**“Teaching the *Daodejing* in a Core Curriculum:**

**The Origins of the World and Its Relation to Justice”**

**Thomas Michael, Boston University**

**Presented at the Plenary Session: The Eastern Dimension: Eastern Texts**

**in a Core Curriculum**

**The Intersection of Religious and Secular Cores**

**in Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education**

**Rhodes College, September 25-27, 2014**

**Sponsored by The Association of Core Texts Liberal Arts Institute (ACTC);**

**The Project for the Study of Liberal Democracy, Rhodes College;**

**Pepperdine University, Seaver College; The Apgar Foundation**

Teaching in a Core Curriculum offers a unique type of opportunity to explore the classics of world literature that have fed humankind’s deepest need to articulate and respond to the most essential questions about what it means to exist as a human being. For myself, the most powerful articulation of these questions is not given in an interrogatory form; it is, rather, given in a particular kind of understanding by Heidegger: Dasein, “being-there.” But where is this “there”? As Heidegger says, Dasein is “being-in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt-sein)*. By virtue of its own definition of “being-in-the-world,” a deeper understanding of what this entails requires and demands one additional determination, which is that human being is always and already a “being-with” (*mitsein*).To exist in the world always already entails that we exist in it with others, in community.

We exist in multiple communities, and Core represents one particular kind of community, one open and directed to the most fundamental issues of what it means to exist, and to exist in community. Our Core community, furthermore, includes first and foremost undergraduate students, the eighteen to twenty-one year olds who are not seekers for answers but who are, rather, seekers of questions. What it seems to me that they yearn for are values, values not to embrace but values to judge, assess, and compare with their own. This is not to jettison their own already familiar ones, but only to see how their own values match up to others. Here the East calls for our own recognition as providing, in some important ways, a different foundation for a different perspective on values.

Core curriculums are guided by questions of value and these questions are directed by what we recognize as Core texts: they speak to values in ways that we do not always ask non-Core to do. Although we in our departmental courses are concerned with history, language, philology, anthropology, economics, and structures and forms, these are not our primary concerns in a Core Curriculum. Ours have to do with opening up to our young students a foundation upon which to understand, or at least to consider and contemplate, what it means to be human. Although I recognize the power of what Rousseau, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and Joyce offer to thought for what it means to be human, I particularly value origins. Origins are conveniently identified with the human urge to establish sense in the world by way of worldviews that can be filled out, filled in, and inhabited. In origins can be found the heart and soul of what religion does more than anything else, namely to provide possible meanings to existence that are created and transmitted, modified or rejected, but always there. In origins are found the potential structures of traditions and, when actualized, origins open pathways to difference; and difference is everything.

In this paper, I intend to present some ideas that I hope will pave the way for a discussion of one possible approach to teaching the *Daodejing* in a Core Curriculum. My understanding of the *Daodejing* places it squarely in the category of a religious text, not a philosophical one, and this will most likely come as a surprise to those of you who are already familiar with it. I read it this way for many reasons, not least of which is that it is a text of “origins” and it presents a stunning vision of the world and the place of human beings in it that is nowhere seen in any other early Chinese writings that pre-date it. It is a unique vision, not shared by any other world tradition of religion or philosophy, and it is built upon on the culturally foundational notion known as the Dao. Further, it comes to us with a fully developed apparatus for understanding the past, present, and future of the Dao-centered world: a cosmogony which conceives the existence of the Dao before the beginning of the world; a cosmology which depicts the structure of the world in which all beings are in harmony with it; an ontology that explores the ways in which human beings have ruined that harmony; and a soteriology that looks forward to a future harmony incepted by sages who are thought capable of transforming the world.

The world-view of the *Daodejing* is Dao-centered; the entire world and all life in it come from the Dao. Unlike the case of Yahweh and Krishna, however, the Dao does not create the world; rather, it gives birth to it. We can look to *DDJ* 25 for its description of the time before there was anything; it says, “There is a thing completed in chaos that was born before Heaven and Earth. Empty and still, it stands on its own and does not change. It moves in cycles and is never threatened. It can be taken as the Mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name; I call it the Dao.”

Building on this portrayal of the time before time when only the Dao existed, *DDJ* 42 provides what is arguably the single-most important Chinese understanding of the coming-to-be of the world; its cultural impact, in fact, for all of East Asia is comparable to that of the Genesis creation stories for Western civilization. But whereas Genesis’ first creation story speaks of Yahweh’s “creating” (*bara’*) the world, the primary verb of *DDJ* 42 is “to give birth to” (*sheng*). The passage is very short: “Dao gave birth to One, One gave birth to Two, Two gave birth to Three, and Three gave birth to the ten thousand living things.”

