

**THE *DAO* OF QOHELETH**  
**An Intertextual Reading of the *Daode Jing***  
**and the Book of Ecclesiastes**

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Of all the world's literary works which may appropriately be labeled religious classics, the Hebrew scriptures and the *Daode Jing* stand out as two of the most popular across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Jon Levenson claims that "[i]f there has ever been a book that has thriven in a plurality of contexts, it is surely the Hebrew Bible."<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Jacob Needleman writes, "The eighty-one short chapters known as the *Tao Te Ching* have been translated more often than any other book in the world, with the single exception of the Bible. Like the Bible, the *Tao Te Ching* is a book whose appeal is as broad as its meaning is deep."<sup>2</sup>

One might suppose that the cross-cultural popularity of these classics would have brought them into frequent contact with one another. However, not much seems to have been done to relate the Bible to the *Daode Jing* in a constructive way. In this article I seek to begin redressing this lack of conversation by offering a reading of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes using the *Daode Jing* as an intertext.

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<sup>1</sup>Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Jacob Needleman, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Vintage, 1989), v.

### *Intertextuality and Intertexts*

The burgeoning interest among biblical critics in intertextuality makes it unnecessary to review its theoretical foundations in detail.<sup>3</sup> However, it does seem prudent to specify and support the stance assumed here toward the locus of intertextual phenomena and the identification of appropriate intertexts.

There are three discrete possibilities for the locus of intertextuality: the author, the text, or the reader. An author-oriented approach to intertextuality would require that readers discern the author's intended or actual uses of prior texts available to the author. Although such an approach would technically fall within the bailiwick of a source analysis rather than an intertextual reading,<sup>4</sup> intertextual readings sometimes do slip into this mode. Even Julia Kristeva, who is credited with having coined the term *intertextualité* and developed much of the theoretical basis for intertextual reading, seems to take this approach when she "goes on to point out that we must verify which edition of Pascal's *Pensées* Lautrémont used for his parody."<sup>5</sup>

An author-oriented approach to intertextual reading, however, requires a construal of the mental processes which preceded the written work. Interpreting an author's intentions, though, is ultimately an act of readerly will:

The idea that as readers we are constrained in our interpretations by the author's own interpretation is shot through with insuperable difficulties. For most texts we simply do not have a statement from the author on its meaning. If we *do* have such a statement...it must be subjected to the same process of reader interpretation that we were trying to avoid in the first place. If we have to infer an intention from the facts of the author's life, then we will have to study his biography, and of course different biographers will infer different intentions. Whichever biographer we decide to trust, his opinion will again be a text that we will have to interpret.

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<sup>3</sup>For which see the contributions to Danna Nolan Fewell, ed., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), especially the essays by Timothy K. Beal, Peter D. Miscall, and David Penchansky.

<sup>4</sup>See Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, "Love and Footwashing: John 13:1-20 and Luke 7:36-50 Read Intertextually," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), 191 n. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Thais Morgan, "The Space of Intertextuality," in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Peter O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 261.

This leads logically to an infinite regress, which can be stopped only by an act of will. That is, we arrive at the "author's meaning" precisely when we decide we have arrived there: we *make* the author's meaning!<sup>6</sup>

Holmes Welch makes a similar point in his discussion of allusion in Chinese classics generally and the *Daode Jing* in particular:

Some poems are little more than a patchwork of earlier literature, meaningless unless we recognize the sources. But even if we recognize the sources, we still cannot be sure what is meant. Perhaps the allusion is not to the content of its source, but to an event in the life of the man who wrote it, or to the place in which it was written; or perhaps, as sometimes happens, an attractive phrase has simply been appropriated without regard to its setting. By now it should be easy to see how, with most of Chinese poetry and much of Chinese prose, we have to decide for ourselves what is meant, within more or less broad limits set by the text. To read is an act of creation.<sup>7</sup>

An intertextual reading would be an even more complex matter, since intertextual connections go also to "anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located" and "unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation-marks."<sup>8</sup> Thus, an author-oriented intertextual reading would have to guess not only at the author's intentional use of sources but also the author's unintentional or unconscious borrowings from manifold available sign systems. Thus viewed, an ostensibly author-oriented approach turns out to depend radically upon the reader despite attempts to efface the reader's role.

A text-oriented approach to intertextual reading is more common. Susan Stanford Friedman notes that in the later work of Kristeva and Roland Barthes, intertextuality becomes

an "anonymous" and "impersonal" process of blending, clashing, and intersecting. Texts "blend and clash," not people. Supplanting the "he" or "she" of a preceding author, the "it" of a text engages in intertextual play.... "[I]t" refers to and assimilates other texts, not the author or writer.... For both Barthes and Kristeva, the text — an "it" — draws, makes, enters, and dialogues with its intertexts. The subject of these verbs is the anonymous, impersonal "it" that engages in intertextual play.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Robert Crosman, "Do Readers Make Meaning?" in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 161.

<sup>7</sup>Holmes Welch, *Taoism: Parting of the Way* (rev. ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1965), 11–12.

<sup>8</sup>Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston, London, and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 39.

<sup>9</sup>Susan Stanford Friedman, "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)birth of the Author," in

How are appropriate intertexts to be identified in a text-oriented approach to intertextual reading? On Michael Riffaterre's account of intertextuality, texts contain "indices [which] direct readers toward *the specific and relevant* intertexts even when cultural changes have made their recovery less likely."<sup>10</sup> For Riffaterre, these "indices" are "signposts," "words and phrases indicating, on the one hand, a difficulty — an obscure or incomplete utterance in the text — that only an intertext can remedy; and, on the other hand, pointing the way to where the solution must be sought."<sup>11</sup> However, successful operation of these "indices" depends on readerly recognition of them as "indices," and readerly decipherment of what they index. If the reader is unaware of the source of an allusion, for example, the allusion fails to allude.<sup>12</sup> Thus, like the author-oriented approach, the text-oriented approach turns out to depend radically upon the reader.

If author-oriented and text-oriented approaches actually depend so radically upon the reader, it seems prudent to adopt a reader-oriented approach from the start. But where ought readers look for intertexts? Kristeva and Barthes make much of the focused text's intersection with the "general text" of society, history, and culture (including "an anterior or synchronic literary corpus").<sup>13</sup> Kristeva poses as a problem for semiotics

defin[ing] the specificity of different textual arrangements by placing them within the general text (culture) of which they are part and which is, in turn, part of them.... The ideologeme of a text is the focus where knowing rationality grasps the transformation of *utterances* (to which the text is irreducible) into a totality (the text) as well as the insertions of this totality into the historical and social text.<sup>14</sup>

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*Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 149–50.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Response," in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 58.

<sup>11</sup>Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response," 58; cf. similarly Steven Winspur, "Lautréamont and the Question of the Intertext," *Romanic Review* 76 (1985), 200.

<sup>12</sup>For examples and discussion, see Peter J. Rabinowitz, " 'What's Hecuba to Us?': The Audience's Experience of Literary Borrowing," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>13</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

<sup>14</sup>Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 36–37.

Such a conception might suggest that readers may look anywhere in the general text for intertexts.

This understanding at once casts the intertextual net too narrowly and too broadly. The overbreadth of the conception for practical purposes is noted by Jonathan Culler, who remarks that "it is difficult to make that universe as such the object of attention."<sup>15</sup> Thus, for manageability, critics (including Kristeva and Barthes) ordinarily analyze a focused text in relation to specific, selected intertexts (usually written works) rather than the general text itself.

