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Abnormalities and Return: An Exploration of the Concept Fan 反 in the Laozi

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Abstract: Laozi's concept of *fan* 反 has many different interpretations. However, except for the *fan* character in chapter seventy-eight which says "appropriate language seems contradictory (*fan* 反)" where it obviously refers to contradictions or opposites (*xiangfan* 相反), all other appearances of this character should be explained as *fan* 返 (return). Return does not refer to opposites, nor does it refer to cyclicity. This point is illustrated through three main channels: first, we argue that in the *Laozi*, the character *fan* 反 was used as a phonetic loan for *fan* 返. Second, this paper shows that both *fan* and *fugui* 复归 mean "return." The third channel attempts to answer the questions of why and where the *Laozi* needs to advocate for the principle of return.

Keywords: Daoism; Laozi; abnormalities; return

1. Introduction: The Ambiguity of Interpreting Fan

There are several different understandings and interpretations of the concept of *Fan* 反 (reverse) in the *Laozi*.¹ One understanding is from the perspective of opposites and their interactive movement;² the second views it as circular movements;³ a third option is from the movement of return.⁴ From the perspective of philosophical argumentation and Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, regardless of whether things are antithetical opposites, opposites that construct each other, or if they have reached an extreme and thus can only go back, cyclical movements, or even their return, all have their own importance and different purpose. When they are opposites, the contradiction, the mutual opposition and completion, and the mutual transformation between them are the main issues. While cyclicity stresses the consecutive cyclicity, return stresses abnormalities and differentiation, which emerge along the way and thus there is a need to correct and restore the original self. What these interpretations have in common is that they all include a meaning of transformation, alteration, and metamorphosis,

¹ Methodologically speaking, a concept and terminology may be used in different meanings for different philosophers or even for a one specific philosopher. There is complete similarity between the ambiguity of texts and the different senses in which people employ them; but equally true, it is entirely possible for people to use the same concept in similar meanings. Those two situations are generally applicable to the concept of *fan* in the *Laozi*. In fact, whether it combines meanings or has only a single meaning depends on our own interpretation. If we say that in different linguistic contexts people employ similar notions, its meaning may be the same or different. Within a single linguistic context, using a specific word in the same place generally means that it should have only one meaning and cannot have two or multiple meanings at the same time (although there are meanings beyond language), otherwise, understanding and interpreting a text becomes impossible, communication and language referring to actions also become impossible. Setting out from this point, we can only say that the interpretation of concepts within a single text and linguistic context may have different possibilities, but we cannot say that a concept has multiple meanings within one location at one time. In fact, deciphering the exact meaning of the concept requires a substantive examination. In regard to this issue, see (Lu 1995, pp. 188–89).

² See (Feng 1984, p. 151; Zhang 1997, pp. 299–300).

³ For this interpretation see (Chen 2003, pp. 170–71, 226; Lu 1995, pp. 128, 188–89; Li 2008, pp. 80, 99; Ikeda 2006a, pp. 20, 276).

⁴ Jiang Xichang 蒋锡昌 maintains that the concept of return in the entire philosophical and thought system in the *Laozi* is of primary importance and views it as having a single meaning with many intentions. See (Jiang 1988, pp. 264–68).

while at the same time they include some sort of intersection and inclusiveness. The movement of opposing contraries can be said to be one of cyclicity, and cyclicity can be said to have contrasting opposites. Once things depart or move forward, there can be return. Therefore, returning or reversal also incorporates the meaning of cyclicity. When speaking only about abnormalities, this reversal is not a cyclical movement, but rather emphasizes the dimension of return.

Laozi's philosophy incorporates both the movements of opposites and their transformation, and their return (even though the degree and quantity are not the same).

This philosophical system includes opposites and their necessary return once they have reached an extreme, as well as mutual metamorphosis between the things themselves. Moreover, contradictions of opposites are extremely prominent in the *Laozi*. Good and evil, being and non-being, hard and easy, high and low, fortune and misfortune, big and small, many and few and many other opposites as well as the transformations that occur between them, are a major component of what is usually considered as Laozi's dialectics (I prefer to call it transformational dialectics). Precisely for this reason, many scholars explain Laozi's idea of *fan* from the aspect of opposites and contradictions.

However, when Laozi uses the character *fan*, there is only one instance where it has the meaning of "contradiction": "exact words are contradictory" (Chapter 78). I do not claim that Laozi does not have the notion of "cyclicity" at all, but I do argue that this notion is very weak. Furthermore, scholars use the words "circular movement" (*zhouxing* 周行) to demonstrate the idea of cyclicity in the *Laozi* ("moving in cycles without arresting").⁵

In fact, this citation from chapter twenty-five does not even refer to cyclicity (as I describe later). It is generally argued that Laozi (and Zhuangzi) emphasize return and going back to one's roots, which is not only related to the notion of *fu* 复 and *gui* 归 in the *Laozi*, but also cannot be separated from Laozi's notion of *fan*. Thus, the first thing I inquire into is the main function of Laozi's notion of *fan* as a notion that indicates return. While Laozi's notion of *fan* indicates return, it is not an independent notion, but rather involves the issue of the structure of Laozi's thought. This is not only because the notions of return—*fu* and going back—*gui* are closely related to *fan*, but also because Laozi has a clear sense of why things must return and where they should return to.

2. *Fan, Fu* and the Return of Things

In the philosophy of the *Laozi*, there is rich thought of mutual oppositions and mutual compliance; however, Laozi's notion of *fan* does not necessarily incorporate this meaning. In total, the *Laozi* uses the term *fan* four times. They are scattered among chapters twenty-five: "distance means *fan*," chapter forty: "*fan* is the movement of Dao," chapter sixty-five: "*fan* together with the beings," and chapter seventy-eight: "precise words are like *fan*." Among those four appearances of *fan*, it is evident that in the last example it has the meaning of "opposite" or "contrary,"; however, the other three are not employed in the meaning of opposites, nor do they indicate cyclicity, but refer to *fan* 返 as in return. In addition, we need to emphasize that *fan* in this meaning refers to the return of the myriad beings or things (including people and manmade things) and does not indicate the return of Dao.

Let us first examine the *fan* character as it appears in the phrase "great means to depart, depart means distance and distance means return" of chapter twenty-five. In general, the *fan* character in this phrase is explained as "return,"⁶; however, it is not normally understood as the return of things, but as the return of Dao. It is the return of Dao which is placed in the ongoing cyclical process. How does this interpretation come about? I do agree that *fan* can be interpreted as "return," but it is not the return of Dao; rather, it indicates that Dao serves as a stimulant for the return of things. At the same time this "return" does not indicate cyclicity. Reading the phrase "distance means return" together with its

⁵ The Guodian 郭店 bamboo slips and the Mawangdui 马王堆 silk manuscripts do not have this phrase. The Peking University Han Dynasty version has "moving about, reaching everywhere and in no danger".

⁶ There are also people who explain it as "opposites," such as Feng Youlan 冯友兰. See (Feng 2000, p. 412).

previous phrases “its designation is called great,” and “great means to depart, depart means distance,” the subject and the attributive of these phrases is Dao, that is—Dao is great, Dao is great, thus it departs; Dao departing means distance, when Dao is far it returns. There is no trouble in saying that “Dao is great” (or the Great Dao); the questions are what does “great” refer to, why does Dao have to go through both departing and distancing to finally “return,” and how is this return cyclical?

Jiang Xichang 蒋锡昌 did not explain what “great” Dao actually refers to, but he did illustrate departure (*shi* 逝) of Dao as an advancement—a historical evolution of the universe. The longer the history of the universe evolves, the more people’s wisdom progress and more evils emerge. In this case, the sages ought to return (*fan* 反) to non-action (*wuwei* 无为) and simplicity (*pu* 朴).⁷

I support this interpretation of departure and return as movements (*xing* 行). However, the question is who is the subject that departs, distances and returns. The problem with Jiang Xichang’s explanation is that he refers to three different subjects: he maintains that Dao creates departures, people bring about distance and sages promote return. The movements of the great Dao bring to three results caused by three different subjects.

However, in my view, the subjects of the result and the generation of this result should be one, we cannot casually exchange them. What deserves attention in Jiang Xichang’s interpretation is that he revealed that most interpretations are wrong. Ikeda Tomohisa’s explanation is similar to Jiang Xichang’s interpretation as he combines Dao and the beings, maintaining that the movement of Dao generated the myriad beings, and when the myriad beings distance from Dao they ought to return to it.⁸ This explanation is closer to the interpretation I offer herein, but first let us review other opinions.

