

“The Way’ of Language”

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“The Way” in Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, integrates the significance of language and its role in human existence. With his poetic approach, the author develops the intricate threads concerning the mysteries of words, naming, and knowledge that unite within “The Way.” In order to follow Lao Tzu’s train of thought, it is wise to open the mind to the language of contradictions, for Lao Tzu uses this construction to point out his deepest thoughts. Observing the complexities, beauty, and strangeness of language, Lao Tzu has created the *Tao Te Ching* as a lens to view the world in accordance with “The Way.”

The *Tao Te Ching* was created through the means of poetry, an art that evokes thought and emotions. Lao Tzu applied a prescriptive technique within his writing that aims at helping readers conduct a life which he deems most beneficial, and that leads to survival and happiness. “The Way,” according to Lao Tzu, encompasses and penetrates through all parts of life, and this common element is what brings what I will call the complexities together. Evidently, language was a tool created by humankind. The purpose of language lies in its use as a tool for communication and without this tool there would not be a standard method of communicating. But language itself is also artificial in the sense that what it conveys does not perfectly describe reality. Through the artifice of poetry, Lao Tzu highlights the artificiality of language and simultaneously investigates and plays with this very artifice. With that being said, it is at the very least ironic that the author has chosen poetry as a medium to convey his prescriptive ideas. If language is artificial and fails to be the same as the natural world, how do we use language to describe the world? What then do we make of words or their meanings? Language is *only* a tool that helps us communicate through our understanding of what something is and not truly the

thing itself. How do we speak about anything if language is faulty and only tells us how we relate to something? What then, do we do if our only means of communication is also the limiting aspect to further our understanding of something? As previously stated, Lao Tzu addresses these problems throughout *Tao Te Ching* with the use of “The Way.” This thesis will focus on understanding Lao Tzu’s writing strategy and intent through establishing “The Way” and the complexities of language he presents. As a result, the reader will discern whether Lao Tzu has adequately solved the problems of language I have described above and if his prescription will lead to the life he deems the best way to live.

In the first poem of the *Tao*, Lao Tzu builds the foundation for “The Way.” The word “name” is repeated throughout the first poem which states that the naming of things is the first layer to understanding “The Way.” What is understood from this first poem is that something that is named is not always its name: “The way that can be spoken of / is not the constant way; / The name that can be named is not the constant name” (Tzu, I. 1.1). Names cannot be constant due to the arbitrariness of naming, thus, what humans name “The Way” may not even be known as “The Way” or the thing in itself for others. Names are not constant and the author recognizes this constant changing quality. Naming is only a tool for human understanding, and here Lao Tzu claims that human capabilities extend so far that, the capacity to give a definite name of a thing is not possible. How does this fit with the concern of language and “The Way?” One might argue that Lao Tzu is putting forth the idea that language is not as it seems.

This view is supported particularly in poem two where Lao Tzu writes, “The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, / yet this is only the ugly; / the whole world recognizes the good as the good, / yet this is only the bad” (II.1.1). When identifying the beautiful or the

good, there are preconceived notions of what *is* good and beautiful. With the help of language as the tool to recognize and explicate poetry, the tool is also controlling how people perceive of things from its name, description, and definition. This stanza also introduces the contradictions that the author will utilize throughout the *Tao Te Ching*. The contradiction here lies within Lao Tzu's technique of putting good and bad together and exposing the fact that good things are also bad and vice versa. Lao Tzu attempts to show that what is agreed upon as good in language might not be good in reality. Thus, from the very beginning of the investigation there comes a roadblock with language. Previously, it was expressed that language is the only means of communication. Language only operates under a certain set of rules that have been established and agreed upon. Thus, attaining any knowledge of "The Way" has not yet been achieved considering that the act of *naming* does not constitute knowing anything about "The Way."

The first poem of the *Tao Te Ching* also establishes how to speak of "The Way." As Lao Tzu states, "The way that can be spoken of / Is not the constant way" (I. 1.1). It seems confusing that "The Way" that can be spoken of is not the constant way, which means that "The Way" that is not spoken of can be the constant way. The uncertainty lies in the concept that there can be two ways of learning about "The Way" through speech and writing. However, Lao Tzu would agree that "The Way" that is spoken is not constant, hence "The Way" that is not spoken is perhaps the constant "Way." Another manner of interpreting the first line of this poem is taking into account the third and fourth line: "The name that can be named / Is not the constant name" (I. 1.3). The second interpretation would posit that when something is named it is not always its name since the act of naming is arbitrary. The object itself does not present a *proper name* to the perceiver; words are created to make a name for the object. The first line then would read that

when “The Way” is spoken about it is not always the same “Way” and that is why it is not constant. Possibly there can be a different “Way” that others express and they can say that it is the same, but it is not, for it is inconstant. Yet, the author carries out the very act that he prescribes his readers not to do. Firstly, he names “The Way,” which contradicts his own writing that explicates the inconsistency of naming any such thing. With that being said, what is understood behind Lao Tzu naming “The Way?” If the author practices what he prescribes his readers not to do, what is Lao Tzu conveying? How does one go about explaining the problem with language if the problem itself is something used to describe the issue?