Paradoxically, however, the notion of the general text is also constrictive, as Culler (inadvertently?) also indicates:

Intertextuality thus designates the domain common to writing and reading as the domain of the intertextual, and a description of intertextuality would involve the most general and significant considerations: the relationship between a text and *the* languages or discursive practices of *a* culture and its relationship to *those particular* texts which, for the text in question, articulate *that* culture and its possibilities.<sup>16</sup>

In practice, this understanding of the general text tends to limit intertextual studies to

a circumscribed field of literature that overlaps significantly with the canon or tradition proposed by early modern critics such as Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot. In effect, the "best that is known and thought in the world" is redefined as that set of text(s) on which the greatest number of intertexts converge.<sup>17</sup>

A parallel constriction can be observed in biblical studies informed by theories of intertextuality, in which focused texts and intertexts almost always reside within the biblical corpus.<sup>18</sup> The limitation of the general text to *a* culture stultifies the potentially rich experience of reading texts intertextually across cultural and canonical boundaries.

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<sup>15</sup>Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976), 1384; cf. Liao Ping Hui, "Intersection and Juxtaposition of Wor(l)ds," *Tamkang Review* 14 (1985), 402.

<sup>16</sup>Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," 1383.

<sup>17</sup>Morgan, "The Space of Intertextuality," 272.

<sup>18</sup>So the contributions to Sipke Draisma, ed., *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas Van Iersel* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1989).

The concurrent overbreadth and constriction of the general text can be overcome by casting readers themselves in the role of the general text. Such a move would mean that the range of intertextual links would be limited only by readers' prior experiences and imaginative construals of texts. Italo Calvino picturesquely describes readers' intertextual construals on the model of books on a shelf:

A book is written so that it can be put beside other books and take its place on a hypothetical bookshelf. Once it is there, in some way or other it alters the shelf, expelling certain other volumes from their places or forcing them back into the second row, while demanding that certain others should be brought up to the front.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, Barthes helps us realize that the hypothetical bookshelf *is* the reader: "The 'I' that approaches the text is itself already a plurality of other texts, of infinite codes or, more exactly, missing ones (whose origins are lost)."<sup>20</sup> In short, *the individual reader is the locus of intertextuality.*

### *Ecclesiastes and the Daode Jing*

Only such a reader-oriented approach to the identification of intertexts can sustain a reading of Ecclesiastes with the *Daode Jing* as an intertext, for the plausibility of any author-oriented or text-oriented connection between the two works is negligible. Furthermore, this view vitiates the need for any justification of this pairing beyond sheer readerly prerogative. Yet the decision to pair these two works, while arbitrary, is not groundless, and I offer two reasons for pairing these texts, as invitations for other readers to join me in the decision to read these works together.

There are, first, considerations of cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue which recommend such reading. Kwok Pui Lan, for example, has appealed for the use of Asian resources — including Confucian,

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<sup>19</sup>Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 81.

<sup>20</sup>Roland Barthes, *SSZ* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1970), 16.

Buddhist, and Daoist texts — in biblical interpretation.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, R. S. Sugirtharajah notes that

[o]ne of the interesting aspects of the re-use of the Bible in Asia is the employment of common religio-cultural sources to illuminate biblical narratives. This is done in two ways. One is to look again at the canonical texts of other faith communities and engage in textual study,... These are intertextual exercises in which cross-references to non-biblical texts and stories are sought, with a view to making a variety of hermeneutical connections and links.<sup>22</sup>

A variety of benefits — contextualized theologies (e.g., Korean *minjung* theology), increased self-understanding, enriched interreligious dialogue — may derive from such readings. It ought to be stressed that these benefits are not for Asian readers alone, for it would be fallacious for Western readers to presume that they have nothing to learn within their own Western contexts from the use of Asian textual resources in biblical interpretation.

Second, there is a certain visceral attraction to Chinese wisdom for some students of the biblical wisdom tradition. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, written in Taiwan, Graham Ogden asserts that "[i]t is not only practically impossible, it is also theologically irresponsible and naive, to ignore some of the issues raised by the juxtaposition of these two great [Chinese and Israelite] wisdom traditions."<sup>23</sup> Although Ogden himself stops short of actually juxtaposing any Chinese texts with Ecclesiastes, his comments have prompted Peter K. H. Lee to read Ecclesiastes intertextually with selected poems by Su Tung-p'o (eleventh century CE).<sup>24</sup> With regard to the *Daode Jing*, there are certain coincidental parallels between sayings in that work and in Ecclesiastes that readers might notice:

The earth stands forever. (Eccl 1:4)

Heaven and earth last forever. (DJ 7:1)<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Kwok Pui Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Robert A. Hoorsley, (rev. ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 18–22.

<sup>22</sup>R. S. Sugirtharajah, "The Bible and Its Asian Readers," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993), 58.

<sup>23</sup>Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Readings; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 217.

<sup>24</sup>Peter K. H. Lee, "Re-reading Ecclesiastes in the Light of Su Tung-p'o's Poetry," *Ching Feng* 30 (1987), 214–36.

<sup>25</sup>Quotations from the *Daode Jing* are from the translation by Feng and English unless otherwise indicated, and are cited by chapter and line.

In action, be aware of the time and the season. (DJ 8:10)

For everything, there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.  
(Eccl 3:1)

Much learning fatigues the body. (Eccl 12:12)

Give up learning, and put an end to your troubles. (DJ 20:1)

Readers who notice such parallels may feel inclined to relate the two works more intimately than merely cataloging parallel phrases — that is, to read the two works intertextually.

Before proceeding to the reading, a terminological note is in order. The *Daode Jing* and Ecclesiastes are often referred to by the names of their putative authors, Laozi and Qoheleth. Studies of Ecclesiastes and the *Daode Jing* frequently comment on the (non-)historicity of these figures. I have chosen to leave such questions aside and construe Qoheleth and Laozi as textual constructs. They are the narrators, the monologists, the "I"s who speak in Ecclesiastes and the *Daode Jing*. I will refer to the texts by these latter terms.<sup>26</sup>

### *Reading the Daode Jing*

Reading a text with an intertext presupposes a reading of the intertext. For this reason, it seems advisable to take up the *Daode Jing* at this point without yet referring it to Ecclesiastes, all the more so since the reading of the *Daode Jing* adopted here departs significantly from mainstream interpretations. Those interpretations construe the *Daode Jing* as a work concerned with mystical metaphysics, with *dao* referring to an ineffable mystical absolute:

The *Tao Te Ching* is thus a work of metaphysical psychology, taking us far beyond the social or biological factors that have been the main concern of modern psychology.... The metaphysical doctrine now stands before us in outline: an unformed, ungraspable, pure conscious principle lies at the heart and origin of all things; it is referred to as the *Tao*.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Ellen Marie Chen understands *dao* to be "primarily an organic nothingness (*wu*) which is at the same time pure motion and

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<sup>26</sup>Quotations from secondary sources, however, will not be altered to conform to these conventions.

