

# **Decoding Tao Te Ching: A Model & Examples**

Liwei Zhang

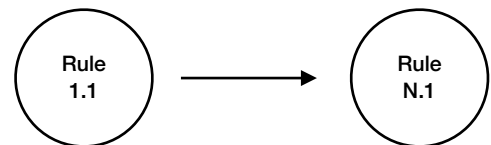
## The Model

### The Rule Space

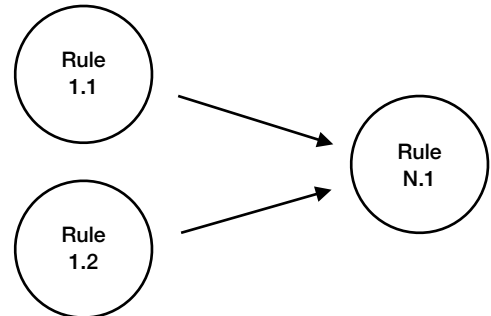
A set among whose elements, often called rules, may exist derivative relationship. There may also exist unidirectional or bidirectional effect relationship between two elements. Any rule having relationship with any rule from the rule space is an element of the rule space as well.

### Derivative Relationship

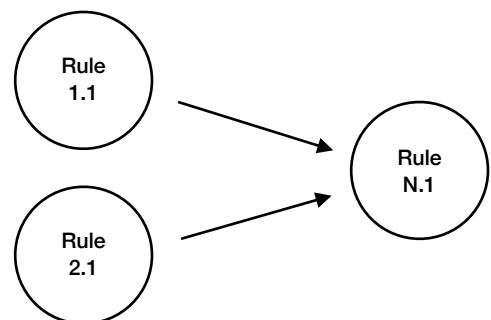
The simplest case: one rule derives another rule.



One of the second-simplest case: two rules from the same dimension derive another rule.



Another one of the second-simplest case: two rules from different dimensions derive another rule.

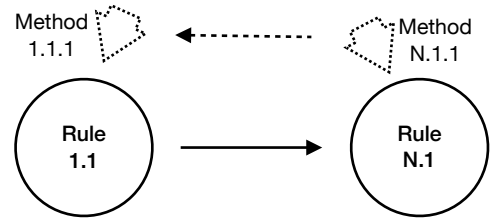


### Method

Method based on the rule space. More specifically, method based on one rule or a set of concrete rules.

While dealing with a problem within the context of a specific rule or a set of rules, the set of methods that directly contributes to handling the problem represents only a portion of the available options.

Taking the simplest case of derivative relationship as an example: picking the method for another rule from the direction of its origin also works.



## Examples of Decoding

Based on Tao Te Ching (Mawangdui Silk Texts version)

【道可道也 非恆道也】

When humans refer to the portion of the rule space that they can (recognize and) describe as "Tao," it does not encompass the portion of the rule space from which it derives; it does not refer to the "Eternal Tao."

The existence of derivative relationships in the rule space implies that there will always be a part of the originating rule space that humans cannot access. Therefore, when the term "Tao" is used correctly, it actually refers to the "Eternal Tao."

【故恆無欲也 以觀其眇 恆有欲也 以觀其所噉】

Therefore, when the observable scope of the effects of the originating rule space exists beyond the limits of human perception and imagination, humans can only perceive it with carefulness and keenness. When the effects of rules, derived from the originating rule space, are within the range of human perception and imagination, humans are able to observe their scopes and boundaries.

The non-existence and the existence of desire point to the two different states of human perception and imagination responding to the originating rule space's effects: the state of elusive nothingness and the state of clear awareness.

【道生之 而德畜之】

The rule space produces. And the methods working on the relevant rules are the way to utilize for one's own purposes.

【是以萬物尊道而貴德】

Therefore, all things respect the dominion of the rule space and treasure the according methods based on relevant rules.

【爲學者日益 聞道者日損】

Those devoted to learning gain more knowledge each day, while those who

perceive Tao find themselves willing to use and apply less rules each day (with the accumulation of shelved rules increasing day by day).

