

Chinese Philosophy - Homework 4.

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Text

When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,

There arises the recognition of ugliness.

When they all know the good as good,

There arises the recognition of evil.

Therefore:

Being and non-being produce each other;

Difficult and easy complete each other;

Long and short contrast each other;

High and low distinguish each other;

Sound and voice harmonize with each other;

Front and back follow each other.

Therefore the sage manages affairs without action(wu-wei)

And spreads doctrines without words.

All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.

He produces them, but does not take possession of them.

He acts, but does not rely on his own ability.

He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it.

It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him.

(Laozi)

Comments

In the first part of this text, we can catch a glimpse of the relativism characteristic of Daoism. According to this claim, distinctions arise from the relation of things to other things. For instance, *beauty* as a concept is not inherent to any objects; it is applicable only if we can compare it to other objects. By such comparison, we can define an ordering relation between objects; essentially a scale, with *ugliness* and *beauty* at the two ends.

This logic can be applied to all concepts we use to structure our world through our human perception. Some action is *good* only insofar as we can relate it to something *bad*. Similarly, an object can be identified as a *table* only if we can contrast its *table-ness* to other objects' *non-table-ness*. These distinctions seem objective, only because they are deeply rooted in our language and perceptual system.

The goal of the sage is to overcome these distinctions and false dichotomies and see the world for what it really is. He/she achieves this by giving up selfish action (i.e. following *wuwei*) and refraining from using words. Essentially, the sage observes the true nature of things (the *Dao*) and acts accordingly, without imposing (false) human views represented by words, social gain, or possession.

References

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Laozi

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi>