

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY DAOISM AND METAPHYSICS

Despite the scholarship of the last thirty years, early Daoism is still a controversial issue. The controversy centers on the religious nature of Chinese Daoism as a whole: does it become a religious tradition only with the revelation of the deity Laojun 老君 to Zhang Daoling 張道陵 in 142 CE, or is there some connection between this institutionalized Daoist religion and what went on in the textualized ideas that circulated for three, four, or even five hundred years before that?

Any reader already familiar with Daoism will be struck by the problem that leaps out not only from the first line of this work, but also from the general framing of the project represented herein. I allude to something called “early Daoism,” a term that will undoubtedly surprise and quite possibly irritate not a few readers. The standard view of the history of early Daoism commonly posits a strict separation between, on the one hand, the early Daoist philosophical texts of the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, collectively represented in the modern academy by the term *daojia* 道家 or “Daoist philosophy,” and, on the other hand, the later Daoist religious institutions that historically appeared after 142 CE, represented by the term *daojiao* 道教 or “Daoist religion.” One motivation of this project, possibly its main one, is to attempt to wipe away the dichotomy imagined in many quarters between “philosophical” and “religious” Daoism. While the issue may not have everything to do with the particulars of what is intended to be signified by use of the label “Daoism,” the quandary remains: how are we to avoid the general tendency of referring to “traditions” by these “ism” labels and the consequent characterizations necessarily leading into essentialized assumptions of such entities and definitions of their boundaries vis-à-vis other such entities? Although there is a certain heuristic value in doing so, it also limits and falsifies in other ways. This essentializing habit, employed by most people who speak and write, is for all of that still grounded in metaphors.¹ The nominalist stand against this habit would claim that such entities do not exist outside of some people’s constructions undertaken for certain purposes; what does exist are people and the writings they produced and the cultural objects that they made.

None of this is to argue that there is not a demonstrable thematic, verbal, and intellectual cohesion among the writings that I term “early Daoist”; that demonstration, indeed, is one of the main goals of this project. In making this claim, I am not arguing for the *de facto* existence of an institutionalized Daoist community before 142 CE, nor will I provide a systematic theology of Daoist thought. I have consciously tried to refrain from making any claims, one way or the other, concerning any kind of early Chinese social group that may or may not be called Daoist, and I cannot emphasize this point enough. Leaving aside those sociological arguments, I do find the undeniable presence of a discursive tradition that undeniably existed before the Han dynasty. Since ideas have legs and do not float on thin air, who these people were that kept the discourse alive is open to speculation, but it is not the concern of this work. The meaningful referent for what I here call early Daoism is, in the most general way, not more than a discursive tradition. This discourse is infused with a distinct and coherent intelligibility that is best analyzed by examining its presentation within the corpus of writings that can be shown to participate in it.

This work confronts that intelligibility and, by identifying the complex of shared ideas found in those writings that participate in this early Daoist discourse but not found in other writings that do not, offers a new way to read what I call early Daoist discourse. Even though these ideas do not call out “I’m Daoist!” (if they did, there would be no need for this project), the presence of that thematic, verbal, and intellectual cohesion is fairly clear once we move beyond the constraining impositions of locating this tradition as either religious or philosophical. These ideas, nonetheless, still clearly participated in the general movement of religious and philosophical thought and belief in early China; more specifically, the writings that I call early Daoist are most readily identified through their participation in a common complex of notions about the pristine Dao not shared by any other writings from any other traditions. I recognize any piece of writing as early Daoist if it demonstrates an active participation in this complex of notions cohering around specific conceptions of the pristine Dao. This complex of notions not only gives a distinctive character to early Daoist disputation of the Dao but can also be shown to share certain fundamental assumptions with later, organized Daoism.

The complex of notions located in the early Daoist writings taken all together constitutes what I call early Daoist discourse. I argue that the prominent themes of this discourse are sustained and given coherence in four primary domains: cosmogony, cosmology, ontology, and soteriology. In distinguishing these domains, we see a discernable profile to the early Daoist discourse that is anything but random and that also continues to be recognized in the writings of later Daoism through their active adoption of the terms, images, and themes established by that discourse. Rather than setting forth in this introduction the identifying elements of this discourse point by point as they are found in discrete passages in the writings under consideration, I attempt, as much as possible, to allow the writings to speak for themselves

while remaining aware of the violence I inevitably perform on them by cutting them up and placing them in the set of categories that I take from my own, non-early Chinese intellectual tradition.