In general, interpretations take “depart—distance—return” as a movement and process of Dao. Zhang Dainian’s 张岱年 understands that Dao is great since it departs and through departure it distances. The universe is then the unceasing course of departure from Dao.⁹ Zhang Dainian did not explain this as a cyclical process. Wang Shumin 王叔岷, Chen Guying 陈鼓应 and other scholars emphasized that the movement of Dao is cyclical. In Wang Shumin’s opinion, the entire essence of Dao is that it has an ongoing cyclical metamorphosis and that is why it can return. If it was only linear without the ability to return, there would necessarily be a point where it is exhausted. Wang Shumin intentionally drew a chart showing that the return of Dao is completely cyclical.¹⁰ Chen Guying interpreted this phrase as: “Dao is extensive without boundaries, flows in circles ceaselessly, flowing ceaselessly in circles it extends far, extending far it returns to its roots.”¹¹ This line of interpretation is rooted in the two phrases of the *Laozi* that say: “moves in circles and does not cease,” and “return is the movement of Dao.” On one hand this interpretation seems logical and satisfying; however, we ought to take a step forward in inquiry. The questions I propose are: (1) Why does Dao in the *Laozi* need to make circular movements? (2) if Dao is an independent force, what is the relation between the circular movements and the myriad beings Dao generates? and (3) what is the relationship between Dao, the beings, and Laozi’s request to “return to the roots.”? Both Jiang Xichang and Ikeda Tomohisa have evidently sensed this problem; nevertheless, their explanations are lacking in coherence and unity.

I maintain that the character *fan* (反) in the phrase “distance means return” should be *fan* (返), yet this *fan* does not refer to Dao and definitely not to a circular movement of Dao. On one hand there is no problem in saying that the movement of Dao is circular, circularity is going back and forth, but on the other hand, does Dao have to go back and forth? Why would Dao need to go back and forth or to circulate? And if it does circulate, why does the “greatness” of Dao begin the cycle? If we are to go into detail, the return of Dao as the circularity of Dao does not resonate. Moreover, if we accept the phrase “moves in cycles and does not cease” in the transmitted edition, then the “movement in cycles”

⁷ See (Jiang 1988, p. 170).

⁸ (Ikeda 2006b, p. 276).

⁹ (Zhang 1982, p. 102).

¹⁰ (Wang 2007, pp. 36–38).

¹¹ (Chen 2003, pp. 173–74).

of Dao does not mean its “circle movement.” The word “cycles” (*zhou* 周) in Pre-Qin manuscripts is primarily used to substitute the character meaning “everywhere” (*bian* 遍). Circular movement is thus movement that reaches everywhere. The Han Dynasty bamboo version says: “moving about and reaching everywhere and in no danger.” The “Explaining Lao” (*Jie Lao* 解老) chapter of the *Han Feizi* 韩非子 says: “The sage observes its mysterious emptiness and makes use of its comprehensive (*zhou* 周) course. Compelled to give it a name he calls it “The Way” and only then was it possible to discuss it.”¹² The character “*zhou*” here, as the translation conveys it, is normally understood as “*bian*.” Together with chapter thirty-four from the Laozi that says “Dao is an easy-flowing stream which can run in any direction,” and chapter thirty-two that says “as an analogy to describe Dao in the world: the small creeks flow into the rivers and seas”—the meaning of the “circular movement” of Dao is one out of two: either that the function of Dao involves all myriad beings and at the same time is in alignment with “alone stands and does not change.” Dao does not go through cycles to maintain its infinity, as Jiang Xichang noted: “Dao does not have a place where it does not reach.”¹³ The second option is that all beings have their own Dao (and their own efficacy *de* 德), which causes them to move about. Therefore, Laozi’s “*zhouxing* 周行” does not mean that Dao moves in cycles, rather that Dao is comprehensive (*bianxing* 遍行).

Reexamining the word “return” in “distance means return,” I maintain that it originally referred to the return of the beings and things. Moreover, this return happens under the encouragement of Dao. Why do the beings and things need to return if they do not depart from Dao or their original nature?

If we look at both the word “great” (*da* 大) that describes Dao together with the phrase “great means to depart, departure means distance,” the greatness of Dao (or its particular efficacy *xuande* 玄德) is that it corresponds to the transformations of the myriad beings and things (in movement). While beings can transform on their own, an abnormal situation of distancing from the self emerges, and in this situation, Dao assists them in the return to their original selves.¹⁴ This interpretation is similar to the notion of “returning to the root” (which obviously refers to concrete beings). In addition, it is equivalent to the meaning of return as it appears in both “return is the movement of Dao” and “return together with the beings.” As things deviate from their origin, they are no longer authentic in the sense that they are far from themselves. Returning is thus the return to authenticity. The subjects who go back to their authentic self cannot be Dao, as Dao is always authentic. On the other hand, the myriad beings (including human beings) can deviate from their ways and become abnormal. Dao then assists them to find their true authentic selves once again.

Now, let us turn to the underlying meaning of the phrase “return is the movement of Dao.” Some interpreters have explained “return” in the phrase “return is the movement of Dao,” as Dao altering between opposites.¹⁵ This explanation is utterly unacceptable. There are two reasons this interpretation is incorrect. First, it implies that Dao has an opposite, but can Laozi’s Dao really have an opposite? Second, if Dao does have an opposite and can alter itself into its contrary, it becomes “non-Dao” (*feidao* 非道). This would contradict the traits of Dao which include originality, authenticity, and “standing alone without altering.”

Other commentators interpret the character “*fan* 反” in the phrase “distance means return” as the character “*fan* 返,” and they apply it also to the phrase “return is the movement of Dao.” According to the Guodian Bamboo slip Laozi A, the character “*fan* 反” in “return is the movement of Dao” was originally “*fan* 返.” Thus, the origin of the former is the latter. However, there are different interpretations regarding what the latter *fan* refers to: some understand it as the circular movement of Dao; some understand it as Dao returning to its roots; as the movement of returning to nothingness,

¹² Translated by Queen, Sarah A., in (Goldin 2013, p. 241).

¹³ (Jiang 1988, pp. 265–68).

¹⁴ As for what “distance” and “return” refer to, I agree with Ikeda Tomohisa’s explanation, as for what “great” and “departure” refer to, my interpretation differs from his.

¹⁵ See (Lu 1995, p. 188; Liu 2006, pp. 421–22).

and even as Dao returning to its own self.¹⁶ There are also interpretations (Ikeda Tomohisa) that maintain that in this instance, “return” stands for “opposites” (*xiangfan* 相反).¹⁷

As previously mentioned, Dao does not move in cycles. In addition, the interpretation of return as Dao returning to its roots is also incorrect. Dao itself is the “root.” If we say that its movement is returning to its own roots that means Dao lost itself, which would contradict the phrase “alone it stands without alterations.” Perhaps, due to this reason, He Shangong 河上公 gave an ambiguous interpretation: “returning to the root; the root is the reason why Dao moves; the movement of Dao generates the myriad things and the deviation from it would make things perish.”

When Jiang Xichang combined the movement of Dao with things becoming abnormal and then returning, and Lu Yusan 卢育三 connected the movement of Dao with it, preventing the things to go towards an extreme and then return to an absence; it showed that both of them sensed that “returning to the root” is not an issue that belongs to Dao, only things and beings can have this problem.¹⁸ The merit of their explanation is that they do not regard “return” as a movement of Dao alone, but combine the movement of Dao together with the changing state of the things. “Return” in the quote “return is the movement of Dao” does not indicate the return of Dao itself, but rather speaks of the return of things. If the things and beings proceed to change on their own without being in accord with Dao, they might alter into something abnormal. In this case, Dao acts as the stimulant for them to “return” to their authentic self.

Therefore, the meaning of “return is the movement of Dao” is: a way of movement (or activation) that Dao does to assist the things and beings to return to themselves. This corresponds to the phrase “weakening (*ruo* 弱) is the use of Dao.” Softness (which is close to the meaning of weakness) is one of the inherent qualities of Laozi’s Dao. The *Bu Er* 不二 chapter of the “Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü” (*Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋) summarizes the philosophy of the *Laozi* as one that “esteems softness.” However, “softness” is not only the softness of Dao, but similar to how non-coercive action (*wuwei* 无为) is the way how Dao treats the myriad things and beings, softness is also a way that Dao treats them. The meaning of “weakening is the use of Dao” is: treating the myriad things and beings softly is the way in which Dao exhibits its function. Treating all things softly means that Dao does not dominate them (“raises them and does not dominate them”), allowing them to alter and transform on their own accord (we will discuss this point in more detail in the following through the discussion of “self-so” and “self-transformation.”)