The birth of the world takes place in a sequence of cosmogonic stages: the movement of the pristine Dao, “in cycles” as *DDJ* 25 says, results in a cosmic rhythm of its internal stuff, called *qi*, best understood in this instance as something like the breath of the Dao; this is One. This breath of the Dao falls into an expansive and contractive rhythm; the expansive breath is *yang*, and the contractive breath is *yin*; this is Two. As the *yin* and the *yang* contract and expand, the airy and light *yang* ascends while the heavy and dark *yin* descends, leaving a space in the middle wherein some *yang* interacts with some *yin*. They congeal within themselves as the realm of Heaven above as pure *yang*, the realm of Earth below as pure *yin*, and the realm in the middle, which is called the realm of the Human; this is Three. The realms of Heaven, Human, and Earth thereby go on to interact, giving birth to the ten thousand living things, a technical term for all living things that exist.

The *Daodejing*’s understanding of the origins of the world is radically non-theistic, although it often employs the metaphor of the mother (*mu*) to better articulate its notion of the origins of the world as a birth rather than as a creation; it uses the metaphor seven times. As *DDJ* 52 states, “The world had a beginning; this beginning can be taken as the Mother of the world.” In similar ways that God and Krishna are thought of as male father figures, so the Dao is a female mother figure. There is a lot at stake with this as far as understanding the origins of the world and the place of human beings in it. Fathers are often deemed as rule-givers, the dispensers of punishment, as well as protectors and defenders. Mothers, on the other hand, are often seen as care-takers, the dispensers of affection, and also the first source of sustenance and nurturance. Does it matter if we see the world as created or born? If it matters, then how does this change our understanding of our place in the world?

The *Daodejing* is well aware of what is at stake in seeing the world as the product of a father’s creation or a mother’s birth. Early China also had powerful male gods, one of which was known as Di. Deliberately responding to this, *DDJ* 4 says that the Dao “is an abyss, the ancestor of the ten thousand living things… I do not know whose child it is, it seems to have preceded Di.” Further, if we see male creators as rule-givers and female birthers as care-takers, then the *Daodejing* directly speaks to this as well; as *DDJ* 51 says, “The Dao gives birth to (all living things)… They are given birth but not possessed. They are acted for but not put into service. They are raised but not put under command.” *DDJ* 34 continues to pursue this difference; it says, “The ten thousand living things depend on (the Dao) for their birth, but it does not speak… It does not go on to possess them… Clothing and nurturing (them), it does not act as their master.”

What, we might ask, does it mean to be “possessed… put into service… (and) put under command”? To recognize that one is participant with all other beings as having been the created species of a god typically equates to recognizing one’s duty to worship that god, and there are proper ways to do so. The Ten Commandments stand as a case in point; but to receive the commands of a creator god, that god must speak, much like God spoke to Moses on Sinai. But the Dao does not speak. One consequence for the world of the *Daodejing* is that humans need to figure out the best rules of existence in community all on their own; there is a different kind of freedom in this responsibility, as well as certain dangers.

But let’s not move too far away from worship yet, because this plays a definite role in the world of the *Daodejing*. *DDJ* 51 says, “None among the ten thousand living things does not worship the Dao but nobody orders it; it is constantly spontaneous.” In other words, the Dao does not speak; therefore it gives no commands of any sort. And yet all things in their spontaneity worship it. What does this mean?

Living things worship the Dao simply by being who or what they naturally are; a tree worships the Dao by sprouting its leaves in the spring and dropping them in the autumn; a lion worships the Dao by chasing and killing zebras, while zebras worship the Dao by running like crazy away from the lions. For a tree not to worship the Dao would be for it not to sprout its leaves; for a zebra not to worship the Dao would be for it to lie down and simply let itself be eaten by the lions. But how do humans worship the Dao? We do so simply by being who we are: natural beings in the world. How do we not worship the Dao? We do so by being other than who we naturally are.

The difference between this understanding of a non-theistic Dao-centered world and a theistic god-centered world cannot be understated. The different stances made available by each view deeply affects how we as humans see ourselves, how we see our relationship to the highest sources from which the world and life comes, and also how we think about justice and injustice, and these are crucial questions for any Core Curriculum.