**【損之又損 以至於無爲】**

The number of rules that one is willing to use and apply keeps decreasing (with the accumulation of shelved rules increasing day by day). One keeps approaching continuously till reaching the state of doing nothing in the end.

**【無爲而無不爲】**

The number of rules that one is willing to use and apply continuously decreasing so that there are more and more one is able to complete.

Wu-wei as a state of extremum can never be reached but can only be approached closer and closer.

**【上德不德 是以有德】**

Superior methods working under rules do not overtly appear to be generated from the rules; this indicates the presence of the methods.

**【下德不失德 是以無德】**

Inferior methods working under rules at least are still generated from the rules; this indicates the absence of the methods.

**【故失道而後德】**

Therefore, if one cannot follow the originating rule space, the only option is to seek methods working under rules as a fallback.

**【報怨以德】**

To respond unfriendliness, use superior methods.

**【同於德者 道亦德之】**

If one conforms to superior methods, the originating rule space provides support for these methods.

## Discussion

By presenting the model and examples of decoding the Tao Te Ching in the preceding sections, it demonstrates what Lao Tzu described:

**Tao** A dual abstraction expression of the structure and form of the universe. The first layer involves extracting patterns from concreteness, representing an abstract concept. The second layer builds upon the abstract concept of rules to reveal the existence of derivative relationships, unidirectional, or mutually influential relationships within the rule space.

**Te** From the perspective of the rule space, it reveals the methods of employing and applying rules. It is crucial to clarify that, in Lao Tzu's text, the use of methods refers not only to intelligent beings like humans but also to all things, including the Tao and even the Eternal Tao itself, i.e., the originating rule space. Therefore, profound methods and superior methods point towards the Eternal Tao. Within the rule space, the utilization by the originating rule space is of the supreme existence.

**Wu-wei** As an existence not within the rule space, one can only seek those methods working under the portion of the rule space that is accessible. In the most ideal situation, those methods perfectly overlap with the utilization of the Tao. In this state of perfect overlap with the Tao, everything is orchestrated by the Tao, and the entity itself can achieve a state of non-action. However, whether such a state is possible is a primary question. Furthermore, the duration for which this state can be sustained is also a question. Additionally, whether its desires can perfectly align with the utilization of the Tao is a more profound question. Therefore, non-action, as an ideal state, akin to the concept of anything can be done, is not genuinely attainable. On the other hand, achieving something without desire is possible, and numerous examples can easily be found. What can be termed as wu-wei does not presuppose a mind without desire but rather a mind with desire. This is a case where wu-wei can be easily confused with having no desire. It is essential to make a clear distinction in this regard. However, although non-action as an ideal state may be unattainable, it can be continually approached closer and closer. The value and role of the concept of wu-wei lie in inspiring humanity to constantly strive to find methods that better align with the context of the rule space and thereby minimize unnecessary losses caused by going against the Tao.

## Limitations of The Model

The model presented above, along with examples of decoding the Tao Te Ching, is limited to an exploration of the universe's structural forms and how to utilize accordingly based on the Tao Te Ching's text. Other dimensions within Lao Tzu's text that are based on different environmental settings are not directly applicable within the

scope of this model. Therefore, the discussion above briefly touches upon the concept of wu-wei only as needed.

## **Afterword**

Science is a way for humanity to explore, accumulate, and iterate upon a portion of the rule space. The perspective of the rule space can help humans appreciate a broader and more profound world, avoiding losing oneself in the constant pursuit of progress.

Lao Tzu, who introduced the concept of the Tao, provides the most original exposition of the rule space. Over the course of more than 2,500 years of dissemination, any rewriting, addition, or deletion of any part of his text would diminish the value of the section where the concept of the Tao originated.

In the absence of an original version to refer to, the only way to ensure the preservation of Lao Tzu's original exposition of the rule space is to use relevant models to verify and retain the parts that can be confirmed as valid, separate the uncertain parts, and eliminate the sections that are confirmed to have been altered or added.

Given the profoundness, abstractness, and extensive complexity of the Tao Te Ching, this paper was neither polished nor detailed. In the future, when the opportunity arises, it will be revisited and revised.

The initial English version was completed on February 15, 2024, EST.