<sup>27</sup>Needleman, *Tao Te Ching*, vi, xiii.



pure creativity";<sup>28</sup> George Chrystides regards *dao* as "the source of the universe and the natural order which flows through it";<sup>29</sup> Clarence Day identifies *dao* as "the eternal, unchanging principle lying behind and in the phenomenal world";<sup>30</sup> Ch'en Yu-king takes *dao* to designate "the body and the force which structures the universe";<sup>31</sup> N. J. Girardot presents *dao* as "a cosmological first principle, origin, or primordial ground and source of being";<sup>32</sup> Hsu Sung-peng glosses *dao* as "the *summum bonum*";<sup>33</sup> Fung Yu-Lan identifies *dao* as "the all-embracing first principle for all things";<sup>34</sup> D. C. Lau conceives of *dao* as "that which is responsible for the creation as well as the support of the universe";<sup>35</sup> Donald Munro characterizes *dao* as "an internal metaphysical principle" determining the nature of all things;<sup>36</sup> Joseph Needham glosses *dao* as "God immanent in nature";<sup>37</sup> R. R. N. Ross takes *dao* to be "the 'Nameless' reality to which no predicates can be meaningfully attached";<sup>38</sup> and Arthur Waley speaks of *dao* as "the ultimate reality in which all attributes are united."<sup>39</sup>

On such mystical-metaphysical readings of the *Daode Jing*, the very existence of the work is paradoxical:

<sup>28</sup>Ellen Marie Chen, "The Meaning of *Te* in the *Tao Te Ching*: An Examination of the Concept of Nature in Chinese Taoism," *Philosophy East and West* 23 (1973), 457.

<sup>29</sup>George D. Chrystides, "God and the Tao," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), 1.

<sup>30</sup>Clarence Burton Day, *The Philosophers of China: Classical and Contemporary* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), 18.

<sup>31</sup>Ch'en Yu-king, *Lao Tzu: Text, Notes, and Comments* (Taiwan: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), 51-52.

<sup>32</sup>N. J. Girardot, "Myth and Meaning in the *Tao Te Ching*: Chapters 25 and 42," *History of Religions* 16 (1976/77), 299.

<sup>33</sup>Hsu Sung-peng, "Lao Tzu's Conception of Good and Evil," *Philosophy East and West* 26 (1976), 301, 313.

<sup>34</sup>Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, *The Period of the Philosophers (from the Beginnings to circa 100 B.C.)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 179.

<sup>35</sup>D. C. Lau, *Lao Tzu/Tao Te Ching* (London: Penguin, 1963), 16.

<sup>36</sup>Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 124.

<sup>37</sup>Joseph Needham, "The Tao — Illuminations and Corrections of the Way," *Theology* 81 (1978), 247.

<sup>38</sup>R. R. N. Ross, "Non-being and Being in Taoist and Western Traditions," *Religious Traditions* 2 (1979), 25.

<sup>39</sup>Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958), 50.

Lao Tzu is just as inconsistent [as mystics like St. John of the Cross]. He begins his whole book with the sentence, "The Tao that can be told of is not the Absolute Tao." In Chapter 56 he seems to impale himself on a monstrous dilemma when he announces, "Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know."<sup>40</sup>

The paradox or inconsistency is, of course, that the entire *Daode Jing* seems to speak of *dao*<sup>metaphysical absolute</sup>, though according to the first line of the work, any *dao*<sup>metaphysical absolute</sup> about which one may speak cannot be the true *dao*<sup>metaphysical absolute</sup>. The mystical-metaphysical reading simply accepts the paradox, however, for "if the *tao* is to be taught at all, some means, no matter how inadequate, must be found to give an idea of what it is like."<sup>41</sup> On this reading, then, the *Daode Jing* is self-referentially incoherent or, as Chad Hansen snidely puts it, the "interpreters allow that what they see in the text is incoherent gibberish, but they seek to explain it by calling it deep and profound mysticism."<sup>42</sup>

The incoherence of the standard reading is one of the reasons Hansen cites for rejecting traditional readings of the *Daode Jing* and, more specifically, for refusing to construe *dao* as referring to a metaphysical entity or reality. By all accounts, mystical-metaphysical readings of the *Daode Jing*, when read against the backdrop of ancient Chinese philosophy, employ what Hansen calls *meaning-change hypotheses* with regard to *dao*, such that "[t]he word *dao* is supposed to change meaning whenever a Daoist uses it."<sup>43</sup> Such hypotheses are common in standard accounts of the *Daode Jing*:

We have seen that before Confucius the term *tao* usually meant a road, or a way of action. Confucius used it as a philosophical concept, standing for the right way of action — moral, social, and political. For Confucius, however, the *Tao* was not a metaphysical concept. For the Taoists it became one. They used the term *Tao* to stand for the totality of all things, equivalent to what some Western philosophers have called "the absolute."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Welch, *Taoism*, 51.

<sup>41</sup>Lau, *Lao Tzu/Tao Te Ching*, 16.

<sup>42</sup>Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 227.

<sup>43</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 204.

<sup>44</sup>H. G. Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tsê-tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 101–2.

Similarly, Fung acknowledges that *dao* referred to a way of conduct in pre-Daoist philosophy, but claims that "when we come to the *Lao-Tzu* we find the word *tao* being given a metaphysical meaning."<sup>45</sup> As Hansen summarizes,

Each meaning-change hypothesis entails that the schools [of Chinese thought] were talking about fundamentally different things. The two most prominent examples of meaning change hypotheses concern the terms *dao*<sup>guiding discourse</sup> and *fa*<sup>standards</sup>. Standard interpretations say that *dao-jia*<sup>Daoists</sup> and *fa-jia*<sup>Legalists</sup> changed the meaning of their focal terms. When Daoists spoke of *dao*<sup>metaphysical absolute</sup> or Legalists spoke of *fa*<sup>laws</sup> they changed the subject.... Daoists, [such hypotheses] allege, changed the meaning of *dao*<sup>way</sup> from moral doctrine to metaphysical monistic absolute — the Chinese equivalent of Parmenidean being.<sup>46</sup>

Hansen objects to the use of meaning-change hypotheses on two grounds. First, textual evidence for such hypotheses is lacking: "all these interpretive hypotheses that *dao* changes meaning are explanations offered by translators, not reports of something found in the text. The texts contain exactly the same graph, and nowhere do they say 'Let's change the subject.'"<sup>47</sup> Second, these hypotheses lack explanatory force:

Traditional accounts suggest that the Daoist use is simply an inexplicable departure from [*dao's*] normal meaning.... The hypothesis that *dao* mysteriously changes its meaning for Daoists entails that the subject-matter and style of philosophy must have changed *simultaneously*. And the change must have been imperceptible to the participants. Philosophical interests must have shifted from practical, pragmatic concerns to Western-like metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics while everyone slept at night. That a tradition should so radically redefine itself with no clear motivation is, on its face, a widely implausible interpretive hypothesis.<sup>48</sup>

Although meaning-change hypotheses assert that Daoist use changed the meaning of *dao*, they cannot explain *why* this happened.

For Hansen, rejection of meaning-change hypotheses is a matter of accurate contextualization of Daoist thought within the history of Chinese philosophy. Abandonment of meaning-change hypotheses could also

<sup>45</sup>Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, 177; cf. Lau, *Lao Tzu/Tao Te Ching*, 22–23; Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 30; and D. Howard Smith, *Chinese Religions* (New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), 71.

<sup>46</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 13.

<sup>47</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 207.

<sup>48</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 207.

be redescribed in the language of intertextuality theory as a transposition of the general text of ancient Chinese philosophy into the *Daode Jing*. A primary implication of this transposition would be that the same semantic range would be attributed to *dao* in the *Daode Jing* as is attributed to *dao* in ancient non-Daoist Chinese texts. The undisputed English translation *way* is given precision by Hansen's definition: "X is a way =<sub>df</sub> some subject (S) can follow X to get from Y to Z."<sup>49</sup> Thus, *guide* is a good translation for both nominal and verbal uses of *dao*.