Kant forcefully argued that human morality is founded on the distinction between right and wrong, and that standard is measured by divine assessments to which the human mind has access. A century later, Nietzsche famously announced the death of God, suggesting the absence of any such divine standards for any human conception of good and evil, and right and wrong. Half a century later, Husserl focused on the crisis of European sciences, taking seriously the intellectual and philosophical consequences of such a de-centered world. Whoever we may judge to be correct in the tension between a theocentric versus a non-theocentric world, we still have the means to adequately formulate the following question: what happens to the foundations of human morality when there are no divine standards against which to judge right and wrong? Certainly the effort to develop a non-theistic, humanistic understanding of morality, justice, and the good were prime topics well worth consideration for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. But let’s bring the *Daodejing* back into this conversation: what does it provide for any conception of a universal moral foundation for questions of justice, of right and wrong? Given its non-theocentric vision of the world and existence, what does it offer, absent divine sanction and fiat, for conceptions of human morality and any understanding of justice that would follow therefrom?

Attention to the *Daodejing*’s presentation of justice and injustice should be central to any reading of it, particularly from a Core Curriculum approach. Different from Aristotle, who wants to discuss justice in relation to individual acts of practical judgment (*phronesis*), the *Daodejing* approaches the issue descriptively rather than theoretically, in so far as it presents its own understanding of justice by way of powerful images of injustice. Briefly said, injustice for the *Daodejing* is first of all a political and economic issue, reducible to acts of injustice carried out by “the ruling elites” over the “common people.” The power of the *Daodejing*’s confrontation with issues of justice and injustice is not in its theoretical discussions of right and wrong (there are none); it appeals, rather, to the visceral witnessing of the pain and suffering caused to the common people by the ruling elites acting to take everything that they can from the people by virtue of their arbitrary authority; it is a simple question of their brute exercise of power.

This method of the *Daodejing*’s confrontation with justice and injustice is presented in *DDJ* 53, which roundly condemns the unrestrained exercise of power in the hands of the ruling elites: “When the courts are spotless, the fields are full of weeds and the granaries are completely empty. Their clothing is patterned and embroidered and they carry sharp swords on their sides. They are gorged with drink and food and they have a wealth of possessions and goods. This is called thievery and aggrandizement, and is not the Dao.” The *Daodejing* calls this mechanism whereby the ruling elite luxuriously live at the expense of the common people “thievery and aggrandizement,” and the total environment created through this social and economic injustice is one in which the Dao, the harmonious force of well-being and the flourishing of life, is not allowed to flow.

This passage gives a brutal depiction of the world of power and politics, in which the ruling elite are so out of touch with the lives of the common people that they give no thought whatsoever to their hardships. Instead of committing their power and resources to helping the common people, they are on the contrary consumed with satiating their own thirst for power and wealth, and the massive expenditures needed to subsidize their desires are directly supplied by the common people through heavy taxation.

But let’s keep in mind that the text is not talking about human beings in general, only the ruling elites; the issue of justice is consistently directed to them. One thing that is all too characteristic of this group is their thirst for more power and more wealth; *DDJ* 46 directly confronts this: “No crime is greater than having excessive desires. No disaster is greater than not knowing how to be satisfied. No misfortune is greater than the desire to possess.” In the view of the *Daodejing*, desire proliferates, and if one gives into these desires, the consequence is ravagement for oneself and others, or what the text calls “crime,” “disaster,” and “misfortune.” These lines underscore the dangers of the unrestrained pursuit of desires. But keep in mind that in this and so many other passages of the text, “having excessive desires” is squarely identified with the ruling elites and not the common people. In the face of this kind of social, political, and economic injustice, what acts of justice could the common people possibly perform?

These are simply some of the various, yet most viscerally powerful, ways in which the *Daodejing* depicts the ruling elite, who seek to control and profit from the lives of the common people who know well enough how to live in the world without such hardships imposed from above.

Throughout the *Daodejing*, the measure of justice is provided by the standards of the Dao itself, and yet the Dao remains silent. It does not command, order, put into service, or punish. If having the presence of the Dao in the world is life, and the absence of the Dao in the world is death, then we need to place this on a continuum: life expands or contracts, and death contracts or expands, in direct relation to the degree to which the Dao is able to course throughout the world; as the text reiterates time and again, “the Dao gives birth.” The Dao loses this ability to course through the world endowing life due exclusively to the crimes, disasters, and misfortunes done, not by humans in general, but specifically by the ruling elites. And if the greatest acts of injustice are caused by the most excessive desires, then offensive war, as the purest demonstration of the unrestrained desire of the ruling elite gone haywire manifest in the effort to take land, resources, wealth, and labor, is the most destructive way that rulers act to shut out the Dao from the world. Further, if the measure of justice is given by the Dao, then offensive war, as the extreme form of desire, is the most unjust action. It is the furthest extreme on the continuum of life to death; as *DDJ* 30 says, “Where troops are stationed, only thorns and brambles will grow. In the wake of a great army, there will inevitably be a year of famine.” The measure of the Dao in such an environment is given in *DDJ* 46: “When the world has the Dao, walking horses are used in the fields. When the world is without the Dao, war horses are reared on the borders.”