Similar to the two cases of “return” we saw above, in chapter sixty-five of the *Laozi* we have “return together with the things” (*yu wu fan* 与物反); this “*fan*” character is written with the foot radical (*fan* 返) and refers to the return of the beings and things. As for this character, there are also interpretations that explained it in terms of “opposites.” He Shangong understood “profound efficacy” (*xuande* 玄德) as “people who are profoundly efficacious,” saying that those people are different from the myriad beings, while the myriad beings desire to bring benefit to themselves, those who are profoundly efficacious bestow this benefit on others.¹⁹ Lu Yusan’s explanation is that those who are profoundly efficacious do not utilize wisdom, they are opposite from those who utilize their wisdom.

Contrastingly, other explanations understand this character as “return.” But where do we return to? Wang Bi’s commentary says that we “return to the genuine.” How do we return? There are explanations that say that the things return together with that which is profoundly efficacious.²⁰ There are also explanations which maintain that the ruler is the one who returns together with the

¹⁶ Wang Bi 王弼 commented that “return” refers to returning to absence (*wu* 无). The contemporary scholar Zhu Qianzhi 朱谦之 and many others adopt this reading. See (Zhu 1984, p. 165).

¹⁷ See (Ikeda 2006b, p. 20).

¹⁸ See (Lu 1995, pp. 188–89; Jiang 1988, pp. 264–68).

¹⁹ See (Wang 1993, p. 255). Ikeda Tomohisa also interprets the meaning of this character as “opposites” (profound efficacy is opposite to things (*wu* 物)). See (Ikeda 2006a, p. 117).

²⁰ See (Chen 2003, pp. 304–7; Xu 1982, pp. 50–51; Li 2008, pp. 88–89).

myriad things.²¹ The character “fan” in this instance does not mean “opposite,” but refers to the character with the foot radical, meaning return. I agree with this interpretation. The question is who needs to return to “great compliance (*da shun* 大顺)?” Obviously, it can only be the things and beings and not those who are “profoundly efficacious.” First, profound efficacy is a trait of Dao, it is the power that Dao has. If “profound efficacy” in this case refers to a trait of Dao, then it is already “great compliance,” it cannot be estranged or go astray, therefore it does not need to return.

While saying that Dao “returns” together with the things is implausible, we may understand it as something that accompanies them in their return. However, it is barely plausible to say that Dao accompanies the things towards “great compliance.” Nevertheless, in this textual context, the profoundly efficacious person might be the sovereign who has comprehended Dao. According to this logic, the sovereign does have profound efficacy and he does return together with the things (this interpretation is close to Jiang Xichang’s understanding). “Profound efficacy” in the *Laozi* is primarily defined by (but not limited to) Dao “generating without possessing, acting without depending, rearing without ordaining.” As Dao is the most fundamental criterion and value, it is feasible that “profound efficacy” is Dao.

It is clear that “return” refers to things and beings. The word “together with” (*yu* 与) in this phrase is not employed as a conjunction, rather it is similar to the usage in chapter seventy-nine where it is employed as a verb meaning “to assist”: “the heavenly Dao does not establish any kinships, it always assists the good people.” Ma Shulun 马叙伦 explains in his commentary to the *Laozi* (*Laozi Jiaogu* 老子校诂) that “*yu* is to be read as “to assist,” as in assisting people.”²² The *Gongsun Chou I* 公孙丑 chapter of *Mengzi* 孟子 says: “to take example from others to practice virtue, is to help them in the same practice.” Similar to the case in the *Mengzi*, this “*yu*,” which is normally understood and translated as “together with,” really means “to assist.” Thus, the phrase “returning together with the things” is in fact saying that the profound efficacy of Dao “assists the things to return.” While the myriad things and beings return, Dao serves as the one who guides and assists them. It can thus be confirmed that “assisting the things in their return” does not mean that profound efficacy is in contrast to the things, nor does it mean that profound efficacy returns together with the things.

Linguistically speaking, Laozi’s concept of “fan” (反) used to imply “return” (*fan* 返) is consistent with the phenomenon of using the two characters interchangeably due to their phonetic relation in Pre-Qin times. If we follow Bi Xiujie’s 毕秀洁 conclusion that the character *fan* 返 already appeared on the bronze vessel inscriptions of the late Shang and Zhou dynasties, then it can no longer be regarded as a character appearing only after the character *fan* 反. In Pre-Qin texts, the phenomenon of using the character *fan* 反 as *fan* 返 was common due to the fact that both have the same pronunciation.²³ The case of *fan* 反 in the *Laozi* is but one example. In the *Zhuangzi*, there are many cases where the character *fan* 反 is employed to indicate *fan* 返. In terms of philosophical argumentation, this phenomenon is consistent with Laozi’s philosophy of “returning to the roots,” for example:

You have gone back to your true form while we remain as men! (“The Great and Venerable Teacher” *da zong shi* 大宗师) (Watson 2013, p. 49)

If the nature is trained, you may return to Virtue, and Virtue at its highest peak is identical with the Beginning. (“Heaven and Earth” *Tiandi* 天地) (Watson 2013, p. 89)

When within there is purity, fullness, and a return to true form, we have music. (“Mending the Inborn Nature” *Shan Xing* 缮性) (Watson 2013, p. 122)

²¹ (Jiang 1988, pp. 400–1).

²² Ma Shulun 马叙伦 does not explain the character *yu* 与 in chapter sixty-five, but we may conclude that this character would be explained in the same manner as chapter seventy-nine. See (Ma 1956, p. 197).

²³ (Bi 2010, pp. 107–10).

‘Culture’ destroyed the substantial; ‘breadth’ drowned the mind; and after this, the people began to be confused and disordered. They had no way to revert to the true form of their inborn nature or to return once more to the Beginning. (“Mending the Inborn Nature”) (Watson 2013, p. 123)

If the fate of the times had been with them and they could have done great deeds in the world, then they would have returned to Unity and left no trace behind. But the fate of the times was against them and brought them only great hardship in the world, and therefore they deepened their roots, rested in perfection, and waited. This was the way they kept themselves alive. (“Mending the Inborn Nature”) (Watson 2013, p. 124)²⁴

The character *fan* 反 in these citations are all used to imply “return” (*fan* 返): indicating that when things or people depart from themselves they need to return to their own original authenticity or natural condition.

Following this discussion, we notice that the sayings “distance means return” and “return is the movement of Dao” in the *Laozi* cannot simply refer to Dao alone, but must be understood through the relationship between Dao and the myriad things. Then again, we must also bear in mind that in the *Laozi*, abnormalities and estrangements can occur only to the myriad things, not to Dao. For if we maintain that Dao can be abnormal or estranged then it loses its most fundamental meaning and function. So far, we can affirm that the three occurrences of the character *fan* 反 in the *Laozi* mentioned herein do refer to the character *fan* 返, meaning “return”; furthermore, all three refer to the myriad things returning to their own authenticity and not to the return of Dao.

The premise for the return of things is necessarily “departure” which occurs prior to return. This seems to be a cycle. However, it is not a cycle because the “departure” and “movement” of things contain their “self-transformation.” Originally, “departure” does not correspond to its “return,” as long as the things proceed in a normal manner, they do not need to return. Return is needed when abnormalities or estrangements occur. Under those circumstances, Dao, as guardian and keeper of things, the one who raises them but does not dominate over them, is also the one to urge and assist the return of things that have gone astray. Thus, in the most general sense, this type of “return” does not mean cyclical movement.

Thus, Laozi’s concept of return indicates the return of things and does not indicate the mutual transformation of opposites nor the cyclicity of Dao. This can also be explained through Laozi’s notions of *fu* 复 and *gui* 归. There are fifteen occurrences of the character *fu* in the *Laozi* (which is more than the occurrences of *fan*). There are only two chapters in which *fu* cannot be understood as “returning” or “going back” (chapters fifty-eight and sixty-four) but besides those two chapters,²⁵

²⁴ There are more examples of *fan* 反 as *fan* 返 in the *Zhuangzi*: “do not let what is human wipe out what is heavenly; do not let what is purposeful wipe out what is fated; do not let [the desire for] gain lead you after fame. Be cautious, guard it, and do not lose it—this is what I mean by returning to the True.” (“Autumn Floods” *Qiushui* 秋水, Watson 2013, p. 133); “To him there is no east or west—he begins in the Dark Obscurity and returns to the Great Thoroughfare.” (“Autumn Floods”, Watson 2013, p. 136); “Here is a man of the Middle Kingdom, neither yin nor yang, living between heaven and earth. For a brief time only, he will be a man, and then he will return to the Ancestor. Look at him from the standpoint of the Source, and his life is a mere gathering together of breath.” (“Knowledge Wandered North” *Zhibeiyou* 知北游, Watson 2013, p. 181); “Driving their bodies and natures on and on they drown in the ten thousand things and, to the end of their days never turn back. Pitiful, are they not?” (*Xu wu gui* 徐无鬼, Watson 2013, p. 204); “Keeping the scholars of the world from returning to the Source, capriciously setting up ideals of ‘filial piety’ and ‘brotherliness’ all the time hoping to worm your way into favor with the lords of the fiefs or the rich and eminent!” (“Robber Zhi” *Dao Zhi* 盗跖, Watson 2013, p. 253).