First understanding how to observe “The Way” is essential to any attempt to understand how Lao Tzu utilizes language. The first technique of viewing “The Way” in stanza three states, “Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to / observe its secrets; / But always allow yourself to have desires in order / to observe its manifestation” (I. 3.1). It seems that this prescriptive stanza is hinting at the idea of being moderate towards attempting to understand “The Way.” It is necessary to get rid of desires to observe the secrets of “The Way,” yet also keep these desires in order to see what “The Way” becomes. Why do we need to get rid of desires to observe “The Way’s” secrets, and what are these secrets? Why are there secrets contained in “The Way?” One can postulate that these secrets are not attainable, since desire is always within humans. Yet, having desires is necessary in order to see what “The Way” can become because desires will lead to questions and as a result we may be able to observe its manifestations. By being moderate, the reader does not fulfill all their desires in observing the secrets of “The Way;” they must be content with what “The Way” wants to show of itself. Furthermore, the last stanza introduces mysteries: “These two are the same / But Diverge in

name as they issue forth. / Being the same they are called mysteries, / Mystery upon mystery - / The gateway of the manifold secrets” (I. 3a.1). One mode of reading this is thinking of the mysteries, the divergence between secrets and manifestations of “The Way,” as something not fully comprehended and the second stanza of the first poem supports this idea: “The nameless was the beginning of heaven and / earth;” (I. 2.1). This suggests that because it is impossible to know the beginning of heaven and earth, its mysteries may not be easily perceived but these mysteries open the doors to their secrets. Thus, the “gateway of the manifold secrets” (I. 3a.5), will contribute in the exploration of how we view and understand what is within “The Way.”

The fourth poem describes what is within “The Way.” The first line begins with saying, “The way is empty yet use will not drain it” (IV. 11.1), which can be read as meaning that the amount of “The Way” used will not empty its contents, and yet it is empty to begin with. Perhaps this line is thinking of the emptiness as having an over abundance that seems to never be fully used because it is unlimited. However, how does this work? The following lines might give a clue to what Lao Tzu is trying to say,

Deep, it is like the ancestors of myriad creatures. / Blunt the sharpness; / Untangle the knots; / soften the glare; / Let your wheels move only along old ruts. / Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there. / I know not whose son it is (IV. 11.2).

Here, “The Way” is claimed to have a deep history like the ancestors of the “myriad creatures”¹ and suggests that through the long line of history and by nature of “The Way” sticking to antiquity, this is the overabundance that is unlimited. Since time continues to move forward, “The Way” will continue to run deep in antiquity and the profuseness of this emptiness will not

¹ “Myriad Creatures” is found in the first poem of the *Tao Te Ching*. Proceeding with this thesis, I will utilize the term as Lao Tzu does.

cease. Furthermore, the constant theme of contradiction is apparent throughout *Tao Te Ching*, but how does this answer the empty “way?” As much as the author describes “The Way” as some sort of path, he always assigns physical attributes to it which alludes to a vessel-like entity (that he refers to later), filled with something and nothing, and never fully empty. The depth of “The Way” is as deep as the lineage of human ancestors, and within “The Way” it is essential to be blunt to whatever is sharp, to untangle things that are knotted, and to soften the harsh glare of “The Way” (IV). However, it is only permitted that we let our wheels move along old ruts, which seems to vouch for antiquity and tradition. Possibly, the sharpness, knots and glare are qualities that are new for a generation and Lao Tzu is asking his readers to return to old ways, and specifically to long rooted traditions. On the other hand, maybe these qualities spoken of are not within “The Way,” and it is actually for the reader to think about when they are about to embark on the path of “The Way.” Becoming less sharp, untangled, and softer, meaning more perceptible, simple, and less judgemental or harsh, decreases the complications of following “The Way.” Additionally, by following Lao Tzu’s advice, the reader will eventually end up on “The Way” that is “darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there” (IV. 13.1). This again shows the contradiction that seems to state “The Way” is not perceptible to our sight, yet it is perceptible in darkness. What has been interpreted of “The Way” is an invisible, intangible entity that is empty. Perhaps this emptiness is saying something more. “The Way” is empty but humans are not, and how the reader applies themselves to “The Way” makes it seem full, for humans are full of many things such as feelings and thoughts. Thus, “The Way” is an empty entity that can be full when humans decide to participate in it and this is why “The Way” is never drained, for many try to follow and be *on* “The Way.”