This construal of *dao* may be tested by a reading of the first chapter of the *Daode Jing*. The first two lines are ordinarily rendered something like

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name. (DJ 1:1-2)

However, as Hansen notes,

nothing in the Chinese corresponds to the definite article *the*. Translators conform to their own community practice of always putting *the* before *dao*. We could, in principle, take as interpretive hypotheses that the subject was *a dao* or *any dao*, or simply *Daos*.... Wherever the translator uses *the Dao* (or *the Way*) substitute *a dao*.<sup>50</sup>

Applying this principle (which holds for *name* as well) enables us to read the first two lines:

Ways that can be told are not constant ways;  
names that can be named are not constant names.

The first line indicates that "any prescriptive system put into words gives inconstant guidance."<sup>51</sup> The second line relates to the first in a part-whole relationship: *daos* are made up of names, which "mark distinctions, not classes of objects."<sup>52</sup> These lines do not assert the existence of any constant ways or constant names, only the inconstancy of any verbally expressible ways and names.

<sup>49</sup>Chad Hansen, "Language in the Heart-Mind," in *Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots*, ed. R. E. Allinson (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 91.

<sup>50</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 215-16.

<sup>51</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 216.

<sup>52</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 217, 219.

The rest of the chapter serves to illustrate the point made in the first two lines. Lines 3–4 are traditionally rendered something like

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

The named is the mother of ten thousand things.

This translation depends on a particular grammatical construal of the line which, though permissible, is not definitive. This construal treats the first two characters of each line — *wu*<sup>lack</sup> and *ming*<sup>name</sup> in line 3 and *you*<sup>have</sup> and *ming*<sup>name</sup> in line 4 — as together constituting the grammatical subject. That is, the standard reading takes *wu-ming*<sup>name</sup> as the grammatical subject of line 3, and *you-ming*<sup>has name</sup> as the grammatical subject of line 4. However, it is also possible to read *wu*<sup>lack</sup> and *you*<sup>have</sup> as "mentions" rather than "uses". The lines would thus be rendered

*Lack* names the beginning of the universe.

*Has* names the mother of all things.<sup>53</sup>

Hansen notes the difficulty of following through cognitively on this distinction between *lacks* and *has*:

trying to think of being and nonbeing (arguably the most basic distinction in language) as opposites based on a single distinction leads to deep paradox. It is *puzzling* in a way that shows the distinction is *inconstant*. If *you* and *wu* mark a distinction in the kapok, where could that distinction lie? Surely the entire kapok belongs on the *you* side, so there is no distinction. If there were a distinction, it would be part of what there is and should be included with *you*. *Wu* names the beginning — the logical edge — of the universe. The implicit distinction cannot be drawn — it can distinguish nothing.

The various discourse *daos* of *you-wu* do sort things into both categories. Confucians allegedly *you ming*<sup>fate</sup> and *wu shen*<sup>spirits</sup> and Mohists' discourse reverses this. So they have a conventional application. But we have no way to decide who is correct on this because we cannot give any coherent characterization of the background against which to apply this distinction. We cannot find a constant (neutral) place to draw the *you*<sup>have</sup>-*wu*<sup>lack</sup> distinction.<sup>54</sup>

This reading helps make sense of lines 5–6 as well. These lines are usually rendered something like

<sup>53</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 219.

<sup>54</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 220.

Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
 Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.

Treating *wu* and *you* as "mentions" rather than "uses", however, results in a rendering like

Treating *lacks* as constant, one desires to observe its mysteries.  
 Treating *has* as constant, one desires to observe its manifestations.

Thus rendered, this pair of lines makes, Hansen argues,

a plausible claim...about the distinction. Treating nonbeing as a constant term will lead to paradox and mystery. Treating *wu*<sup>lack</sup> as naming something is inherently paradoxical. Treating *you*<sup>have being</sup> as constant will manifest itself in desire to study the sequences of events, essentially the study of science.<sup>55</sup>

Thus far, Hansen's reading strategy has enabled a coherent reading from which the concerns of mystical metaphysics are quite distant.

The reading of the final lines of chapter 1 plays an important role in the overall construal of the chapter and of the *Daode Jing* as a whole:

These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as darkness.  
 Darkness with darkness.  
 The gate to all mystery. (DJ 1:7–9)

Although these lines speak of "these two," the traditional reading has four things in view: the nameless, the named, the ever-desireless, and the ever-desiring. On the proposed reading, however, the two things which spring from the same source are *wu* and *you*. (Chapter 2 expands on the theme of distinctions and names: the evaluative pairs beautiful/ugly, good/evil, difficult/easy, long/short, high/low, instrumental music/vocal music, and front/back each arise from a single distinction.)<sup>56</sup> The names *wu* and *you* spring from a single distinction (*viz.*, between being and nonbeing), but on careful reflection the distinction is impossible to consistently maintain.

The making of preference orderings accompanies the making of distinctions. In learning to distinguish between beauty and ugliness, one may learn to prefer beauty. In learning to distinguish between good

<sup>55</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 221.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Hansen, *Daoist*, 222–24.

and bad, one may learn to prefer good. At various places in the *Daode Jing*, however, Laozi demonstrates that these socially constructed preference orderings can be reversed. Thus:

Truthful words are not beautiful;  
 beautiful words are not truthful.  
 Good words are not persuasive;  
 persuasive words are not good.  
 He who knows has no wide learning;  
 he who has wide learning does not know. (DJ 81:1–6)<sup>57</sup>

Surely many *daos* <sup>guiding discourses</sup> prescribe the preference of truth to falsehood and of beauty to ugliness. The first two lines of this chapter, however, posit a case in which both preferences cannot be held at the same time. In this case, preferring truth entails preferring ugliness, and preferring beauty entails preferring falsehood. Lines 4–6 similarly invert the preference structures of conventional *daos*. It should be remembered, however, that a *dao* that can be articulated is inconstant (DJ 1:1). Therefore, chapter 81 — which is itself a *dao* <sup>guiding discourse</sup>, is also inconstant. In some cases, then, perhaps true words are beautiful, good words are persuasive, and knowledgeable people do have wide learning. The point is not that conventional *daos* must be reversed, but that all conventional *daos* are in principle susceptible to reversal or other kinds of change.

Distinctions, of course, need not come exclusively in pairs. Laozi asserts in chapter 12 of the *Daode Jing* that

The five colors blind the eye.  
 The five tones deafen the ear.  
 The five flavors dull the taste. (DJ 12:1–3)

Mystical-metaphysical readings of the *Daode Jing* find here a deprecation of sense experience and an advocacy of an introspective focus.<sup>58</sup> In a slightly different, nonmetaphysical vein, Waley finds here "an answer to the Hedonists.... Any attempt to exploit the full use of the senses leads to a dulling of those senses."<sup>59</sup> Ch'en similarly reads chapter 12

<sup>57</sup>Following Lau's translation.

<sup>58</sup>So Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 38–39; Herrymon Maurer, *Lao-Tzu/Tao Teh Ching: The Way of the Ways* (New York: Schocken, 1985), 86; Needleman, "The Tao — Illuminations and Corrections of the Way," 90.