²⁵ *Fu* 复 in chapter fifty-eight speaks of the transitions between straightforwardness and surprise, going well and dark and ominous “the straightforward reverts to surprise and what is going well again becomes dark and ominous.”; and *fu* in the phrase: “return to what most people have passed over” in chapter sixty-four is mostly interpreted as “to correct.” In the “Seal of Virtue Complete” (*De Chongfu* 德充符) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* it says: “This toeless cripple is still anxious to learn to make up for (*fubu* 复补) the evil of his former conduct.” “Fu 复” in “*fubu* 复补” should be understood as “to make up for” or “to compensate,” similar to the phrase in the *Liji* 礼记: “When the mourning is ended, will they not resume (*fu* 复) the marriage ceremonies?” Zheng Xuan 郑玄 explained this “fu 复” in terms of “compensation.” Like in the *Zhuangzi*, *fu* has nothing to do with correction. Therefore, in chapter sixty-four of the *Laozi* we should read *fu* in the phrase “return to what

fu functions as “return” or “going back.” The original meaning of *fu* is not the meaning proposed by the “Explanation of Characters” (*Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字) which defines *fu* as the movement of going back and forth. Its original meaning is “return” or “go back” (as mentioned in the “Zhou Book of Changes” (*Zhouyi* 周易): “there is nothing that goes and does not come back.” Six of the occurrences of *fu* in the *Laozi* are paired with the character *gui*.²⁶ Chapter fourteen has: “Ceaseless in its action, it yet cannot be named, and then it again returns (*fugui* 复归) and becomes nothing;” chapter sixteen says “the things are manifold, each returns (*fugui* 复归) again to its roots;” in chapter twenty-eight we find “constant efficacy does not depart, return again to infancy,” “constant efficacy is unharmed, return again to the boundless,” and “constant efficacy is sufficient, return again to simplicity;” and in chapter fifty-two there is: “make use of its radiance, return again to its clarity.” *Fu* and *gui* used together as a compound shows us that the meanings of *fu* and *gui* are essentially the same, they both mean “return” (*fan* 返).

Other appearances of *fu* have *fu* stand-alone rather than in a compound, they can be found in chapters sixteen (“the myriad things and beings arise together, I observe their return(*fu* 复)” and “returning (*gui* 归) to the root is called stillness, stillness is called returning (*fu* 复) to the mandate”), nineteen (“people return to filial piety and care”), and eighty (“people return to the use of knotted cords for writing”). Compared to the fewer instances of *fan*, understanding and explaining Laozi’s usage of *fu* and *gui* seems to be an easier task. However, on the whole, the three *fan* characters that the *Laozi* employs have the same meaning as *fu* (with two exceptions) and *gui*. They refer to the return of the myriad things to Dao.

3. Why Is Return Necessary? “Desires Arise” and “Disasters Arise”

Both *fan* and *fu* in the *Laozi* mean to return, go back, and even restore. Although there is a premise of the alteration and transformation of things, essentially it is because of transformation that abnormalities and estrangements happen. According to the *Laozi*, only through returning and going back can the estranged things can transform anew and develop on a reasonable and normal track. The question is: why do abnormalities and estrangements occur in the first place? According to the understanding of Dao as a pure origin, as something that generates the myriad things, bestows them with their particular and efficacious nature (the root of good), and the one that nurtures and matures them, why and how do things deviate from Dao, from their own particular efficacy, and go astray?

According to Ikeda Tomohisa, the reason things go astray is due to the fact that they can “be on their own accord” (*ziran* 自然) and “self-transform” (*zihua* 自化) too much. He maintains that Laozi’s philosophy contains an internal contradiction: on the one hand there is the metaphysical dominance of Dao over the myriad things and the political centralized power of the monarch over the people; on the other hand, there is some sort of political democracy and anarchism in which Dao and sage rulers act non-coercively (*wuwei* 无为) and allow things to “be on their own accord” and self-transform.²⁷

I do not think there is an existing contradiction in the *Laozi*. To overcome various dominations or the centralization of power, the *Laozi* proposed the fundamental idea of allowing the things and people to self-transform through the non-coercive action of Dao and the sages. Dao is also the generative force and original power thus it is the natural leader of the myriad things. This does not mean Dao intends to control or dominate them, on the contrary, it is precisely to avoid the control and dominance of Dao that Laozi ascribes non-coercive action, softness, and the profound efficacy of “generating without possessing, acting without depending, rearing without ordaining” to Dao. Chapter thirty-four serves as the best representation of this claim:

people have passed over” as “to forgive.” A similar usage is found in the “Spring and Autumn Annals of Lǚ” (*Lǚ shi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋): “thus we shall forgive the crimes of the Qin minister of defense.”

²⁶ Translator’s note: for the sake of clarity in translation I do distinguish between *fu* 复 and *fugui* 复归. *Fugui* as a compound is thereby translated as “return again” instead of simply “return.”

²⁷ See (Ikeda 2014, pp. 1–19).

The myriad things and beings depend on it for their generation, but it does not give orders. Achievements are completed but it does not claim the name of having done it. It clothes all things as with a garment, and makes no assumption of being their overlord, constantly without desires, its name is in the minute; all things and beings return to it, but do not know their master, it may be named great. That is why the sage can accomplish the great by his not acting on the great, thus, he can accomplish the great.

Dao and the sages act non-coercively and softly; correspondingly, it allows the myriad things and people to be on their own accord, to self-transform, and to accomplish on their own. At the same time, this non-coercive action and softness of Dao or sage rulers manifest as following the self-soing and self-transformation of all things (Dao emulates the self-so). Chapters thirty-seven and fifty-seven both make the connection between Dao and the myriad things as well as the connection between the sage rulers and the common people explicit:

Dao constantly acts non-coercively and nothing is left undone. If the marquises and kings can maintain this, all things transform on their own. (Chapter 37)

Therefore, the sages say: "I act non-coercively and the common people transform on their own; I cherish equilibrium, and the common people order themselves; I am non-interfering in my governance, and the common people prosper themselves; I am objectless in my desires, and the common people are of themselves like unworked wood." (Chapter 57)

The relationship between Dao and all things is harmonious and cooperative: Dao generates all things, it follows them, and under its guardianship, they self-transform. We cannot see in this any possibility of things going astray or becoming abnormal. Then, where does the problem emerge?

In the explanation Christianity offers towards original sin, human beings are lured into decline. However, if a person is originally pure and good, he should be able to resist this temptation. This serves as a base for Xunzi's criticism of Mencius's "theory of good nature." Xunzi concludes that if human nature is really as good as Mencius describes it, then one cannot lose their original heart-mind; but if one can lose their original heart-mind, it means that goodness is not a-priori.

In the *Laozi* we do not find dualism. The author of the *Laozi* conceived things generated by Dao to be good. Jiang Xicheng proposed that the estrangement that can occur to the myriad beings or to civilization may be the result of an evolution of Dao. However, this interpretation does not have textual evidence. If we say that domination and dictatorship give rise to abnormalities and estrangements in human affairs, then similarly, letting things take their own course and ignoring them can also lead to harmful things. However, for the *Laozi*, "non-coercive action" and "softness" of Dao and the sages are not the reason abnormalities and estrangements emerge, rather things become estranged or abnormal because of the different things that arise. One of those things are desires. Chapter thirty-seven says:

If the kings and marquises can guard it, the myriad beings and things will then transform on their own. Transforming and desires arise, I subdue it through the simplicity of the nameless. The simplicity of the nameless will lead them to be without desires. Not desiring is to be in equilibrium, the whole world will be ordered on their own accord.

The key here is the saying "transforming and desires arise, I subdue it through the simplicity of the nameless." The transformation in "the myriad things will then transform on their own" is normal. Laozi does not object to change and differentiation ("transform on their own"), he maintains that grand simplicity becomes a variety of vessels ("when unworked wood is split it is made into vessels, when the sages are employed they are made into head officials"). However, according to chapter thirty-two, differentiation and employment must be limited, if it exceeds limitations then estrangements happen:

When we start to regulate the world, we introduce names. But once names have been assigned, we must also know when to stop. Knowing when to stop is how to avoid danger.

We can see from the phrase “I then subdue it through the simplicity of the nameless” that “desires arise” is not normal. The character for arising (*zuo* 作) comes from the pictograph of a person lifting up his body. The meaning of this character was then extended to mean “to arise” and “to begin.” The character for desires (*yu* 欲) also incorporates many meanings, such as to want, to hope, to wish, to demand, to need, to take pleasure in, and so forth. In this sense, “desires arise” should not pose problems.