On the other hand, “The Way” could perhaps be empty due to it not being a definite substance. For how can anyone describe something that is empty and during its use does not result in its drainage? Consider this: “The Way” is not some *thing* and simply a system or a practice. Poem thirty four elucidates more evidently why “The Way” is important for humans and it seems to provide a further clue about what “The Way” is. Lao Tzu begins the stanza by describing the capacity of “The Way.” “The way is broad, reaching left as well as right” (XXXIV. 76.1) and this quality displays a sense of vastness of “The Way.” Proceeding from this, I believe that “The Way” is never ending due to its immense vastness of reaching left and right. If by establishing “The Way” as something never ending, what was previously proposed of “The Way,” being a system or a practice could be plausible. For a system to work, it must have its necessary parts to contribute to the working of the whole. But of what system is “The Way?” Lao Tzu furthers the readers curiosity from the second line of poem thirty-seven.

The Myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it / claims no authority. / It accomplishes its task yet lays no claim to no merit. / It clothes and feeds the myriad creatures yet lays no / claim to being their master (XXXIV. 76.2).

Here, contradictory statements show how “The Way” operates. Using phrases such as “no claim to no merit” and “no claim to being their master” personifies “The Way,” making it seem like it is alive. Additionally, with this lively sense of “The Way” it is more evident to readers why creatures depend upon it. Nature seems to play a part in the liveliness of “The Way,” for without nature, human life would not exist, nature does not claim merit, nature clothes and feeds, yet does not claim to be a master. However, it seems absurd to establish immediately that nature is “The Way,” since nature is something filled with substance and previously it was stated that

“The Way” is empty. Possibly it is advantageous to view “The Way” as the system of nature, a never ending natural flow of forces coming together to create a harmonious relationship within nature. Yet, if this is “The Way,” how could it be possible to think that following its path will lead to something greater or simply anything at all? Formerly, it was emphasised that the necessity of tradition is shown throughout *Tao Te Ching*. Could we then coincide tradition with the system of nature and claim that “The Way” of nature is simply the “tradition” that we should follow? In other words, the manner in which nature thrives is what we should follow?

Poem fourteen continually supports the claim of “The Way” being a system and strengthens the notion that antiquity is part of “The Way.” The first line immediately begins with a contradiction which continues throughout the poem:

What cannot be seen is called evanescent; / What cannot be heard is called rarefied; / What cannot be touched is called minute. // These three cannot be fathomed / And so they are confused and looked upon as one. /... ... Hold fast to the way of antiquity / In order to keep in control the realm of today. / The ability to know the beginning of antiquity / Is called the thread running through the way (XIV. 32.1).

Lao Tzu displays another example of a mystery that encapsulates “The Way” when he states, “And so they are confused and looked upon as one” (XIV. 32a.2). Since readers are unable to see what is evanescent or even touch what is minute, they are faced with an unknowable entity that belongs to the category of mysteries. However, as previously stated, these mysteries are the reasons why it is possible to arrive at the “gateway of manifold secrets” (I. 3a.5). In other words, it appears that what cannot be seen, heard or touched is a direction that would lead to manifold secrets. How is that possible? How is something unattainable the answer to knowing certain things? Again, this emphasizes the theme of contradictions that are present in *Tao Te Ching*.

These contradictions then may be interpreted as a combination of opposites that always, “...returns to that which is without substance. / This is called that shape that has no shape, / The image that is without substance” (XIV. 33.4) known as “The Way.” Thus, if “The Way” is a mix of two opposite characteristics and is “the refuge for the myriad creatures” (LXII. 143.1), it expresses the *balance* that encapsulates and is inside “The Way.”

This balance is apparent throughout Lao Tzu’s work and it appears to be one of the main factors of “The Way.” Lao Tzu shows that in order to attain some sort of balance there needs to be a clash between two (or even more than two) things that makes its combination *balanced*. With regards to a system of nature, balance is key to its harmonious course. “The Way” then appears to be a balanced system of nature that holds many secrets. This balance also holds true for the idea of keeping in “control the realm of today” (XIV. 34.2). Lao Tzu stresses that in order to keep control it is necessary to “Hold fast to the way of antiquity” (XIV. 34.1), another contradiction between “today” and using antiquity as its tool to keep the harmony of the present. If antiquity is the beginning to controlling “today” and “The Way” is something in which nature thrives, this would support Lao Tzu’s claim that, “The ability to know the beginning of antiquity / Is called the thread running through the way” (XIV. 34.3). The “thread” that Lao Tzu mentions is what holds all of the components of “The Way” together. Hence, if “The Way” encourages us to continually look back and follow antiquity, “The Way” concludes again as a system that has been in existence throughout all of life.