Chronologically, “early Daoism” signifies the interval material that began to appear from the time of the traditional positing of the man Laozi at the end of the Spring and Autumn period, or at least from the first appearance of the *Laozi* writings, the date of which is generally established either by the Guodian edition of the *Laozi* or the earliest period of the Jixia academy, dates very close to those of Confucius.² The period of early Daoism comes to a close abruptly with the death of the prince of Huainan 淮南子 in 122 BCE. Huainan’s death by execution was symbolic of the dramatic events that witnessed the elevation of the Confucian ideology to the level of state orthodoxy at the hands of Emperor Wu 漢武帝, Sima Qian 司馬遷, and Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒. The examination of the historical records giving information about the next 250 years of Daoist history, from the death of Huainan to the revelation of Zhang Daoling, remains a separate project that lies beyond the limits of this work.

Previous attempts by modern scholars to deploy some sort of interpretative framework onto the writings of early Daoism commonly have led to the imposition of distinctions that are completely foreign not only to the spirit of early Daoism but to early Chinese thought and practice as a whole. In the 1950s, Herlee Creel was the first Western scholar to apply a sophisticated interpretative model to early Daoism. He designated two different kinds of Daoism, the first of which he called contemplative and the second purposive. “Contemplative Daoism” is characterized by what he called “a mad intoxication with the wonder and power of nature,” and is best exemplified by the *Zhuangzi*.³ “Purposive Daoism” is characterized by “the attempt to utilize an essentially mystical doctrine for the furtherment of personal ambitions and political purposes,” and is best exemplified by the *Laozi*.⁴ Together, these two forms of early Daoism were to be known as “philosophical Daoism,” in distinction to *xian* Daoism that is based on the quest for immortality.⁵ The lasting consequence of Creel’s model for later interpretations of early Daoism was to draw a clear line of demarcation between, on the one hand, the thought of the *Laozi* and the thought of the *Zhuangzi*, and, on the other hand, the ideas they embodied in distinction to all other Daoist writings.

Maintaining this clear distinction between the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, A. C. Graham some thirty years later presented a new model for interpreting early Daoist writings based on the distinctions he drew between what he saw as the different voices in the *Zhuangzi* itself with the specific chapters attributable to each.⁶ He categorized these as the Individualist, the Primitivist, and the Syncretist. This breakdown was extended by both Graham himself and other scholars to refer not only to the different voices in the *Zhuangzi*, but also to all of the other writings of early Daoism. For him, the Individualist writings emphasize spontaneity, mysticism, and self-cultivation, and are best exemplified in the first seven chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. The Primitivist

is similar to the Individualist, but adds to its topics of attention a cosmological theory together with a specific body of political theory, and is best exemplified by the *Laozi*. Last is the Syncretist layer, which Graham characterizes by its assimilation of the thinking and goals of the several other early Chinese intellectual traditions. It is directed specifically to the ruler, and gives a strong priority to government rather than to individual self-cultivation; for him, this category is best exemplified by the *Huainanzi*. It is interesting to note that Graham retained, albeit in a slightly revised form, Creel's basic set of distinctions between the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. By using this model, Graham is able to designate discrete portions of the early Daoist writings as belonging to any one of these three groupings, thereby thwarting possible notions pertaining to the internal coherence of the early Daoist discursive tradition as a whole.⁷

Directly drawing on the kind of distinctions set forth by Graham, Harold Roth has presented the most recent hermeneutical model applied to the writings of early Daoism. He interprets them through three general categories of specifically Daoist concern:

1. Cosmology: a cosmology based on the Dao as the predominant unifying power in the cosmos.
2. Inner cultivation: the attainment of the Dao through a process of emptying out the usual contents of the conscious mind until a profound experience of tranquility is attained.
3. Political thought: the application of this cosmology and this method of self-cultivation to the problems of rulership.⁸

Roth's interpretative framework somewhat closes the gap between the separations inserted into the early Daoist tradition by writers like Creel and Graham. Furthermore, by relying on this framework, he is able to bring into the category of early Daoism many writings that scholars traditionally have not recognized as such; according to Roth, if a discrete piece of early Chinese writing meets the criteria of what counts as belonging to one of these three categories, it is to be identified as early Daoism.

