

The *Zhuang-zi* and *Laozi* texts attempt to identify human's vain desires for materialistic goods and temporal values, and in turn, suggest an alternative – the Way of the sage. Both texts are filled with contradiction after contradiction, paradox after paradox, all of which amount to one conclusion: that there is no answer, and that in itself *is* the answer.

Both Zhuangzi and “Laozi” highlight the emphasis humans place on fleeting values and tangible goods, such as wealth and jade. Laozi states that when the Way weakened, humaneness, rightness, intelligence, and wisdom emerged (84); he juxtaposes the Way with concepts that humans and society define as “good.” Zhuangzi, likewise, criticizes “knowledge,” arguing that human's quest for knowledge triggered division and the “so's and not sos's” (117). Zhuangzi and Laozi's critiques of human values stem from their argument that everything in the universe is constantly changing and transforming, and thus “the placement of value distinctions...[are] merely fleeting moments in the game of life that all come to naught” (Cook 66). Does this mean, then, that there is no point to knowledge, honor, wealth, and even virtue? What *is* virtue?

Zhuangzi and Laozi regard the sage as one who lives in harmony with the Way and disregards such temporal temptations and values. The ability to live amongst the paradoxes and contradictions is what Laozi characterizes as “profound virtue” (83). According to Laozi, a sage “accomplishes things by doing nothing” and furthers teaching with no words (80). The sage exists amongst ordinary men, amidst argumentation and conflict, but has the ability to consider, take positions when necessary (without argumentation), and make distinctions (Zhuangzi 119). The sage's purpose is to harmonize with the Way as well as teach humans how to be stripped of natural desires such as ambition, knowledge, and wisdom. The sage, by doing nothing, brings society into order (Laozi 81), because “by doing nothing, nothing is left undone” (87). How does

“doing nothing” result in “something”? What can be attributed to as “undone”? What is the meaning of words?

Present in both texts is a continuous play on words and strings of paradoxes. Zhuangzi presents pages and pages of dialogue about flutes, finger-pointing, there-is's and there-isn't's only to say that we don't know if we “know that what [we] call knowing is not, in fact, not knowing...[and] what [we] call not knowing is not, in fact, knowing” (Zhuangzi 119-120). The paradoxes and contradictions in the texts (and the texts themselves) become physical manifestations of the Way: ever-changing, open to interpretation, and words that may or may not mean anything and may or may not make sense.

Laozi and Zhuangzi's manipulations of words and twisting of ideas throw the readers (like myself) in all directions, leaving me wondering what it is that Zhuangzi and Laozi are trying to convey about the Way. Only after reading the endless paradoxes and manipulation of language can I finally begin to comprehend “the *wordless* teaching [of the Way] and the advantage of doing nothing” (Laozi 89).

## Sources

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