Within the system of “The Way” exists the peculiar uncarved block. In connection with naming and knowledge, the uncarved block is used as a metaphor to elucidate the problems of producing names. Being free from desire and to be like the uncarved block is what Lao Tzu

advises his readers to follow: "... the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block" (LVII. 133.8) and "Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved / block, / Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible" (XIX. 43a.4). The other element of the uncarved block concerns the attainment of knowledge and how far one can go by using language. The passage begins, "Though the uncarved block is small.../ Only when it is cut are there names. / As soon as there are names/ One ought to know that it is time to stop. / Knowing when to stop one can be free from danger" (XXXII. 72.2). Interpreting the uncarved block as existence² and language as the tool to cut the uncarved block, Lao Tzu advises his readers of the dangers of cutting and to refrain from continuously cutting the block. Lao Tzu highlights that cutting the block constantly does not bring the readers closer to *knowledge*³. In fact, it seems the act of cutting diverts one from obtaining knowledge since naming does not promise anything for the "myriad creatures." Further, Lao Tzu warns his readers that establishing names is the furthest the "myriad creatures" can go. I believe Lao Tzu is positing that when a name is given to an object, the name is all the "myriad creatures" should know because investigating further into the name such as its definition and tracing its evolution does not guarantee knowledge. Dissecting further into a word brings readers nowhere. As Lao Tzu says, "As soon as there are names / One ought to know that it is time to stop" (XXXII. 72.11). This idea aligns with Plato's concept in the *Cratylus*, which asserts that once the element of a word is found, continuing its investigation is useless since it is unclear what the word signifies. Thus, the only conclusion Socrates reaches is "To say that a name has a foreign origin when we do not know what it signifies" (Plato, *Cratylus*. 421d). One can postulate that this deduction is simple, lacking a substantial explanation

² Interpretation gained in conversation with Corbin O'Connor.

³ Knowledge is here talked about as knowledge of anything.

and does language no justice. Perhaps this is Socrates playing a joke on his readers, and ultimately trying to say that we can never know what the word truly signifies. Lao Tzu's notion of stopping at names parallels Socrates argument and answer about the further examination of words; it leads to an unsatisfactory answer and without knowledge in sight. The deeper the reader dissects the word can lead to getting lost in meaning and signification. Clearly, Lao Tzu is also playing with his readers by conveying his ideas through the artifice of poetry, as mentioned above. Repeatedly, the reader can see that the author continually plays with the problem of language and shows its complexities while further adding more complexities through the very structure (poetry) of his work. One might read "Knowing when to stop one can be free from / danger" (Tzu, XXXII. 72.13) as something entirely different than what has just been explicated. The complicated metaphors and mysteries within Lao Tzu's poem claim to be prescriptive and helpful yet what can be interpreted is always different; similar to the act of naming, these interpretations are not constant. There can be many ways Lao Tzu's advice can be read and the author in some sense is giving freedom to the reader to interpret his work, yet he still expects his message to be clear and easy to understand.

The concept of knowledge within the *Tao Te Ching* is further developed through metaphors of the empire. Knowledge, according to Lao Tzu, is something that should not be shared. The act of learning and attaining knowledge does not suit his perfect empire. This idea of rejecting knowledge corresponds with Lao Tzu's belief in knowing when to stop once names have been cut. Once names have been established, it is best not to continue dissecting the uncarved block, an indication that for the "myriad creatures," only a surface level understanding of things being named should be presented. Since learning is a culprit of Lao Tzu's empire, at

least this surface level judgment of things will be enough for the communication of the “myriad creatures” in order to survive. In poem twenty, Lao Tzu begins with a negative tone that lays out his views on the dangers of learning and places further emphasis on how to distinguish between contradictions, and if there is really much difference between them. He says:

Exterminate learning and there will no longer be / worries. // Between yea and nay / How much difference is there? / Between good and evil / How great is the distance? (XX. 44.1).

What does the author fear of learning? The evidence can lead one to conclude that Lao Tzu is adopting the ideology that knowledge is power for the people, an idea that aligns with an excerpt from poem three: “Therefore in governing the people, the sage empties / their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills / but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them / innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and / ensures that the clever never dare to act” (III. 9.1).

Moreover, with no learning, people will most likely follow the authority of the empire rather than self-reflect and analyze their decisions more carefully. Hence, the empire would have “no worries,” for the people are kept in a voiceless bliss.