Roth's categories, however, insert a different set of distinctions onto the integrity of early Daoist writings, of which the most significant is the distinction between body and mind or spirit. He distinguishes the categories of "cosmology" and "inner cultivation" in order to demonstrate the early Daoist concern with identifying with the pristine Dao through a kind of mysticism. In other words, the separation between what he understands as "cosmology" and "inner cultivation" is overcome by a mystic transcendence of the human body as the spirit identifies with the Dao. In part, Roth's distinction between "cosmology" and "inner cultivation" is the result of too strict a separation between a material cosmology involving a cosmic Dao and a mystical self-cultivation involving an ineffable Dao. The Dao of the cosmology and the Dao to which a person unites are more closely related than he presents them: both are fundamentally grounded in a physicality that can never be brushed

aside. Furthermore, Roth's third category, "political thought," refers to the material consequences for the world that follow from the mystical attainment of an individual, either a sage or a ruler. This third category marks his interpretative effort to close the space between the mystical spirit and the material body that his categories have created. However, the early Daoist writings do not privilege the political as an independent realm of discourse; rather, the political benefits for the country accrue from the ability of a sage, as one who has made the Dao fully present in the world by embodiment, to act as a kind of conduit whereby the Dao can easily access the human world that human beings have caused to be closed off from it. Thus, although his categories partially correct those of Creel and Graham, the distinctions Roth draws are grounded in a metaphysical split that cannot be sustained by any reading of the writings themselves.

Categories such as these are the product of modern scholarly attempts to provide some type of hermeneutical access to writings traditionally recognized as Daoist. Although the writings do not employ anything like the kinds of categories presented by Creel, Graham, and Roth, there is still no way to avoid the need to apply some set of categories to the materials in order to generate intelligibility for us, and this work represents no exception. My choices for the categories employed in this project owe much to the work of earlier scholars like Creel, Graham, and Roth, but I hope to overcome some of the more problematic issues that their categories have created. The central categories—or, as I prefer to call them, domains of discourse—that I employ to make possible my own access to the ideas in the writings emerge from the vocabulary of metaphysics and theology. These domains include cosmogony (chapter 2), cosmology (chapter 3), ontology (chapter 4), and soteriology (chapter 5). By employing this terminology, I do not mean that all Daoist writings have a cosmogony, cosmology, ontology, and soteriology, nor that they even have these kinds of categories available to their own systems of thought (though this would be hard to prove or disprove). All the writings I consider address a lot of questions, all at once, and I will examine these questions in terms of the four domains, one by one in each of the remaining chapters.

The kinds of distinctions that necessarily must be applied in isolating these domains inevitably falsify; I do not intend to categorize individual writings standing alone as representing one domain nor that all of the domains are found in any single writing. I will call upon these domains only so far as they can assist, in a general way, the intelligibility of my readings of discrete pieces of writing, or sustained sections, within the substantial collection of surviving writings of early China, only some of which can be identified as specifically Daoist. Other early Chinese traditions also discuss and explore these four domains of discourse but, I will argue, only coincidentally and in piecemeal fashion; only early Daoist writings construct a complete, sustained, and coherent vision of reality and experience that can be interpreted as oriented around these four domains.

The first three of these domains (cosmogony, cosmology, and ontology) address the three central questions of metaphysics, and the fourth (soteriology) addresses the central question of theology not dealt with by metaphysics. Metaphysics begins with the questions of ontology: “What is there in the universe?” (Minds? Bodies? Stuff? Ghosts? Spirits? Angels?). It then asks the questions of cosmogony: “Whatever there is in the universe, how did it originate?” (Genesis? Brahma? Shunyata?). It finally asks the questions of cosmology: “Whatever there is in the universe, how do the pieces of it relate to each other?” (Mind-body problem, how many angels dance on the head of a pin, reductionism). Theology adds a further consideration with its questions of soteriology: “Whatever there is in the universe, where does it lead?” (Salvation or damnation? Utopia? Democracy, theocracy, or socialism?).

Despite their apparent sequential progression, in this work I start with cosmogony, not ontology. This should come as no surprise because the mechanisms of early Chinese cosmology and ontology, as well as cosmology and soteriology, revolve around the temporally constant movements of the pristine Dao. In the early Daoist writings, questions about the pristine Dao in and of itself, before and outside of the world, have a certain primacy that make the questions of cosmology, ontology, and soteriology understandable. To call upon a simple cliché, time and space in early China tend more toward cyclicity than unilinearity, and since each of the domains I discuss constantly returns to all of the others without leaving them behind once and for all, why not start at the beginning?