Note that the horses mentioned in this passage are the same horses: when the Dao has free access in the world and the cycles of life are in harmony, people peacefully are able to go on with the harmonies of their own lives, thus employing their horses in agriculture. But when the world is without the Dao, these same farmers get conscripted into the armies, and the field horses are transferred from the fields to the battle-lines, typically the borders between states fighting for possession of the country under siege, and the horses are employed in driving the war-chariots. When the world is without the Dao, the result is warfare, destruction, and death.

In the non-theistic world of the *Daodejing*, there are no divine commands, rules, or even guidelines that human beings have to work with as they are born and grow into it. There is no divine judgment, and there is no divine retribution. But acts of injustice carry their own specific kind of punishment, but one not meted out in any afterlife. For the *Daodejing*, to think in terms of punishment and retribution for injustices is already to stray from the given conditions of its Dao-centered world-view. Maybe it is better to think of natural consequences; when human life is in harmony with the Dao, life proceeds; when it is not, life ends, and this is the simple reason why justice is better than injustice, as succinctly stated in *DDJ* 55: “Whatever is not of the Dao dies prematurely.”

What does any of this mean for the kinds of Core questions concerning justice with which we want to engage our students? Passages like these from *DDJ* 46 and 55 can open up a space in which we just might be able to rethink the question of justice by limiting it, at least first of all, to a specific arena of exercised power rather than a general question of human nature. How do questions of justice apply to victims of the unjust exercise of power? Is this to say that questions of justice are not applicable to the members of society who are bereft of even the power to defend themselves against injustice? Or should it, rather, redirect our thinking to the question of the relation between justice and power in a less universalistic, but more *realpolitik* way? Machiavelli confronted similar questions, but his taken perspective was that of what the *Daodejing* would name as the ruling elites, not its victims. In a world without divine commands concerning right and wrong, do we not also hear an echo of Thrasymachus, namely that justice is as power dictates?

Or are there other and antecedent questions that we can and maybe should conceive before we can even ask the question of a universal justice: need we not first of all take into consideration the question of power and its proliferation when there are no divine defenses against its unrestrained exercise? The *Daodejing* reduces the question of justice to its most extreme demonstration: justice is that which primarily provides for the on-going processes of life, while injustice ultimately leads to its extinguishment.

Notice that the *Daodejing* does not relegate the question of justice to virtue; in early China, issues of virtue belong more properly to the Confucian realm best represented in the *Analects*. It is also interesting to point out that for the *Analects*, virtue and justice do have a divine standard, Heaven (*tian*). For Confucius, Heaven represents the supreme moral authority safeguarding right and wrong, and justice and injustice; as he once was recorded as saying, “If it is Heaven’s will, the truth will prevail.”

But the *Daodejing* presents the conditions of the world in a radically non-theistic, non-transcendental vision, which is not that much different from Thrasymachus and Machiavelli, not to mention Nietzsche and Husserl. Absent any divine authority, what standards are available to human beings for knowing the measures of justice? This is precisely the point where the *Daodejing* parts ways from both Thrasymachus and Machiavelli. For it, the standards of justice and injustice, and right and wrong, are simply given with the measure of life and death. These are not topics of theoretical discussion or philosophical debate; they are, rather, eminently available right at hand, right in front of our eyes if we care to look: in the suffering of the common people.

There is a lot more to say about teaching the *Daodejing* in a Core Curriculum. Some issues that I have not discussed include the ways in which the short text presents a somewhat counter-intuitive understanding of human identity (it is radically physical); deeper questions about the text’s idea of the good life (one that is in harmony with the rhythms of the Dao); and the ways in which the *Daodejing* provides specific ideas about how best to nurture one’s personal relationship with the Dao (which is certainly not of the type of “I-Thou” relationship discussed by Buber).

What does the *Daodejing* offer to any Core Curriculum? In terms of both time and place, Core Curriculums are inherently comparative; in our first Core Offering at Boston University, Core Curriculum 101, we read the epic of Gilgamesh next to Genesis and the Odyssey; slightly less interested in how these writings fit into ancient Mesopotamian, ancient Near Eastern, and ancient Greek cultures, we look at different questions, questions about what it means to be human, and we look to various possible ways that earlier cultures have confronted this and other such questions. By far the great majority of such works embed the question of what it means to be human in theocentric worlds populated with divine authorities who want to define for us what it means to be human. The *Daodejing* offers a radically different view from within the depths of the ancient world, one in which there is no question of divine authority, no divine rules of how to act, and no divinely imposed standards of justice and with retribution for failing to meet them.

In the words of *DDJ* 57, “How do I know that the world is so? By this.”