Returning to the idea of balance and its relationship with learning, the author questions whether there is much of a distance between good and evil. Lao Tzu seems to argue that good and evil are glued together through “The Way,” which balances the system. However, there is a concern about how Lao Tzu separates good and evil. If good and evil are not far apart, what is the significance of them being in close proximity? It seems likely that good and evil both contain parts of each other and cannot exist without one another, similar to the good needing the bad and vice versa. Thus, if people are unable to see the difference between good and evil due to the empire’s encouragement of no learning, Lao Tzu is again proposing that keeping the “myriad

creatures” ignorant is the best route to leading the empire. Although one might also argue that the act of exterminating learning does not necessitate keeping the empire ignorant. Perhaps through showing that these contradicting elements such as good and evil are close to each other, Lao Tzu is highlighting the purposelessness of learning. Again, Lao Tzu would say that the names the “myriad creatures” have given things are not constant names, and good and evil would be an example of that inconsistency, which could explain why the distance between good and evil is not far. Nonetheless, the reader should not be fooled by the author’s tricks. It seems that this is more evidence that Lao Tzu is playing with language and should lead us to question how his readers should interpret his advice. How then do we take his words seriously?

Examining Lao Tzu’s concern with words and their potential for straightforwardness brings together the idea of knowledge and how a reader comes to understand what is immediate and not obvious to the eyes. Words can be used in different ways. In particular, the use of words can branch into two categories, the first being straightforward words with no hidden meaning and the latter the use of words to produce ambiguity with levels of meaning. Poetry can fall under both categories, however, when it follows the prior, the poem usually becomes unchallenging and does not pose the complexities of language. When poetry is ambiguous and utilizes words which produce a puzzling verse, one is more keen on analyzing what the poem is trying to say. The concept of straightforwardness in *Tao Te Ching* illustrates Lao Tzu’s thoughts on how words are used in context. The author seems to support straightforwardness even when straightforwardness mutates into its opposite when he asks, “Who knows the limit? Does not the straightforward exist? The straightforward changes again into the crafty, and the good changes again into the monstrous” (LVIII. 135a.1). Here, the word “straightforward” seems to signify the

way in which something can be direct. However, Lao Tzu shows that even with a direct intention, the straightforward is able to change into the crafty, the crafty being the opposite of straightforwardness.

Lao Tzu elucidates the change from straightforward to crafty in poem fifty-eight when he says “It is on disaster that good fortune perches; / It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches” (LVIII. 135.1), implying that disaster and good fortune are not on opposite ends entirely. In fact, they are closely tied together and follow after one another. Furthermore, the manner in which Lao Tzu places the opposites of disaster and good fortune is an act of the straightforward turning into the crafty. Why this is the case is due to Lao Tzu showing two instances where disaster and good fortune are not separated from each other and thus what he intends to let his readers know through these opposites is his craftiness. Placing opposites next to each other was previously discussed to bring about a balance and is still true. Here, however, the act of putting those two opposites together is the craftiness that Lao Tzu would like for his readers to interpret. If the author intended to be straightforward about his intentions and the real meaning behind his poetry, there would not be the *Tao Te Ching* at all. It would merely be pages of advice that one would follow. The nature of the poem leads one to see the craftiness that Lao Tzu has put forth. And this craftiness leads the reader to question what the poem is trying to convey.

Lao Tzu further emphasizes the idea of straightforwardness when he states “straightforward words / seem paradoxical” (LXXVIII. 189.1). Again, Lao Tzu is supporting his previous claim about the subject of straightforwardness and that it seems there is no such thing as straightforwardness. Perhaps what one intends to say or write is not what is always truly meant

and that is why Lao Tzu questions, “Who knows the limit? Does not the straightforward exist?” (LVIII. 135a. 1). Once more, Lao Tzu’s actions do not parallel the guidance that he provides in the *Tao Te Ching*. The constant act of not following one’s own advice is apparent throughout the author’s writing and further suggests how the problems of language he proposes does not allow him to follow the guidance he provides. Perhaps there was no way of being straightforward to his audience due to how straightforwardness can lead to craftiness and if this is so, why not be crafty overtly?

On the other hand, the author creates more confusion as he admits that his words are not difficult to understand. Particularly in poem seventy Lao Tzu asserts, “My words are very easy to understand and very easy / to put into practice, yet no one in the world can / understand them or put them into practice’ (LXX. 170.1), an ironic statement due to the fact that his words have been composed to form a poem which would result in different interpretations that can lead a reader not to understand. Another factor is the use of symbols and metaphors throughout the *Tao Te Ching* that suggests the words are not suppose to be understood completely at first glance and must be dissected carefully in order to be comprehended. And yet, has not the author rejected the idea of investigating further than the sign given of the object? Lao Tzu’s response to why people are unable to grasp his intentions is stated in poem seventy: “It is because people are ignorant that they fail to / understand me” (LXX. 172.1). What does the author mean by ignorant? Is it simply the act of ignoring what is written between the lines? How is Lao Tzu able to justify the capacity of comprehending his work if the work itself proves that words and phrases are not always as they seem? Moreover, how does Lao Tzu expect his readers to understand any of his work through the artifice of poetry?