<sup>59</sup>Waley, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese*

as a warning against the consequences of excess.<sup>60</sup> Reading with attention to the inconstancy of *daos*<sup>guiding discourses</sup>, however, produces exactly the opposite meaning. The problem is not that individuals dull their senses by excess. Rather, it is that society in effect dulls its member's senses by restricting the colors, tones, and flavors to five each.<sup>61</sup> If one is guided by a *dao* which distinguishes only red, yellow, blue, white, and black,<sup>62</sup> one is "blind" to the variety of colors found in a child's box of crayons — cornflower, thistle, aquamarine, navy, and periwinkle, to name only a few shades of blue. Among other things, society uses its conventional *daos* to restrict its members' interpretations of their experiences. These *daos*, however, are inconstant; the lines could be (re)drawn in different places.

Finally, the distinctions expressed by names may be worked together into prescriptions for patterning behavior — that is, into *daos*<sup>guiding discourses</sup>. These too are inconstant, as a comparison of chapters 19 and 54 demonstrates.

Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom,  
 And it will be a hundred times better for everyone.  
 Give up kindness, renounce morality,  
 And men will rediscover filial piety and love.  
 Give up ingenuity, renounce profit,  
 And bandits and thieves will disappear. (DJ 19:1–6)

These lines seem to advocate reversal of a *dao* that prescribes intellectual, moral, and economic growth. Judging especially from line 6, however, this *dao* in practice generates thievery, interpersonal distance, and hypocritical scheming (cf. DJ 18:3–4) rather than positive intellectual, moral, and economic values. (Some readers may transpose here a Pauline intertext: "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness [Rom 7:7–8, NRSV].) By generating what it seeks to proscribe, this *dao* displays its inconstancy.

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*Thought*, 156.

<sup>60</sup>Ch'en, 92–94; cf. Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Tao: An Initiation into the Heart of Taoism through the Authentic Tao Te Ching and the Inner Teachings of Chuang Tzu* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 138.

<sup>61</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 227.

<sup>62</sup>See Ch'en, *Lao Tzu*, 92.



In chapter 54, however, Laozi paints quite a different picture.

Cultivate Virtue [*de*] in your self,  
 And Virtue will be real.  
 Cultivate it in the family,  
 And Virtue will abound.  
 Cultivate it in the village,  
 And Virtue will grow.  
 Cultivate it in the nation,  
 And Virtue will be abundant.  
 Cultivate it in the universe,  
 And Virtue will be everywhere. (DJ 54:4–13)

It is important to note here that *de*<sup>virtuosity</sup> presupposes a *dao*:

The *de*<sup>virtuosity</sup>, as the traditional formula had it, is the *dao*<sup>way</sup> within a person. It is the physical realization of the program [*dao*] that generates the behaviors. When we have good *de*<sup>virtuosity</sup>, our behavior will follow the *dao*<sup>way</sup>. The program runs as intended in us. Good *de*<sup>virtuosity</sup>, therefore, is like a combination of virtue (when compiling a moral *dao*<sup>way</sup>) and like power (because executing instructional programs enables us to do things). Our virtuosity is the translation of an instruction set into a physical, dispositional potential.

Daoist thinkers make this view of things especially clear. The *Laozi* introduces the idea that we create desires by learning guiding discourse [*dao*] — gaining knowledge of what to do (know-to).<sup>63</sup>

Thus, in chapter 54, Laozi asserts that cultivating *de*<sup>virtuosity</sup> — that is, attempting to conform ever more closely to a *dao*<sup>guiding discourse</sup> — at the individual, domestic, civic, national, and global levels will in fact produce a closer correspondence between behavior and *dao*. Taken as *daos* themselves, then, chapter 18 leads one away from using *daos* to effect particular ends (it won't work, the chapter asserts), while chapter 54 leads one toward such a use of *daos* (it will work, the chapter asserts). The existence of two *daos* (*viz.*, DJ 18 and DJ 54) leading in opposite directions suggests the inconstancy of both.

Thus the claim that any expressible *dao* is inconstant may be taken as the fundamental claim advanced in the *Daode Jing*. It is quite unnecessary to posit the existence of some constant inexpressible *dao*, for that is beside the point. The point is that one cannot always depend

<sup>63</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 20.

for guidance on society's guiding discourses. In the end a paradox remains, though not a mystical or metaphysical one. Laozi invites us to adopt the perspective that no expressible *dao* is constant, but that perspective itself is a *dao* <sup>guiding conceptual perspective</sup>. If this *dao* too is inconstant, then it may just be that there is an expressible *dao* which is constant — this one, or perhaps another. (This is parallel to the paradox that arises from the claim, "Everything I say is untrue.") We may lay aside this paradox for the time being, however, in the interests of transposing the *Daode Jing's* central claim into the book of Ecclesiastes.

### Reading Ecclesiastes

The central concerns of Ecclesiastes are introduced in the opening words, "הֶבֶל הֶבֶל הַכְּלִים, said Qoheleth. הֶבֶל הַכְּלִים. It's all הֶבֶל. What יְתָרוֹן is there for people in all the activity they engage in under the sun?" (Eccl 1:2–3) Already at this early stage, we encounter one of the most intractable problems in reading Ecclesiastes: lexicography. The sense of הֶבֶל in Ecclesiastes is notoriously difficult to specify. The terms יְתָרוֹן and רֵעוּת [רְעוּת] רֵיח are also difficult.<sup>64</sup> The frequency and centrality of Qoheleth's use of these terms entails that the sense one attaches to these terms decisively shapes one's reading of Ecclesiastes.<sup>65</sup> The importance of these terms justifies attending at length to their senses.

The basic denotative sense of הֶבֶל is not that difficult to specify. In the psalms and wisdom corpus it apparently denotes "breath" or "vapor," with the connotation of "here one instant, gone the next" (as in, e.g., Pss 39:6, 7, 12; 62:10; Job 7:16), or "emptiness" or "uselessness" (as in, e.g., Job 9:29; 27:12; 35:16). In the prophetic corpus, the latter sense is assimilated to "idol" (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 17:15 // Jer 2:5). Translators of Ecclesiastes have tended toward the latter sense. Proposed English translation-equivalents vary, but cluster around the notion of futility.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> יְתָרוֹן has no discernible semantic difference from רֵעוּת.

<sup>65</sup> John E. McKenna, "The Concept of *Hebel* in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992), 19; Roland E. Murphy, "On Translating Ecclesiastes," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991), 572; Graham Ogden, " 'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *Bible Translator* 38 (1987), 301; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 17, 22.

<sup>66</sup> I include under this rubric the common translation *vanity*, but in contemporary usage *vanity* denotes something akin to narcissism, which has nothing to do with any recognized or proposed sense of הֶבֶל.

This common tendency has, however, been criticized by Michael Fox and Graham Ogden.<sup>67</sup> Their critiques are persuasive and need not be reproduced here. We may also pass quickly over suggestions that הָבֵל be translated variously throughout Ecclesiastes, for as Fox notes, "The thematic declaration that everything is *hebel* and the formulaic character of the *hebel*-judgments show that for Qoheleth there is a single quality that is an attribute of the world.... The *hebel* leitmotif disintegrates if the word is assigned several different meanings."<sup>68</sup>

While agreeing that a consistent translation-equivalent for הָבֵל is needed in Ecclesiastes, and that *futility* is inappropriate, Ogden and Fox advance different suggestions for an appropriate rendering. Ogden suggests *enigmatic*. According to Ogden, הָבֵל "conveys the notion that life is enigmatic and mysterious; that there are many unanswered and unanswerable questions."<sup>69</sup> However, *enigmatic* is not always an appropriate description of the situations to which Qoheleth attaches הָבֵל-judgments. This is true, for example, of Eccl 2:18–19:

And I hated all my gain for which I was working under the sun, which I will leave to those who come later. And who knows if they will be wise or foolish? But they will control all my gain for which I worked and for which I was wise under the sun. This also is הָבֵל.

