**Journal #2: *Dao De Jing***

Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* is a text that attempts to illuminate the minds of people that have become accustomed to living lives driven by material wants, egotistical conceptions of themselves, and of instant gratification. Laozi explains that to arrive to a virtuous life we must follow the “Way”, or the “Dao”, which is a path of living which will lead you to living a fulfilled, virtuous life. The Dao isn’t a path that has active instructions on how to achieve this fulfilling life; instead it’s the opposite, it relies on what isn’t there or what shouldn’t be there to give insight on how to live. Laozi narrates that humans are a unique species in that, through our desires, our capacity to think/act intentionally, and alter our nature we actually break the harmony of the Dao (Laozi, 162). He claims that as civilization and human self-consciousness arose Dao declined (Laozi, 161). To achieve a virtuous life, or the “De”, we need to strip ourselves of all our self-conceptions and thoughts and we need to experience the world and reflect on it. In fact, Laozi says “Heaven is able to be long lasting and earth is able to endure, because they do not live for themselves” (Laozi, 166). He makes a similar connection to water, which gives sustenance and life to everything on this planet while confining itself to lowly places, water seems to be humble and good because it is good, not because it tries to be good. Laozi uses examples of sages, humble people who are full of wisdom because they don’t feel the need to affirm their wisdom and compete with others. He states that if people can model themselves off of these sages their lives can benefit endlessly, not in means of riches, status, or power, but in means of having strong virtues, wisdom, and self-knowledge. When we stop valuing ourselves based off of our external accomplishments or material accumulations, we can’t feel hurt if we fail, or if we lose our material goods. Laozi praises the sages’ ability to detach themselves from the pressures of the external world in an extended passage which finishes by saying, “Because they do not contend, no one in the world can contend with them” (Laozi, 173).

I believe the *Dao De Jing* is a text that can give some incredibly important insight to western society in today’s day and age. We tend to live in a world where we assess our success by how much money we make, what kind of car we drive, where we live and so forth. We also live distracted, by our phones, by means of instant gratification, and we tend value these material goods and shallow feelings more than we value deep reflective thought and virtuous growth. The *Dao De Jing* would tell us to stop living life for the external objects we can accumulate or for what other people think of us. Take for example, a businessman who works all day and night neglecting his family so that he can buy a nicer car, a bigger house, nicer cloths and so forth. These wants, created by human consciousness, reflect fake desires, that Philip J. Ivanhoe says (while interpreting Laozi), instead of bettering our life, lead to “destitution, want, alienation, and self-destruction” (Laozi, 161). In fact, the businessman from my example will never be satisfied, he will always strive for more, and the more he gets the less happy he will be. He will be tired, overworked, and he will have no time for his family or for himself. In attempting to run towards a better life he will actually be working so hard for a worse life.

Laozi uses the examples of a vessel and a room; “By adding and removing clay we form a vessel. But only on what is not there do we have use of the vessel” (Laozi, 167). This concept was very striking to me; we always consider the tangible materials (or tangible success etc.) we are using, in this example it’s the clay. But the value of a vessel isn’t found within the walls of clay, it’s found within the empty space inside of it that gives the vessel its usage. This example should be interpreted and applied to real life. The *Dao De Jing* teaches to reduce your desires, to know yourself before you try to know others, and to live for yourself and for what is natural and valuable and not to live to accumulate wealth or impress others. By stopping to understand who you truly are, you begin to finally become that person. When you chase after something so forcefully, you distance yourself from that thing. Instead the true value is in understanding yourself, not giving your ego so much importance, not comparing yourself to others, and not attaching yourself to the physical world because the most important things found in this world are not physical.

**Citation:**

Ivanhoe, Philip J. “Chapter 4: Laozi (The ‘Daodejing’).” *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Van Norden Bryan William, Hackett Publ., 2007, pp. 161–206.