The solution to understanding Lao Tzu's words are the words themselves as he says in poem seventy: "Words have an ancestor and affairs have a sovereign" (LXX. 171.1). What is meant by this line is the idea of having a lineage of words that can trace its origins. When I speak of origins I do not mean the actual origin of a word since the answer to that question does not exist⁴. A word does have its roots and tracing the etymology of a word can aid a reader in understanding what the word used to mean, how it has evolved throughout the years and what it means today. This concept of ancestors and the tracing back of words coincides with the importance of antiquity and how a pursuer of "The Way" must remember its traditions. However, this seems to contradict what was previously mentioned about further tracing the meaning and evolution of words. At this point, the reader can discern a pattern within Lao Tzu's work: running into contradictions seems to be what the author is trying to point out. The reader can see that there are multiple layers to Lao Tzu's strategy in his poems where he claims to show something that is easy to understand and misleads his readers with the contradictions. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be Lao Tzu's ultimate resolution to the problem of naming and how we interpret the world around us through language. It would be too naive to take Lao Tzu's words at face value since he likes to reveal the problems within language through his own writings. Thus, it might only be a matter of not over analyzing what is between the lines. Yet, one should not be fooled by the sophisticated elegance that poetry poses.

What encapsulates the difficulty of language is the realization of what is known and what is not known. Lao Tzu expounds on a similar concept that is found in Plato's works in regards to knowing: "To know yet to think that one does not know is best; / Not to know yet to think that

⁴ Referring to Plato's, *Cratylus*.

one knows will lead / to difficulty” (LXXI. 173.1). In this stanza, the author notes that the act of admitting to not knowing is the best way to live rather than creating the facade of knowing. How does this aid the previous discussion of straightforwardness, names, and contradictions? Lao Tzu’s answer is quite simple, “It is by being alive to difficulty that one can avoid it” (LXXI. 173a.1), which expresses the thought that by confronting the difficulty at hand the reader is able to keep away from difficulty. Again, Lao Tzu has shown another contradiction that supports the idea of balance. It is apparent at this point that the notion of balance is the thread that keeps all the contradictions together and the harmony that exists as a part of “The Way.” Almost all that Lao Tzu has laid out in his work shows a contradiction and the resolution to the contradiction is to face it. How do readers face the contradiction of language? The contradiction is: language itself is constantly accentuating itself as a problem and our seemingly simple act of straightforward communication in fact, results in causing the obstacles.

In my perspective, the use of language continues to emanate its paradoxical essence, which does not mean language is not progressing, but that even with the progress that language makes, its fundamental difficulties still maintain their influence. The progress that is spoken of is the evolution of words and how words can turn into sentences for use in all aspects of life. Lao Tzu is offering another insight to the problem of naming and that is why stopping at names is to avoid danger. Names are given to an object in hopes of representing it, and if names is where one should stop, Lao Tzu wishes to keep his people (in the empire or people reading his work) ignorant in hopes they do not face the problems that language poses after having established names. With this, I can make the claim that Lao Tzu does not want his readers to know anything at all. The author wants to protect and warn his readers about the dangers of language and the use

of it through his own work but by default, readers have joined many who have arrived at “danger” when progressing beyond names.

Another interpretation of this can be a rather positive outlook on the danger that Lao Tzu is trying to protect us from. By avoiding danger and stopping at names, the author implies that due to the difficulties of language, it is enough to have only names for the “myriad creatures” to understand the world. It is the act of attaching more components of the name that leads to the danger. The components of a name can be its meaning or even how it can be used in a context. Having only names provides the simplicity that Lao Tzu advises his readers to follow. In the beginning, it was argued that the first poem posed the problem of names not being of a constant nature. In addition to its inconsistency and Lao Tzu’s advice of stopping at names, the poem illuminates that the names themselves already have their complexities that must be faced, and going further than names takes the individual out of the simplicity they wish to seek. The consequence of not being simple is imbalance. It was established that “The Way” is a system of nature that embraces the harmony of nature; if the balance breaks readers have ceased to follow “The Way.” Although its contents are empty, “The Way” flows through the threads of the nature that balances the forces of nature and this balance of “The Way” provides the simplicity that a reader should be inclined to follow. Why does balance lead to simplicity? Through the structure of Lao Tzu’s poems, it seems that the best mode of conveying his message lies in the way that the contradictions are placed. The contradictions that he presents are actually contradictions that need one another to show the bigger picture of the particularities of the contradiction. With opposing forces acting on each other equally, simplicity emerges. If the opposing forces do not equally act upon each other in the same manner, then the simplicity would not emerge; that is

why contradictions are needed, because by having contradictions readers are given a balance of both forces.