However, there are obviously negative connotations to the word “desire” in the sense that it can mean greed or excessiveness. The “Explanation of Characters” defines desires as greed. The *Guangya* 广雅 Dictionary says that “desires” equals “covetous.” We also find the negative connotation of desires in the “Zhou Book of Changes”: “the *junzi* restrains his wrath and represses his desires;” and in the “Book of Rites” (*Liji* 礼记): “the *junzi* rejoices in attaining to the course; and the petty persons rejoice in obtaining their desires.” In the *Laozi*, “desires arise” probably carries this negative connotation. In general, I consider the interpretation of desires as greed precise.

Many commentators and scholars focused on the notions of “absence of desires,” “no desires” and “desire not to desire” in the *Laozi*. Let us examine a few examples from the text:

Not displaying what can be desired, will lead the people’s hearts to be non-chaotic . . . constantly leading the people to absence of knowledge and absence of desires, will allow those who are wise to not dare to act. (Chapter 3)

Display a genuineness like raw silk and embrace simplicity like unworked wood, lesson your concern for yourself and reduce your desires. (Chapter 19)

Consistent in its absence of desires, it can be named minute. (Chapter 34)

The simplicity of the nameless will lead them to be without desires. Not desiring is to be in equilibrium, the whole world is ordered on its own accord. (Chapter 37)

There is no crime more onerous than greed, no misfortune more devastating than avarice. And no calamity that brings with it more grief than insatiability. (Chapter 46)²⁸

I am objectless in my desires and the people are of themselves like uncarved wood. (Chapter 57)

Therefore, the sages desire not to desire, do not esteem goods that are difficult to obtain. (Chapter 64)

As long as human beings exist, they will desire to fulfill life’s basic needs. Laozi certainly cannot, nor should he object to desires in this sense. Laozi does, however, object to excessive desires phrased in the text as “desirable,” “desire to obtain,” and other greedy activities or cravings. In response, he advocates “objectless desires” (*wuyu* 无欲), referring to desires that are harmful and improper, not to aspirations and needs in general. The “Explaining Laozi” chapter of the *Han Feizi* incorporates an explanation of Laozi’s phrase: “there is no crime more onerous than greed.” According to the explanation in the *Han Feizi*, “can be desired” (*keyu* 可欲) signifies excessive desires that may lead to harmful results:

If people have desires, their plans and calculations will become confused. If plans and calculations become confused, desires will deepen. If desires deepen, the perverted mind will prevail. If the perverted mind prevails, undertakings will be led astray and will cut off.

²⁸ The first phrase is missing in the Wang Bi version. In the Guodian version it says: “there is no crime worse than excessive desires”; “there is none greater” in the phrase “there is no greater calamity than insatiability” is recorded in the “Explaining Lao” chapter of the *Han Feizi*, the Mawangdui *Laozi* silk manuscript, and the Guodian bamboo version as: “no calamity that brings more grief.”

If undertakings are lead astray and are cut off, misfortunes and difficulties arise. Looking at the matter from this perspective, misfortunes and difficulties are born of the perverted mind and the perverted mind is led by things that can be desired. Things that can be desired are [of two] sorts: if coming [to the country], they entice good people to do evil; if leaving [the country], they cause good people to suffer misfortunes. If evil arises, it encroaches upon and weakens the ruler above. If misfortunes arrive, the people suffer many afflictions. Thus, things that can be desired encroach upon and weaken the ruler above, while they afflict the people below. To encroach upon and weaken the ruler above and afflict the people below is a grave crime indeed. Thus, it is said: “there is no calamity greater than things that can be desired.” This is why the sage is not enticed by the five colors nor is he sullied by lewd music. The enlightened ruler scorns amusements and addictions and avoids the lewd and the lascivious trifles and dazzling beauties.²⁹

Laozi opposes possessions and plunder, opposes the monopolization and centralization of wealth, or in other words, is against corruption and greed. He advocated to dismiss and overcome desires of this sort. This is precisely what chapters twenty-nine and forty-four tell us:

Eschew the excessive, the superlative, and the extravagant. (Chapter 29)

Your reputation or your person—which is dearer to you? Your person or your property—which one is worth more? Gaining or losing—which is the greater scourge? Miserliness is certain to come at a huge cost; the hoarding of wealth is certain to lead to heavy losses. Therefore, those who know contentment avoid disgrace, and those who know where to stop avoid danger. They will be long-enduring. (Chapter 44)

To achieve social justice and fairness, Laozi advocated for the purity of the heart-mind and abandonment of desires. This shows that he objected to greediness. He maintained that the “way of heaven” (*tiandao* 天道) and great sages benefit in a different manner from those who monopolize and dictate, they “diminish superabundance and supplement deficiency” instead of “taking away from those who have not enough to add to his own superabundance:”

The way of heaven is like archers drawing their bows. To hit something high in the air, they pull the string downward; to hit something lower, they pull the string upward. When they have drawn the string too far back, they let some go, and when they have not drawn it far enough, they pull harder. The way of heaven is also to let some go where there is excess and to augment where there is not enough. The way of human beings on the other hand is not like this at all. It is instead to take away from those who do not have enough in order to give more to those who already have too much. Who then in having too much is able to draw on this excess to make an offering to the world? Perhaps only those who have Dao. (Chapter 77)

The sages do not accumulate things. Yet the more they have done for others, the more they have gained themselves; the more they have given to others, the more they have gotten

²⁹ Translation excerpted from (Goldin 2013, p. 238). The commentary to the phrase “no misfortune more devastating than avarice” in the “Explaining Lao” chapter of the *Han Feizi* also clarifies that both ‘insatiability’ and ‘not knowing contentment’ refer to greedy conduct: People have neither fur nor feathers. Unclad, they cannot resist the cold. Above they do not belong to heaven and below they do not cleave to the earth. Rather, they consider the stomach and intestines as their fundamental root because if they do not eat they cannot survive. This is why they cannot avoid possessing minds that desire material benefit. If they cannot eradicate this mind desirous of material benefit, they grow anxious. Therefore, the sage wears just enough to resist cold and eats just enough to satiate hunger and so he is free from anxiety. Most people, however, are not like this. Whether you are as important as a regional lord or as unimportant as a person who merely possesses a surfeit of a thousand pieces of gold, you cannot eradicate the anxiety that comes along with the desire to obtain material benefit. Now the convict may receive a pardon and the criminal sentenced to death may gain a reprieve but those who are perplexed because they do not know contentment will live out their whole life without being released from such anxiety. Thus, it is said: “There is no misfortune greater than not knowing contentment.” (Goldin 2013, p. 239).

themselves. Thus, the way of heaven is to benefit without harming; the way of the sages is to do without contending. (Chapter 81)

Laozi defined profound efficacy as “generating without possessing, assisting yet making no claim, rearing yet not lording.” This definition stresses the fact that it generates but does not possess. According to the view that Laozi held towards desires, we can tell that the word “arise” in “desires arise” (that is, greed) is one of the reasons abnormalities and estrangements can happen. Another abnormal arising is “errors arise” (*wangzuo* 妄作) as recorded in chapter sixteen:

The myriad things arise together, so I observe their return. The things in the world are manifold, they all return to their root. Returning to the root means stillness, it is called returning to the propensity of things. Returning to the propensity of things is called constancy, knowing constancy is called clarity. Not knowing constancy—errors arise, and the unfortunate occurs. Knowing constancy is to be accommodating, accommodating is tolerance, tolerance is kingliness, kingliness is heavenly, heavenly is Dao, Dao is enduring. To the end of one’s days one will be free of danger.

According to the definition in the “Explanation of Characters,” errors (*wang* 妄) as in “errors arise” means chaos (*luan* 乱). The chapter “On Shepherding the People” (*Mu Min* 牧民) in the *Guanzi* 管子 tells us that: “if the sovereign lacks proper restraint, the people will behave recklessly.”³⁰ “Twenty-five Years to Lord Ai” (*Ai Gong ershiwu nian* 哀公二十五年) in the *Zuozhuan* 左传 says: “those who are prone to taking sole possession over profits are in error.” Those cases of errors all refer to improper and illegitimate conduct (being in an uncontrolled state or situation, committing outrages, etc.). The reason errors arise is because one “does not know permanence.” Another arising in chapter sixteen is “arise together” (*bingzuo* 并作). If there is no problem with the word “together” (*bing* 并) then we should take a look whether the word “arise” is problematic. In the *Hengxian* 先text of the Shanghai Museum bamboo collection we find:

Auspicious appropriateness, beneficial craft,³¹ and diverse things emerge from arising. When there is arising, there is an endeavor; when there is no arising, there is no endeavor. Regarding the endeavors of heaven: they will arise of themselves to become endeavors. How then could they not be continued?³²

According to the textual context, arising refers to illegitimate and improper arising. Arising as it appears in “arise together” may belong to the same category as “desires arise” and “errors arise,” meaning that it refers to illegitimate conduct. Furthermore, if things were to self-transform properly, return would not be an issue. The estrangement of things generally emerges while they arise together (there already is estrangement when they arise together).