Clearly Qoheleth is not pleased by this situation. But it does not seem to puzzle him at all. *Enigmatic*, then, is not an optimal translation-equivalent for הָבֵל.

Fox's suggestion is perhaps more appealing. Drawing heavily on Camus, Fox advocates *absurd* as a translation-equivalent for הָבֵל. For Fox,

[t]he essence of the absurd is a disparity between two phenomena that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are actually disjunct or even conflicting... The quality of absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or event in and of itself (though these may, by extension, be called absurd), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup>Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; B&L 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 29–51; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 17–22; Ogden, "Vanity."

<sup>68</sup>Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 36.

<sup>69</sup>Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 22.

<sup>70</sup>Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 31.

Fox further describes how he finds absurdity in Ecclesiastes:

Basic to Qohelet's thinking are certain assumptions about the way reality *should* operate. His primary assumption is that an action and a fitting recompense for that action are cause and effect; one who creates the cause can justly expect the effect. Qohelet identifies this expectation with the reasonableness he looks for in the working of the universe. At the same time that he cleaves to this expectation, he sees that there is in reality no such reasonableness, and his expectations are constantly frustrated.<sup>71</sup>

The text, however, belies a rigorous application of this judgment, as illustrated by reference to Eccl 5:17–6:2. Here Qoheleth describes two situations in which God gives people riches, but in one case God gives the recipients the ability to enjoy their riches (5:17–19), while in the other case God denies the recipients the ability to enjoy their riches (6:1–2). It is reasonable to suggest that Qoheleth's expectation is that one will enjoy one's riches. This is evident in his accumulation of riches in pursuit of pleasure (Eccl 2:1–11). If this is Qoheleth's expectation, the situation observed in 5:17–19 would fulfill Qoheleth's expectation, while the one described in 6:1–2 would frustrate his expectation. On the other hand, Qoheleth may already realize on the basis of his own pursuit of pleasure that one may well fail to enjoy one's riches. If so, the situation described in 6:1–2 would fulfill his (new) expectations, while the one described in 5:17–19 would frustrate them. On either reading, Qoheleth's expectations are sometimes fulfilled, sometimes frustrated. They are not *constantly* frustrated. If absurdity denotes a constant frustration of expectations, *absurd* does not provide an optimal translation-equivalent for הֶבֶל.

A defender of the translation-equivalent *absurd* might argue that no formulaic הֶבֶל-judgment (גַּם-זֶה הֶבֶל and variations) is applied to the situation in 5:17–19. Two considerations deny this argument any force. First, the judgment "this is הֶבֶל" does appear in 6:2, and the antecedent of *this* is unclear. While *this* could refer only to the situation described in 6:1–2,<sup>72</sup> it could also refer to the entire immediate discussion of the enjoyment of wealth, reaching back as far as 5:9. It is possible, then, to construe the הֶבֶל-judgment in 6:2 as applying to 5:17–19 along with 6:2. Second, and more importantly (as Fox himself argues),

<sup>71</sup>Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 32.

<sup>72</sup>So Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 90.

a translation-equivalent for הַבִּלְּ should be applicable to all the situations described in Ecclesiastes, not just those where a הַבִּלְּ-judgment is explicitly attached to the description. From the very beginning, Qoheleth has told us that everything that happens under the sun is הַבִּלְּ. Therefore, he need not apply a verbal הַבִּלְּ-judgment to each discrete situation. As we have seen, however, *absurd* fails to apply to every situation described in Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth's expectations are not constantly frustrated — frequently, but not constantly.

This realization opens a point of entry into Ecclesiastes for the *Daode Jing*. Qoheleth's expectations — the central one being that "an action and a fitting recompense for that action are cause and effect; one who creates the cause can justly expect the effect"<sup>73</sup> — may be redescribed as his *dao*, the conceptual perspective or discourse that guides his behavior.<sup>74</sup> In his observations, however, Qoheleth discovers that his *dao* guiding conceptual perspective sometimes guides well, sometimes badly. For one (like Laozi) who understands the nature of *daos*, this is to be expected. *daos* are "ever present and in motion" (DJ 25:5):

Being great, [a *dao*] flows.

It flows far away.

Having gone far, it returns. (DJ 25:10–12)

*Daos* are always changing. *Daos* cannot be pinned down. *Daos* that can be articulated are not constant *daos*. Laozi's perspective on *daos*, then, suggests for הַבִּלְּ — which can be applied to a situation in which a *dao* guides well or one in which a *dao* guides poorly, since it applies to every situation that occurs under the sun — a connotation overlapping significantly with that of *inconstancy*.

This construal fits well with Qoheleth's controlling models that guide his application of הַבִּלְּ-judgments. Those models are, pre-eminently, the sun and the wind. In some way the sun and the wind, along with other phenomenon, model and elucidate the concept of הַבִּלְּ:

הַבִּלְּ הַבִּלְּ הַבִּלְּ said Qoheleth: הַבִּלְּ הַבִּלְּ: It's all הַבִּלְּ.

What יִהְיֶה is there for people in all the activity they engage in under the sun?

A generation comes and a generation goes, and the earth stands forever.

<sup>73</sup>Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 32.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Hansen, *Daoist*, 213.

Going to the south and going around to the north, around and around continually goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

All rivers run to the sea, but the sea does not fill up. To the place from which the river flow, there they go to flow again.

All words are wearisome. People never stop talking.

Eyes are never satisfied with seeing. Ears never have their fill of hearing.

What has been is what will be. What has been done is what will be done. There is nothing completely new under the sun.

If there is a matter of which it is said, "Look, this is new," it has already been since time immemorial.

There is no memory of the earliest things. Likewise, for the things which follow them, there will be no memory of them when other things come after them. (Eccl 1:2–11)

This poem could, perhaps, be read as an affirmation of constancy: the sun always goes on its course, the wind always goes on its course, the rivers always flow on their courses, nothing is new. But on further reflection the only thing that could be attributed constancy on the basis of this poem is change. Generations come and go, but each is made up of different individuals. The sun, wind, and rivers are constantly in motion, which entails that their location is inconstant, always changing. The last word is never said, the last sight never seen, the last saying never heard. These are pictures of inconstancy, not constancy.

As for the claim that nothing new ever happens, it too points to inconstancy, not constancy. Since what is, is inconstant — as demonstrated, for example, by the situations described in 5:17–6:2 — what has been was also inconstant. Beyond this, the claim that nothing new ever happens, as a response to a claim that something new has happened, corroborates Laozi's claim that names that can be named are not constant names. Recalling that names which come in pairs, like new/old (along with, e.g., good/bad and beautiful/ugly) arise from single distinctions, we might note that what one person calls old, another calls new. There is no constant, neutral, never-in-need-of-revision place to draw the line between old and new. Moreover, since paired names enable preference orderings, we might think to ask whether calling something new implies that it is to be preferred to that which is old, or whether it is to be eschewed in favor of that which is old. Whether the claim that something is new lauds the new or denigrates the new *vis à vis* the old, the claim that nothing new ever happens deconstructs the preference ordering by showing that the distinction cannot be made.

Thus Qoheleth's claim that nothing new ever happens not only demonstrates the inconstancy of events, but also the inconstancy of assigning paired discriminant labels to events.