The last poem of the *Tao Te Ching* encapsulates Lao Tzu's work and aims at providing a last insight into the problems of names, words, and ways of interpreting. The first four lines of poem eighty-one exhibit a ratio between the words truthful, beautiful, good, and persuasive. Lao Tzu writes, "Truthful words are not beautiful; / Beautiful words / are not truthful. Good words are not persuasive; / persuasive words are not good" (LXXXI. 194.1), which shows a relation between the four emphasized words. Truthful words must be good, and since truthful words are not beautiful (which implies the truth can be painful) the good is not always something that is cloaked with the elegance of language. The multiple styles that language has taken throughout the *Tao Te Ching* show how words can become beautiful (even as Lao Tzu states his words are easy to follow), but that does not mean we must not follow "The Way." This beauty reaches further than just the aesthetics of the words; the way the words blend together to form its intricate beauty and its lack of consistency in the method of naming is the danger that Lao Tzu is warning his readers about. Moreover, beautiful words, in contrast to truthful words, seem to persuade, since the way that one writes can influence the audience that reads it. The more beautiful the words are, the easier it is to persuade since its flowery language is the reason why readers fall for its tricky and intentional beauty. In these four lines of poem eighty-one, it appears that the author is bidding farewell and reminding his readers of the methods that we use to disguise words. However, presenting the complexities of words through the manner of confirming that each word does not always produce what one might think it will such as: "...Beautiful words are not truthful" (LXXXI. 194.1), again show the balance between them and

assuring us that since truthful words are not beautiful it does not necessitate that beautiful words are truthful.

The third and fourth lines of poem eighty-one stress the previous notion of knowing. Lao Tzu repeats this idea in order to truly emphasize the importance of how an individual should conduct their life by admitting to the fact that individuals do not *know* in order to have wide learning: "...He who knows has / no wide learning; He who has wide learning does not / know" (LXXXI. 194.3). In order to be able to have wide learning, one must be able to admit to not knowing and if continuing their search while admitting to knowing only leads to no wide learning, it would appear that knowing would cease the act of enquiry. Throughout this thesis, the problems that have been explored does not imply any sort of knowing. I believe it was important to show that the interpretations that can be obtained from the *Tao Te Ching* lead to further interpretations. Alternating between interpretations correspond to our strive at balance. Thus, the end of our enquiry about "The Way" is reached. What is left but to go set our feet on the path of "The Way?"

From what has been interpreted of the *Tao Te Ching* and connected with the all encompassing "The Way," it is easy to admit that readers should follow "The Way." All aspects of "The Way" do not seem to divert its readers into following a path that would lead to catastrophe, as long as you follow Lao Tzu's prescription. By following the prescription, readers would eventually set their feet on "The Way" and be one with the uncarved block. The simplicity of life does not lead one to danger, but balance and harmony that allows life to flow the way it should. The *Tao Te Ching* advocates for the immersion of humans to be one with nature, to follow the path of nature and follow antiquity. How easy is life to those who see the

contradictions and figure out that its purpose is not to oppose but to bring together the opposition? This would only happen if the words of Lao Tzu are understood by the reader. Lao Tzu claims that his words are easy to practice and carry out yet nobody is able to do so in poem seventy: “My words are very easy to understand and very easy / to put into practice, yet no one in the world can / understand them or put them into practice” (LXX. 170.1) and here again, the author provides a hint at why the *Tao Te Ching* is not for those who are mesmerized by the beauty and craftiness of words alone. The *Tao Te Ching* is for those who truly want to follow “The Way” and lead the simple life that nature emanates around us. In some sense, in order for anyone to understand Lao Tzu’s work, the wonder within the person must be so powerful as to reach the depths of “The Way” and must compel us to attempt to understand its meaning. Hence again, a contradiction is shown where in order to become simple in one’s life and walk along the “The Way” one must already have their own complications. What I mean is this: Previously, it was asserted that the complexities of language already exist in only the name itself even without going further in investigating the name’s meaning. Since difficulties are already present in the sign of the word it is advised to embrace these difficulties. By walking along the path of “The Way” it does not necessitate that the problems disappear. Within “The Way,” there are already many difficulties such as contradictions that one must face, and by being on “The Way,” “The Way” itself will show readers how to deal with them.

