the connecting word *er* (meaning either "but" or "and") in its most contrastive, rather than merely conjunctive, sense. When we do that, the counterintuitive claim, and thus the point of making this statement in the first place, is brought into focus with the parallelism. We normally expect "doing" (*wei* 爲), taking action, so often vilified in these pages, to be just what the sage does *not* engage in. Instead, the claim here is that the sage *does* "do," does act purposively at times, but in such a way that, contrary to what we've been led to believe is an entailment of all such "doing," it involves no struggle or striving; this purposive acting *for* a purpose turns out unexpectedly to involve no striving *against* something else. As stated in the previous section of the chapter, he does not struggle or contend *against* others, but rather is acting "for" (*wei*) them, and yet unexpectedly this does not diminish his own self, but rather enhances it. The expected conflict between advantage to self and advantage to others does not apply. Here the point is generalized: in taking action for any purpose, he is able to do it in such a way that the expected conflict between fulfilling this one purpose and fulfilling all alternate and potentially opposed purposes does not apply. Hence we have here an unexpected conjunction of opposite qualities, linked by a contrastive sense of *er*. This means we must ponder in what sense "benefiting" might be normally *expected* to involve also "harming," just as "doing for the sake of" normally involves "striving against something." And this unlocks the sense and structure of the passage. No object is given for the four

verbs "benefit," "harm," "act for," and "strive against," so we might assume either a general object (i.e., "things") or the antecedent "other people" from the previous section of this chapter. Now, considering the contrastive structure, we can see instead that the reference to the previous section implies a switch of object between the two verbs in each of these final two sentences. To benefit *some one thing* is normally expected to entail also potentially harming *something else,* just as acting *for some particular purpose* is normally expected to imply struggling *against some other* purpose, the opposed purpose. In trying to make things warmer, one is normally implicitly striving against the purpose, which some others might have, to make things colder. In benefiting a given person or thing, one normally deprives some other person or thing of that benefit, thus harming them. The course of heaven, however, strangely enough brings benefit to things in such a way that this normally expected entailment does not occur. The point is that both benefiting others and doing things for specific purposes normally (i.e., unless accomplished through *wuwei*) involve bias and one-sidedness: when some are benefited, others are harmed; when deeds are directed to achieving some one purpose, some other purpose or some other person is struggled against. To be *for* something is normally to be *against* something else. But the course of heaven is to have no values at all and thus treat all equally, and the course of the sage is, among other things, to regard both the good and the not-good as good (as seen in chapters 27, 49, and 62; compare also chapter 5). By thus having no values at all, by its utter impartiality, by being the fertile void, free of all desire and of all desirability, lacking all values and thus free of all one-sidedness or bias, the course of heaven is what embodies both the ultimate valuelessness and the ultimate value ("real A" and "real B") at once: thus it can manage the seeming impossibility of bringing benefits without ipso facto also harming someone (as normal benefiting inevitably does), and in this way can benefit all. And the course of the sage, treating both the good and the bad as good, can thus manage the seeming impossibility of taking action *for* something, regarding it as good and thus being good to it, without ipso facto being *against* anything or anyone else, regarding it as not good and thus being not good to it—and hence can perform the seemingly impossible task of taking action for the sake of something without any opposition to or from any other thing, without striving against anything or anyone.

Such is the interpretation behind our translation. But another more outlandish and intriguing possibility deserves mention here as well, which can further enrich our appreciation of this deceptively simple passage. For an even more pungent complexity lies in the hint of a still starker contrast embodied in a parallel pun, whiffs of which can be caught in some of the older English translations (e.g., those of pioneering sinological luminaries such as James Legge and Arthur Waley). The word *li*  can mean not only "benefit, profit" but also, oddly enough, "sharp." So the very word that could mean "benefit" actually also means something that we would expect to cause harm, and thus gives us an even stronger contrast to

"without doing harm." Focusing on the meaning of "sharp," as do Legge and Waley, this passage would be far from invoking the bland redundancy of saying, "the course of heaven benefits and doesn't harm." It would rather be saying something like "Just as it is the course of heaven, however sharply it cuts, to bring benefit rather than harm, so it is the course of the sage, however busy his doings, to be *for* others rather than struggling *against* them." Something that is sharp normally causes harm. But in the case of the course of heaven, although it is "sharp"—as we've learned in the preceding ten or so chapters: its net lets nothing escape (chapter 73), it is in charge of all the killing (chapter 74), it brings low the high (chapter 77)—its sharpness unexpectedly benefits rather than harms. Likewise, as we've already seen, though in reality the sage does sometimes act *for the sake of* something—i.e., in this chapter, for the sake of other people—when doing so he is engaged in a kind of deliberate activity that, contrary to our expectations, involves no striving *against* anything—no struggling, contending or opposition to others. His efforts to benefit other people are not simultaneously aimed at harming someone else—for, as mentioned in chapter 60, sages do not even aim to harm "the demons." We can thus see, on either of these readings, how this seemingly bland statement is not bland at all, but rife with irony and counterintuitive piquancy—and thus was appropriately judged (by someone or other, many many centuries ago) as a fitting final line of the *Daodejing.*

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