Identifying inconstancy as a primary connotation of **הַבֵּל** helps us make good sense of **יְתָרוֹן** and **רֵעִיּוֹן** [רֵעִיּוֹן] **רוּחַ** as well. **יְתָרוֹן** a word unique to Ecclesiastes, is evidently a nominalization of the verb **יָתַר** "to remain." The verb itself is not used in Ecclesiastes. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, things that stand as objects of **יָתַר** include crops not destroyed by hail (Exod 10:15), unconsumed portions of a meal (i.e., leftovers: Exod 12:10; Lev 7:16–17; 8:31–32), sacrificial portions not consumed by fire (Lev 2:3, 10; 6:9; 10:10) and survivors of war (Num 26:65; 1 Kgs 9:20–21; 2 Chron 8:8). In such cases, objects of **יָתַר** are those things which have remained through a process of (destructive) change, that is, things which exhibit a greater degree of constancy than things around them. **יְתָרוֹן** then, may plausibly be glossed *that which is constant*. In this light, Eccl 1:3 may be read as a response to an implied interlocutor's objection to Qoheleth's claim in 1:2:

Qoheleth: Utter inconstancy. Utter inconstancy. Everything is subject to change.

Interlocutor: Not so!

Qoheleth: Oh no? What is there that's constant for people in all their activity under the sun?

The poem that follows in 1:4–11 then illustrates and supports Qoheleth's original claim of utter inconstancy, as we have seen.

The phrase **רוּחַ** [רֵעִיּוֹן] **רֵעִיּוֹן** is also helpfully illumined by this perspective. Within Ecclesiastes, **רֵעִיּוֹן** is supposed to mean something like "striving" or "chasing." Outside of Ecclesiastes, **רֵעִיּוֹן** appears six times, in each of which it clearly denotes one's neighbor or companion.<sup>75</sup> In a manner similar to the treatment of *dao* in standard approaches to the *Daode Jing*, **רֵעִיּוֹן** is supposed to change meaning — indeed, to be a different word altogether (**רֵעִיּוֹן** II instead of **רֵעִיּוֹן** I) — when Qoheleth uses it. If, however, we attribute the same lexical sense to **רֵעִיּוֹן** in Ecclesiastes that it clearly has elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, we are able to make good sense of **רוּחַ** [רֵעִיּוֹן] **רֵעִיּוֹן** by using the translation *companion of the wind*. The phrase implies that the situation so described shares characteristics of the wind, predominantly the inconstancy discerned in the above reading of Eccl 1:2–11. By

<sup>75</sup>Cf. the etymologically related nouns **רֵעַ** "neighbor, companion," **רֵעֵהוּ** "friend, fellow," and the verb **רָעָה** II "to have dealings with (G), to make friends with (HD)."

occasionally appending רעות [רעיון] רוח to a הַבֵּל-judgment, Qoheleth reinforces the feeling of inconstancy that הַבֵּל connotes.

Emphasizing constancy and inconstancy, as suggested by bringing Laozi's insights to bear on Ecclesiastes, has allowed us to make good sense of Eccl 1:2–11. The utility of this move may be further illustrated by considering the function of the הַבֵּל-judgments Qoheleth appends to the descriptions of various situations. Those judgments take two forms: הַכֹּל הַבֵּל (1:2, 14; 2:11, 17; 3:19; 12:8; and, with slight variation, 11:8)<sup>76</sup> and גַּם-זֶה הַבֵּל (2:15, 19, 21, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:9; 6:9; 7:6; 8:10, 14; and, with slight variations, 2:1, 23; 6:2).<sup>77</sup> As a comprehensive judgment, הַכֹּל הַבֵּל functions four times as a general assertion (1:2, 14; 12:8), once as a justification for a negative emotional reaction to events (2:17), and twice to pre-empt the exemption of a particular situation from a הַבֵּל-judgment (2:11; 3:19). The specific judgment, גַּם-זֶה הַבֵּל, has usually been construed as having a categorical function, identifying the associated situation as one of many belonging to the class named הַבֵּל.

Laozi's cautions, however, have made us suspicious of names. Naming a situation הַבֵּל invokes one-half of a distinction הַבֵּל /not-הַבֵּל (יִתְרוֹן?), that might prompt us to prefer (along with Qoheleth?) the non-הַבֵּל. Moreover, attention to an interesting nuance of גַּם provides us with a different understanding of the function of גַּם-זֶה הַבֵּל. גַּם may function as an analog of *even*, marking that which is other than expected:

Then even [גַּם] the valiant warrior, whose heart is like a lion's, will be utterly terrified... (2 Sam 17:10)

Even [גַּם] in laughter the heart is pained... (Prov 14:13)

Even [גַּם] a fool seems wise if silent... (Prov 17:28)

(Cf. Deut 12:31; Exod 4:9; Jer 2:33; 12:6; 14:5; Prov 14:20; 20:11; Ruth 2:15; and other passages.) Reading Ecclesiastes with this sense of גַּם in mind enables us to see Qoheleth's הַבֵּל-judgments as equivocal rather than categorical. By appending a הַבֵּל-judgment to a particular

<sup>76</sup>In Eccl. 11:8, כָּל-שִׂבְאָה הַבֵּל appears instead of הַכֹּל הַבֵּל.

<sup>77</sup>In Eccl. 2:1, הוּא replaces זֶה. In 2:23, הוּא is appended to the standard formula. 6:2 lacks גַּם.



situation, Qoheleth warns against assuming that the situation just described is itself constant and should thus reshape expectations.

As noted above, Fox suggests that Qoheleth expects fitting recompense for actions. However, Eccl 8:14 reports a situation in which "there are righteous people who are treated according to the deeds of wicked people, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the deeds of righteous people." But this situation does not *always* obtain, "[f]or to those who are good before God, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness, and to sinners God gives the task of adding and amassing, to give to those who are good before God" (Eccl 2:26). Qoheleth appends a specific  $\text{הַבֵּל}$ -judgment to his description of each of these situations. Treating the  $\text{הַבֵּל}$ -judgments as categorical requires us to specify some common feature which characterizes not only these two situations but also all other situations described in the book. That is,  $\text{הַבֵּל}$  is that which any two manifestly opposite situations have in common. Treating the  $\text{הַבֵּל}$ -judgments as equivocal actually satisfies the categorical requirement, for it helps us see that the one feature common to all situations is that expectations formed by one's experience of a given (set of) situation(s) may be frustrated by one's experience of another given (set of) situation(s) which out differently. To put it another way, *daos* <sup>guiding discourses</sup> are inconstant. They sometimes guide well, sometimes poorly.

No reading of Ecclesiastes can successfully claim adequacy unless it makes good sense of Qoheleth's use of key terms and contradictory situations. The reading presented here accomplishes this, thanks to insights transposed into Ecclesiastes from a reading of the *Daode Jing*. However, Ecclesiastes has another feature of which an adequate reading must make sense, which this reading has yet to treat: Qoheleth's comments on death. Indeed, those comments might seem to resist the reading I have offered. It could be argued that death is certainly a constant in human life, for everybody dies.