We have used language and followed the path of “The Way” in order to embrace our difficulties. The simplicity that Lao Tzu asks his readers to strive for is already present in the contradictions within “The Way.” It is a contradiction that Lao Tzu advocates for the simple life but yet to understand what and how to attain the simple life it is necessary to understand the

difficulty of understanding the simple life and that is through his text. Lao Tzu stresses that his words are easy to execute, yet nobody is able to do so and he claims it is because people like to take bypaths: “The great way is easy, yet people prefer / by-paths” (LIII. 120.3). It seems Lao Tzu is claiming the difficulties and the contradictions that his text proposes (and within life) are ignored and readers attempt to find an easier way. In reality, Lao Tzu is stating that by the act of enquiry, analysis, and living with the difficulties, readers are getting closer to the simple life. It is by facing the reality of the difficulty that one becomes simple. And this simplicity that a reader reaches brings them closer to nature since simplicity is a part of nature. Nature is in itself complicated even though it is structured to show that there is a harmony that runs through it. Yet, the harmony only comes along through the clash of contradicting elements to bring about balance.

According to Lao Tzu, this simplicity and balance should produce happiness. Lao Tzu prescribes poetic words in order for readers to solve the puzzle of happiness. People love to take bypaths which take them away from a road to happiness. People can't be told what happiness is, they must find it within themselves through being content and becoming one with “The Way” as Lao Tzu notes in poem eighty: “...Bring it about that the people will return to the use / of the knotted rope, / Will find relish in their food / And beauty in their clothes, / Will be content in their abode / And happy in the way they live” (LXXX. 193b.1). This poem shows that the simplicity of life lies in the mundane and the contentment one can find in the simplest things. Moreover, line six highlights, again, the importance of antiquity and why readers should trust ordinary things, rather than strive for something more artificial, in order to be happy and content within their lives (LXXX. 193a.1) The balance within a happy life is the unity of the simple

things that bring out this happiness. If one wishes to be more excited in unordinary (artificial) things, it seems that Lao Tzu is afraid that his readers will lose sight of what is important in life. When the reader finds happiness in the simplest things in life, perhaps part of this happiness is the excitement of wonder.

It is no doubt that the *Tao Te Ching* excites the wonder within a reader's mind. Though, the chosen structure of Lao Tzu's work can bring about different interpretations, the author has a particular view of the ideas he wishes to pass on. In some cases Lao Tzu's work and intent is confusing, but the fact that it is confusing is what leads to further inquiry because it is confusing for a reason. Using poetry as his style of writing, the analogies within the poems invoke a sense of wonder and some type of emotion. Grasping what the author means with the mysteries of his writings help us attain the mysteries. One of Lao Tzu's overarching themes throughout *Tao Te Ching* is the idea of balance which is the product of his contradictions. He believes that too much of one thing is not good. Lao Tzu's ideology is apparent in his writing and that is why he structures his poems in a way that readers can see the juxtaposition of both contradicting ideas. When readers are attempting to attain some sort of knowledge, it seems plausible to claim that the contradictions are a tool that helps to reach the balance from the opposing forces. Therefore, Lao Tzu has exposed the paradoxical essence of language through his play with language and the artifice of poetry. The author shows that language used to understand language does not bring us any closer to understanding language or anything at all. The "myriad creatures" use names for surface level understanding but there is always a danger in going further into names and the reader has done just that. Straightforward words are not always straightforward in a sense that through the artifice of poetry, nothing is straightforward. Ironically, Lao Tzu is trying to lead his

readers on one way, “The Way,” yet by utilizing the structure of poetry it can result in different paths. However, Lao Tzu has shown that the route he has taken to answer the problems of language has created even more problems and the author has circled back to the beginning of his prescription since the advice he provides is hard to follow. The author believes readers can follow his prescription, but only if they understand. And the burden of understanding is pressed on the shoulder of the reader, but Lao Tzu asserts, ‘straightforward words / seem paradoxical’ (LXXVIII. 189.1).

The ultimate paradox of attempting to solve the problems of language by using language has been demonstrated in this thesis. With language as the only means of communication, we come recognize that its faultiness does not necessitate that readers cannot discover a new idea. Although language is not perfect and does not perfectly describe the object itself, it does not mean that language is of no use. Language can bring about some type of knowledge and whatever that knowledge may be, it is helpful to understand the world. The contradictions that Lao Tzu has put forth within language elucidate that the very paradoxical character of language can produce balance. The balance lies in the fact that language is good and bad at the same time, bringing some sort of knowledge, and with that knowledge readers are able to cultivate new concepts through it. The creation of language shows that the human capacity to know something is bound to the structure that the language abides to. However, even within a set of rules, language can distort and express words many different ways that can still bring about new ideas. Language is good and bad, but the manner of inquiry into its problems and utilizing this tool in Lao Tzu’s way allows readers to embrace the issues rather than letting it go. It is also important to note that this paradoxical problem within language is one worth having in a sense that the very

problem brings people together. There is always the good and the bad, according to the author. In order to have the good, the bad is needed and vice versa. It is a vine, each individual thing, all intertwined to create a unity that preserves the twists and turns of existence.

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