In the silk manuscripts (Mawangdui 马王堆 *Laozi*) the phrase “the things in the world are manifold” was scribed as “the things of heaven.” I speculate that the character “*fu* 夫” was erroneously transcribed as “heaven” (*tian* 天). In the “Royal Regulations” (*Wangzhi* 王制) chapter of the “Book of Rites” we see:

Not to hunt when there was no business in the way was deemed an act of irreverence.
To hunt without observing the rulers was deemed cruelty to the creatures of heaven.

The forged chapter “Successful Completion of the War” (*Wucheng* 武成) in the ancient “Book of Documents” (*Shangshu* 尚书) we find:

³⁰ Translation excerpted from (Rickett 1998, p. 53).

³¹ “Craft” (*qiao* 巧) in “auspicious appropriateness, beneficial craft” was originally deciphered as the character “lord” (*zhu* 主) but Dong Shan 董珊 changed it to “craft” in his proofreading. See (Dong 2004).

³² Translation from (Brindley et al. 2013, p. 149).

The present king of Shang is without principle, cruel and destructive to the creatures of heaven, injurious and tyrannical to the multitudes of the people.

“Creatures of heaven” literally means “all things in the world.” That is the same as saying “all things” (*fuwu* 夫物). The Guodian 郭店 version of the *Laozi* says: “the heavenly Dao is encompassing” (*yuanyuan* 员员). If we read the characters *yuanyuan* 员员 as *yuanyuan* 圆圆 (circling): “the heavenly Dao circles around,” then not only does it not match the following phrase: “each returns to their roots,” it also has no connection to the previous phrase: “the myriad things arise together.” In Laozi’s philosophy, the issue of going back and returning can only be applied to the myriad things or common people. This problem does not exist for Dao or the heavenly Dao. As we see in the following quotations, all the occurrences of “heavenly Dao” or “Dao of heaven” do not mention the issue of return:

To withdraw oneself when the work proceeds—this is the Dao of heaven. (Chapter 9)

Not to look out the window—to know the Dao of heaven. (Chapter 47)

The Dao of heaven—without contending, it is good at winning. (Chapter 73)

The Dao of heaven is like flexing a bow. (Chapter 77)

The Dao of heaven does not establish any kinships, it is always with the good person. (Chapter 79)

The Dao of heaven benefits without doing harm. (Chapter 81)

We conclude that the “heavenly Dao” as written in the Guodian version is clearly an error; the original must have been “creatures of heaven” (*tianwu* 天物) or “all things” (*fuwu* 夫物). Moreover, in the *Zaiyou* 在宥 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we see: “the myriad beings and things are manifold, each returns to its roots.”

In the *Laozi*, the term *wanwu* 万物 (myriad things) refers to all things and beings, thus the propositions “the myriad things arise together” and “errors arise” are applicable to all things—whether natural or human. However, the fact is that when the *Laozi* gives concrete examples to the phenomenon “errors arise,” it mainly refers to human affairs. This explicitly says that the *Laozi* mostly stresses “abnormalities” of human endeavors. From the aspect of judgment criteria in the world of human beings and human endeavors, according to the *Laozi*, all activities and conducts that do not accord to Dao or to their particular efficacy lead to the “arising of errors.” Furthermore, although errors arise when human beings do not conform to Dao or particular efficacy (*de* 德), this mainly refers to the conduct of a ruler who assumes great power and wealth. As chapter three has it:

Not promoting those of superior character, will save the common people from being contentious, not prizing property that is hard to come by, will save them from becoming thieves, not making a show of what might be desired, will save them from becoming disgruntled.

Promoting those of superior character, prizing property that is hard to come by, and making show of what might be desired refer to bad conduct. Normally, the ruler engaging in political affairs should abide by traits of Dao such as non-coercive action, purity and equilibrium, simplicity, softness, non-contending and others. But in reality, since rulers assume the utmost power and have the most wealth, they are the ones that most easily betray Dao and give rise to errors. The outcomes of their malicious actions are the most severe.

There are many places in the text where Laozi exposes and denounces rulers who take part in malicious political conduct. Two chapters in particular give a vivid description:

The only things we have to fear in traveling the grand thoroughfare (Dao) are the turn-offs. The grand thoroughfare is perfectly level and straight, yet people have a great fondness for

mountain trails. Their court is impeccably clean, yet the fields are overgrown with weeds and the granaries stand empty. Their clothing is embroidered, and colorful and sharp swords hang at their sides; they are stuffed with food and have wealth and property to throw away. This is called highway robbery, which ought not to be confused with Dao. (Chapter 53)

The people's hunger is because those above are eating too much in taxes—this is why they are hungry. The people's lack of order is because those above manipulate them—this is why they are not properly ordered. And the people's scoffing at death is because those above are exacting so much from life—this is why they scoff at death. It is precisely those who do not kill themselves in living who are more enlightened than those who treasure life. (Chapter 75)

A very dim and pessimistic view towards humanity and civilization comes from political estrangements. Chapter eighteen expresses the degeneration and decline of civilization:

It is when the grand Dao is abandoned that authoritative conduct and appropriateness appear. It is when wisdom and erudition arise, that great duplicity appears. It is when the six family relationships are disharmonious, that filiality and parental affection appear. It is when the state has fallen into troubled times, that the upright ministers appear.

According to the Confucian view, authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁), appropriateness (*yi* 义), wisdom (*zhi* 智), erudition (慧), filiality (*xiao* 孝), parental affection (*ci* 慈) and upright ministers (*zhong chen* 忠臣) are major ethical values and ideals. However, for the *Laozi*, they are calamitous outcomes resulting in the abandonment of the grand Dao. Surprisingly, the terms wisdom and erudition, filiality and parental affection, and upright ministers become synonyms to the notions of great duplicity, disharmony, and troubled times. For the *Laozi*, these notions become an unstoppable force that brings to the decline of one's true nature and genuine values. The phrase "when the grand Dao is abandoned that authoritative conduct and appropriateness appear," tells us that the decline of Dao is a product of historical advancement and the passage of time. Chapter thirty-eight depicts the process of the decline of Dao and De (德):

Only when we have lost sight of Dao is there excellence (*de*), only when we have lost sight of excellence is there authoritative conduct, only when we have lost sight of authoritative conduct is there appropriateness, and only when we have lost sight of appropriateness is there ritual propriety. As for ritual propriety, it is the thinnest veneer of doing one's best and making good one's word, and it is the first sign of trouble.

Similar to many later commentaries, Han Feizi notes that ritual propriety is the source of passivity and other problems; however, his interpretation on the previous phrases are unique. He viewed Dao, excellence, authoritative conduct, appropriateness and ritual propriety as values that are contained in one another and not as an ongoing process of deterioration.³³ This may be due to the variation in textual versions:

When we have lost sight of Dao then we lose sight of excellence, when we lose sight of excellence we then lose sight of authoritative conduct, when we lose sight of authoritative conduct we then lose sight of appropriateness, when we lose sight of appropriateness we then lose sight of ritual propriety.

Regardless of whether Han Feizi himself copied it wrong or this version was widespread at his time, the text cited is most likely incorrect. Two reasons for this assumption are (1) the transmitted and

³³ In the "Explaining Lao" chapter, Han Feizi remarks: The Way has its accumulations, potency has its achievements. Potency is the achievements of the Way. Achievements have their concrete expressions; concrete expressions have their radiance. Humaneness is the radiance of Potency. Radiance has its saturating effect; its saturating effect becomes manifest in affairs. Righteousness is the affairs of Humaneness. Affairs have their Ritual; Ritual has its cultural expressions. Ritual is the cultural expression of righteousness. Thus, it is said: Losing the Way, potency is lost; losing potency, humaneness is lost; losing humaneness, righteousness is lost; losing righteousness, ritual is lost. (Goldin 2013, p. 230).

excavated materials are identical, and (2) since ritual propriety appears after the decline of civilization and becomes the first sign of trouble, it corresponds to the situation of a degenerated civilization rather than to a sequence of values which subsume one another. Thus, the “Knowledge Rambling in the North” (*zhibeiyou* 知北) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* offers a more precise understanding and commentary of this passage:

Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know, and hence the sage conveys his instructions without the use of speech. Dao cannot be made ours by constraint; its characteristics will not come to us (at our call). Authoritative conduct may be practiced; appropriateness may be partially attended to; by ritual propriety men impose on one another. Hence it is said: “When the Dao was lost, excellence appeared. When excellence was lost, authoritative conduct appeared. When authoritative conduct was lost, appropriateness appeared. When appropriateness was lost, ritual propriety appeared. Ritual propriety is but the (unsubstantial) flowers of Dao, and the commencement of disorder.” Hence, “he practices Dao, diminishes daily. He diminishes it and again diminishes it, until he arrives at non-coercive action. Having arrived at this non-coercive action, there is nothing that he does not do.” Here now there is something, a regularly fashioned utensil—if you wanted to make it return to the original condition of its materials, would it not be difficult to make it do so? Could any but the great man accomplish this easily?