A more nuanced consideration, however, reveals that death is more closely tied to inconstancy than to constancy. This can be demonstrated in three ways. First, death guarantees the inconstancy of distinctions among the living. Distinctions such as wise/foolish (Eccl 2:12–16), righteous/wicked (7:15), rich/poor (8:8), and even human/animal (3:16–21) are erased at death (cf., summarily, 9:1–3). Second, the timing of death is inconstant. On the one hand, a wicked person may live long (7:15; 8:12), while either righteousness and wisdom or

wickedness and foolishness may result in a premature death (7:16–17). Third, Qoheleth's valuation of death is inconstant. He cannot seem to decide whether it is better to be dead (so 4:2–3; 6:3; 7:1–4) or alive (so 7:16–17; 9:4–6). In sum, then, human experience of death is for Qoheleth the inescapable guarantor of inconstancy in what happens under the sun.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, then, we can discern Qoheleth's explorations of life's inconstancies. Transposition of the *Daode Jing's* central claim into Ecclesiastes enabled us to discern this, and also to discern the inconstancy of the *daos* <sup>guiding discourses</sup> with which Qoheleth experimented. Life is, Qoheleth says, utterly inconstant. People can find no constancy in life from which to derive a constant (reliably predictive) *dao*.

### *Conclusion: The Daos of Qoheleth and Laozi*

Readers who follow Laozi's assertion and Qoheleth's demonstration of the inconstancy of all *daos* may be left feeling somewhat hollow. Granted that no *dao* provides constant guidance, are there no *daos* that provide good or at least reasonably adequate guidance? Do Ecclesiastes and the *Daode Jing* permit the articulation of some sort of minimal *dao* that can be used to guide human life, so long as those guiding their lives by this *dao* realize that it in no way guarantees constant outcomes?

Perhaps *wu-wei*, as advocated by Laozi, is just such a framework. Although *wu-wei* is commonly translated by *inaction*, a more satisfactory translation-equivalent would be *not deeming*. "To *wei* is to assign something to a name-category [e.g., *good*, *beautiful*] in guiding action."<sup>78</sup> Hansen explains the dynamics of *wu-wei* thus:

[F]or Laozi *wei* signals induced, learned patterns of response — the opposite of autonomous or spontaneous response.... Getting rid of *wei* is freeing us from *society's* purposes, *socially induced* desires, *social* distinctions or meaning structures. We are to free ourselves from social, artificial, unnatural guidance by a system of distinctions and name pairs. That, notoriously, leaves us able to act naturally.... Thus to follow *wu-wei* is to give up names, distinctions, desires, and any deliberate action based on them.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 213.

<sup>79</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 213–14.

Paradoxically, however, following *wu-wei* means following a *dao*<sup>guide</sup> based on the name pair *natural/conventional*. To put it more generally, Laozi's advice, summarized in the *wu-wei* slogan, "constitutes the very thing he opposes."<sup>80</sup> And since "[a]ll guidance that *can* come from a *dao*<sup>guide</sup> will be inconstant"<sup>81</sup> one may well find oneself in a situation in which acting according to social convention rather than natural instinct may turn out to be preferable.

But perhaps we need not assume that Laozi offers the *wu-wei* slogan as a constant *dao*, but as yet another example of the inconstancy of all *daos*. That is, Laozi advocates *wu-wei* "only as a heuristic corrective to our conventional presuppositions of what has positive value."<sup>82</sup> Seen in this light, *wu-wei* is itself subject to corrective reversal. It would seem not to be a matter of finding a constant *dao*, but of accepting the inconstancy of all *daos* and, indeed, of the life itself.

This perspective intersects with the book of Ecclesiastes in Qoheleth's use of four "there is nothing better" sayings:

There is nothing better for people than to eat, drink, and perceive benefit in their work. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for who eats or enjoys pleasure except from God? (Eccl 2:24)

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and do good in their lives, and for them to eat, drink, and perceive benefit in their work — this God gives. (Eccl 3:12)

I saw that there is nothing better for people than to enjoy their activities — this is their portion, for who can see what is coming, and what will occur later on? (Eccl 3:22)

I commended pleasure, because there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and to be happy. This accompanies their activity during the days of their lives which God gives them under the sun. (Eccl 8:15)

These sayings do not, *pace* Ogden, advocate a conceptual perspective that "will, because of its wisdom, lead to *yitrôn*."<sup>83</sup> That would be a constant *dao*. But, as we have seen, there is no such thing. Indeed, Qoheleth specifies that following the courses of action mentioned in

<sup>80</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 214.

<sup>81</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 214.

<sup>82</sup>Hansen, *Daoist*, 225.

<sup>83</sup>Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 48.

these sayings cannot provide *a priori* knowledge of outcomes (Eccl 3:10, 22; 8:17). Rather these claims (which are, not incidentally, phrased as value judgments rather than advice) represent a concession to the inconstancy of life: "This is the best one can hope for."

Sensitivity to life's inconstancy may, though, be precisely the key to successful living from Qoheleth's and Laozi's points of view:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven:

a time to be born and a time to die,  
 a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted,  
 a time to destroy and a time to heal,  
 a time to breach and a time to build,  
 a time to mourn and a time to laugh,  
 a time to lament and a time to dance,  
 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones,  
 a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,  
 a time to seek and a time to lose,  
 a time to keep and a time to send away,  
 a time to tear and a time to sew,  
 a time to be silent and a time to speak,  
 a time to love and a time to hate,  
 a time of war and a time of peace. (Eccl 3:1–8)

So sometimes things are ahead and sometimes they are behind;  
 Sometimes breathing is hard, sometimes it comes easily;  
 Sometimes there is strength and sometimes weakness;  
 Sometimes one is up and sometimes down. (DJ 29:7–10)

One who recognizes this state of affairs is equipped to deal with it:

In action, be aware of the time and the season. (DJ 8:10)

Wise hearts know the appropriate time, since there is an appropriate time for every purpose. (Eccl 8:5)

For Qoheleth, as for Laozi, the *dao* of wisdom consists in knowing what time it is.<sup>84</sup> *daos* give inconstant guidance because life itself is inconstant. "[E]ach situation in which we guide our action by codes made up of *ming* is unique."<sup>85</sup> Perhaps "be aware of the time and the

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<sup>84</sup>I am indebted to André Resner for this well-wrought phrase.

<sup>85</sup>Hansen, "Language," 88.

season" may be a *dao* that can provide usually good, though not constant (since life is unpredictable), guidance. Instead of searching for a constant *dao*, then, Laozi and Qoheleth offer the best *dao* <sup>guiding conceptual perspective</sup> they can discover:

A way can be a guide, but not a fixed path. (DJ 1:1)<sup>86</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Within the framework of a reader-oriented approach to intertextuality, biblical and Asian texts may profitably be read in terms of one another. Despite Western biblical critics' recognition of the importance of Chinese philosophical literature, however, Chinese and biblical wisdom texts have not often been read intertextually. An intertextual reading of the book of Ecclesiastes and the *Daode Jing* illustrates the value of such an approach. Laozi's perspectives on the inconstancy of all guiding discourses help to make sense of Qoheleth's confusion and cast his alleged "despair" in an altogether new light. Conversely, Qoheleth's conclusions provide an interesting and pertinent response to the questions raised by Laozi's critique of guiding discourses.

## 撮 要

以讀者為主導研究文本互涉性，有利於研究聖經和亞洲的文本。雖然西方批評家明白到中國哲學著作的重要性；但是卻很少以文本互涉的方法研究中國的典籍和聖經的智慧書。本文以文本互涉的方法來解讀傳道書和《道德經》，也就表明這方法的價值。老子「萬物無常」的觀念有助我們明白傳道書模糊的地方，而且令讀者對傳道書所謂的「虛空」有全新的認識。另一方面，傳道書的結語亦為《道德經》中所引發的問題提供有趣及中肯的回應。

<sup>86</sup>Following Cleary's translation.