He Shanggong and Wang Bi interpreted this passage through the process of decline as well. It now becomes evident why Laozi advocated return. It is because things, especially human beings and their affairs, produce various abnormalities and estrangements in their reality and historical processes.

4. Whence Is the Journey Back? “The Simplicity of the Nameless” and “Returning to the Root”

In the *Laozi* *fan* 反 means to return (*fan* 返) and go back (*fugui* 复归). Moreover, as the text sets both the direction and the goal of return, it also establishes standards and criterions. From the perspective of innate qualities, abnormalities and estrangements happen because things deviate from their own particular efficacy. From the perspective of the origin of all things, abnormalities and estrangements happens because things deviate from the grand Dao.

Therefore, to return is not only things returning to their origin and their innate efficacy, but also their return to the roots of Dao and the standards it sets. In chapter sixteen the return of things is described in the phrase: “each return to their own root.” When things return to their roots they can then achieve equilibrium; achieving equilibrium they are then able to return to their natural disposition and their natural propensity. According to the *Laozi*, the standard set by Dao and its efficacy is the criterion of permanence (*chang* 常): “to know permanence is called clarity.” When one does not know permanence then errors arise which means one becomes abnormal, knowing permanence means going back to permanence. Let us take a second look at chapter twenty-eight:

Know the male yet safeguard the female and be a river gorge to the world. As a river gorge to the world, you will not lose your permanent efficacy, and not losing your permanent efficacy, you return to the state of a newborn baby. Know the clean yet safeguard the soiled and be a valley to the world. As a valley to the world, your permanent efficacy will be ample, and with ample potency, you return to the state of simplicity. Know the white yet safeguard the black and be a model for the world. As a model for the world, your permanent potency will not be wanting, and with your potency not wanting, you return to the state of the limitless.

In this chapter, terms such as the newborn baby, the limitless, and simplicity offer the goal of return. The return of things is then returning to the state of a newborn baby, returning to the state of the limitless, and returning to simplicity. In the *Laozi*, the newborn baby, simplicity, and water (which “comes nearest to Dao”) are metaphors for Dao. Simplicity (*pu* 朴) in this chapter is equivalent to the response chapter thirty-seven gives to the problem of desires rising: “realign them with the unnamed simplicity.”

For the *Laozi*, estrangements and abnormalities may also be the growth of superfluous things. To save things from this growth is then to decrease; therefore, return may also be understood as the process of decreasing. Chapter thirty-eight expresses this insight: “therefore the great man resides with the thick and does not reside with the thin, resides with the fruit and not with the flower.” This is also expressed in the reduction described in chapter three:

Not promoting those of superior character, will save the common people from becoming contentious. Not prizing property that is hard to come by, will save them from becoming thieves. Now making a show of what might be desired, will save them from becoming disgruntled. It is for this reason that in the proper governing by the sages: they empty the heart-and-minds of the people and fill their stomachs, they weaken their aspirations and strengthen their bones, ever teaching the common people to be unprincipled in their knowing and objectless in their desires, they keep the hawkers of knowledge at bay. It is simply in doing things non-coercively that everything is governed properly.

Chapter nineteen expresses decrease in a more revolutionary and radical manner:

Cut off sagacity and get rid of wisdom and the benefit to the common people will be a hundredfold. Cut of authoritative conduct and get rid of appropriateness and the common people will return to filiality and parental affection. Cut off cleverness and get rid of personal profit and there will be no more brigands and thieves. But these three sayings as they stand are still lacking and need to be supplemented by the following: display a genuineness like raw silk and embrace simplicity, lessen your concern for yourself and reduce your desires.³⁴

One of the characteristics of Dao in the *Laozi* is simplicity. Returning to Dao and going back to the roots is also returning to simplicity and going back to genuineness. As a social ideal, Laozi imagines a “small country with few people.” According to his description, this ideal society makes very little use of utensils, does not have wars and conflicts, and people lead a happy life: “relishing their food, finding beauty in their garments, enjoying their customs, finding security in their homes.”

Return, as the *Laozi* demands it, is decreasing and eliminating things that corrupt Dao and its particular efficacy. Those things include both techniques and Confucian ethical standards. Through sayings such as “when Dao is lost excellence appears” and “when the grand Dao is abandoned,” Laozi imagined the remote past as the best social situation. Therefore, his notion of “going back” may be a return to a real historical state which did actually happen in past times. The *Zhuangzi* gives us an outstanding expression of this aspect:

³⁴ It is quite evident that the chapters “Horse’s Hoofs” and “Rifling Trunks” in the *Zhuangzi* display the spirit of the *Laozi* in criticizing civilization: “If the Way and its Virtue had not been cast aside, how would there be any call for benevolence and righteousness? If the true form of the inborn nature had not been abandoned, how would there be any use for rights and music? If the five colors had not confused men, who would fashion patterns and hues? If the five notes had not confused them, who would try to tune things by the six tones? That the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements—this was the crime of the artisan. That the Way and its Virtue were destroyed in order to create benevolence and righteousness—this was the fault of the sage” (“Horse’s Hoofs” *Ma Ti* 马蹄, Watson 2013, pp. 66–67). “The fish should not be taken from the deep pool; the sharp weapons of the state should not be shown to men. The sage is the sharp weapon of the world, and therefore he should not be where the world can see him. Cut off sageliness, cast away wisdom, and then the great thieves will cease. Break the jades, crush the pearls, and petty thieves will no longer rise up. Burn the tallies, shatter the seals, and the people will be simple and guileless. Hack up the bushels, snap the balances in two, and the people will no longer wrangle. Destroy and wipe out the laws that the sages has made for the world, and at last you will find that you can reason with the people. Discard and confuse the six tones; smash and unstring the pipes and lutes; stop up the ears of the blind musician Kuang; and for the first time the people of the world will be able to hold on to their hearing. Wipe out patterns and designs; scatter the five colors; glue up the eyes of Li Zhu; and for the first time, the people of the world will be able to hold on to their eyesight. Destroy and cut to pieces the curve and plumb line; throw away the compass and square; shackle the fingers of Artisan Chui; and for the first time, the people of the world will possess real skill. Thus it is said: “Great skill is like clumsiness.” Put a stop to the ways of Zeng and Shi; gag the mouths of Yang and Mo; wipe out and reject benevolence and righteousness; and for the first time, the Virtue of the world will reach the state of Mysterious Leveling. (“Rifling Trunks” *Qu Qie* 篋, Watson 2013, pp. 70–71).

Have you alone never heard of that age of Perfect Virtue? Long ago, in the time of Yong Cheng, Da Ting, Bo Huang, Zhong Yang, Li Lu, Li Xu, Xian Yuan, He Xu, Zun Lu, Zhu Rong, Fu Xi, and Shen Nong, the people knotted cords and used them. They relished their food, admired their clothing, enjoyed their customs, and were content with their houses. Though neighboring states were within sight of one another and could hear the cries of one another's dogs and chickens, the people grew old and died without ever traveling beyond their own borders. At a time such as this, there was nothing but the most perfect order. ("Rifling Trunks" *Qu Qie*, [Watson 2013](#), pp. 71–72)

Zhuangzi further imagines a more primitive state described as an "age of perfect virtue":

The people have their constant inborn nature. To weave for their clothing, to till for their food—this is the Virtue they share. They are one in it and not partisan, and it is called the Emancipation of Heaven. Therefore, in a time of Perfect Virtue, the gait of men is slow and ambling; their gaze is steady and mild. In such an age, mountains have no paths or trails, lakes no boats or bridges. The ten thousand things live species by species, one group settled close to another. Birds and beasts form their flocks and herds; grass and trees grow to fullest height. So it happens that you can tie a cord to the birds and beasts and lead them about or bend down the limb and peer into the nest of the crow and the magpie. In this age of Perfect Virtue, men live the same as birds and beasts, group themselves side by side with the ten thousand things. Who then knows anything about "gentleman" or "petty man"? Dull and unwitting, men have no wisdom; thus their Virtue does not depart from them. Dull and unwitting, they have no desire; this is called uncarved simplicity. In uncarved simplicity, the people attain their true nature. ("Horses Hoofs" *Mati* 马蹄, [Watson 2013](#), pp. 65–66)

As we can see from the *Zhuangzi*, the more primitive and natural things are, the better. This is the phenomenon of "beautiful imagination" that people have towards ancient long-gone historical periods. This Daoist historical image differs from the perfect historical staged imagined by other philosophers in pre-Qin times. For example, the Mohist and Legalist scholars believed that the natural, ancient, and primitive situation is not good, while civilization is the desired result of leaving a primitive situation. For instance, Mozi 墨子 believed that people in ancient times did not know how to build their homes, did not know how to make clothes, did not know the proper way to eat and drink, nor did they know how to manufacture means of transportation. Their lives were simply inconvenient. Thus, to meet the needs of human beings, the sage kings created civilization:

Primitive people, before the art of building houses and palaces was known, lingered by the mounds and lived in caves. It was damp and injurious to health. Thereupon the sage-kings built houses and palaces. The guiding principles for these buildings were these: the house shall be built high enough to avoid the damp and moisture; the walls thick enough to keep out the wind and cold; the roof strong enough to stand snow, frost, rain, and dew; and the walls in the palace high enough to observe the propriety of the sexes. These are sufficient . . . Before clothing was known, the primitive people wore coats of furs and belts of straw. They were neither light and warm in winter nor light and cool in summer. The sage-king thought this did not satisfy the needs of man. So, he taught the women to produce silk and flax and to weave cloth and linen, therewith to make clothing for the people. The guiding principles for clothing were these: In winter the underwear shall be made of spun-silk as to be light and warm. In summer it shall be made of coarse flax so as to be light and cool. And this is sufficient . . . Before the art of cooking was known, primitive people ate only vegetables and lived in separation. Thereupon the sage taught the men to attend to farming and to plant trees to supply the people with food. And the sole purpose of securing food is to increase energy, satisfy hunger, strengthen the body and appease the stomach. He was

frugal in spending wealth and simple in habits of living, and so the people became rich and the country orderly . . . Before the primitive people know how to make boats and carts they could neither carry a heavy load nor travel a great distance. Thereupon the sage-king made boats and carts to facilitate the people. The boats and carts were made durable and convenient so that they would carry much and travel far. Such an undertaking takes little wealth but produces many benefits. Naturally the people found it agreeable and convenient. The people were not tired out and yet the ruler's needs were all supplied. So, people were attracted to him. (Mozi, Book I, "Indulgence in Excess" *Ci Guo*)

Similar to the account in the *Mozi*, Han Feizi believed that people's lives encountered various difficulties in the distant past, middle antiquity, and even in near history. The sages and great people appeared in time to solve the problems encountered in each era:

In the most ancient times, when men were few and creatures numerous, human beings could not overcome the birds, beasts, insects, and reptiles. Then a sage appeared who fashioned nests of wood to protect men from harm. The people were delighted and made him ruler of the world, calling him the Nest Builder. The people lived on fruits, berries, mussels, and clams—things rank and evil-smelling that hurt their bellies, so that many of them fell ill. Then a sage appeared who drilled with sticks and produced fire with which to transform the rank and putrid foods. The people were delighted and made him ruler of the world, calling him the Drill Man. In the age of middle antiquity there was a great flood in the world, but Gun and Yu of the Xia dynasty opened up the channels for the water. In the age of recent antiquity Jie and Zhou ruled in a violent and perverse way, but Tang of the Yin dynasty and Wu of the Zhou dynasty overthrew them. (Han Feizi, Chapter 49 "The Five Vermin", *Wudu* 五蠹)³⁵

In the historical narratives by Mozi and Han Feizi, we learn that they differ from Zhuangzi. They did not beautify ancient times, on the contrary, they confirmed the rationality and legitimacy for human beings to depart from the most ancient stage, and further affirmed the advancement of civilization. However, at the same time, they were not merely theorists of historical progression as they did not hold a linear view of history. In different extents, their way of thinking was similar to the Confucian "ancient based reconstruction." Overall, according to Mozi's narrative, social practices and political conduct in his days betrayed the original intentions and aspirations of the sages who created civilization. He essentially idealized the early stages in the history of the sages' creation. According to the characteristics of different historical periods, Han Feizi believed that civilization and way of government in each period had its particular rationality and legitimacy. This means that past governance cannot be idealized, and it cannot be used to measure future generations. It also means that future generations and the world at present must adopt methods of governance that suits best their needs:

Now if anyone had built wooden nests or drilled for fire in the time of the Xia dynasty, Gun and Yu would have laughed at him, and if anyone had tried to open channels for the water during the Yin or Zhou dynasties, Tang and Wu would have laughed at him. This being so, if people in the present age go about exalting the ways of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, and Wu, the sages of today are bound to laugh at them. For the sage does not try to practice the ways of antiquity or to abide by a fixed standard but examines the affairs of the age and takes what precautions are necessary. (Han Feizi, Chapter 49) (Watson 2003, p. 98)

Han Feizi's famous theory of historical stages also comes to illustrate this point. According to his schema, society in ancient times strove for morality, society in middle antiquity strove for wisdom,

³⁵ (Watson 2003, p. 97).

and society in his time strove for power.³⁶ Han Feizi did not say that striving for morality or wisdom is bad, on the contrary, he praises it. However, he did maintain that they were merely suitable for society in ancient times and middle antiquity. Society in his time strove for power. If they were to strive for morality and wisdom like in past times, it would be no different from the stump watcher waiting for rabbits.

In the *Laozi*, Dao is the root value and the origin of the world. When everything and everyone keeps Dao and follows it, the world is in its best state. But when deviating from it and losing it, estrangements will necessarily occur. To overcome estrangements, human beings searched for various alternatives, but instead of finding a solution they produced many civilized things. The way to heal the illnesses of civilization is similar to healing a physical illness. Healing also has limitations and negative effects, sometimes it even causes harm as stated in the *Zhuangzi*.³⁷ However, we still need medical skills (that can be continuously improved and perfected), as it is impossible to solve an illness by abandoning medicine. Similarly, the ill state of civilization can only be solved through its development.

For the *Laozi*, civilized things cannot offer a solution from the roots of the problem. The more the alternatives, the less they can solve problems. In addition, they create more problems which lead to a more severe decline and deterioration of human civilization. Laozi turns to Dao for assistance, maintaining that it is a way to solve things once and for all. In Laozi's view, when things lose their own self it is because they add too many extra things. Chapter twenty-four says:

As these attitudes pertain to Dao, they are called indulgence and unseemliness. Such excess is so generally despised, that even those who want things, cannot abide it.

The method to heal the ill situation of civilization is not by adding things, but only through reduction—that is the reduction of all the extra and unnecessary things (on behalf of Dao decrease daily). Appealing to Dao for assistance is to give up and eliminate civilized alternatives, to return to the origin of Dao and its efficacy, thereby returning to the original state of all things. This is the fundamental solution and way to escape the illness of civilization. Reductionism in science believes in restoring the natural disposition of things. Laozi and Zhuangzi want to restore the natural state of things through return. Strictly speaking, we cannot go back in history, nor can we erase events that already passed. The place where civilization degenerates is also the place where it should change. When things return to themselves they rebuild a better self. This happens over a progressing course of time rather than in a repetition of the past. Similarly, Laozi's philosophy of return, on the surface, may seem to be saying that things ought to return to themselves by returning to their past. However, what this philosophy actually strives for is change in the present and advancement in the future.

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³⁶ Han Feizi said: "Men of high antiquity strove for moral virtue; men of middle times sought out wise schemes; men of today vie to be known for strength and spirit." ("The Five Vermin". Watson 2003, p. 101) He also said: "men of antiquity strove to be known as virtuous; those of the middle age struggled to be known as wise; and now men fight for the reputation of being powerful. In antiquity, events were few; measures were simple, naïve, crude and incomplete. Therefore, there were men using spears made of mother-of-pearl, and those pushing carts. In antiquity, again people were few and therefore kind to one another; things being few, they made light of profits and made alienations easy. Hence followed alienations of the throne by courtesy and transfer of the rule over all under heaven. That beings so, to do courteous alienations, promote compassion and beneficence, and follow benevolence and favor, was to run the government in the primitive way. In the age of numerous affairs, to employ the instruments of the management of affairs that were few, is not the wise man's measure. Again, in the age of great struggles, to follow the track of courteous alienations, is not the sage's policy. For this reason, wise men do not personally push carts and sages do not run any government in the primitive way." (Han Feizi "Eight Fallacies" translated by Liao (1939, p. 484)).

³⁷ The *Zhuangzi* says: "The true man of ancient times got it and lived, lost it and died, got it and died, lost it and lived. Medicines serve as an example. There are monkshood, balloonflower, cockscomb, and chinारoot; each has a time when it is the sovereign remedy, though the individual cases are too numerous to describe." (Xu Wu Gui, Watson 2013, p. 212).

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