

Linguistic Skepticism in the Daodejing and its Relation to Moral Skepticism

Introduction

The *Daodejing* is widely conceived to be a moral guide written to present a way of life to restore harmony amid social and political unrest in Ancient China¹. It calls for people to embrace and follow the *Dao* (道), which was said to be “the image of what was before the Lord himself” (cf. *Daodejing*, Ch. 4, IVN, p. 165). Only through this will people understand the true meaning of virtue and order. However, there is an existing argument that the *Daodejing* seems to portray some form of linguistic skepticism², defined as the language used in the *Daodejing* is unable to fully guide one in conforming to social conventions in this paper. Through this, there have been different conceptions of the *Dao* and the moral truth of *wuwei* (无为) (non-action). This appears to then perpetuate moral skepticism, defined as the claim that no one has moral knowledge. Hence, it introduces the question of whether linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* brings about moral skepticism. In this paper, I argue that linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* does bring about moral skepticism.

¹ See *Tao-te Ching / Definition, Summary, & Facts*. (1998, July 20). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tao-te-Ching>

² It is important to note 2 things. Firstly, there are multiple definitions of linguistic skepticism. Therefore, my subsequent definition of linguistic skepticism is the one that I am going with in this paper. Secondly, when defining linguistic skepticism, the scholars that I refer to in this paper (See Footnotes 2, 3, 4) generally choose to focus on questioning whether the language use in the *Daodejing* can fully guide one in conforming to social conventions, rather than its “accuracy in describing what cannot be described” (Hansen 1981: 324) (cf. Tanaka 2004: 192, 195).

Roadmap

I will first present the existing argument that the *Daodejing* portrays linguistic skepticism supported by three articles: Hansen (1981)³, Tanaka (2004)⁴ and Yu (2003)⁵. In it, I will also discuss two different interpretations of the *Dao* resulting from linguistic skepticism in the text. Later, I will present an argument on the relation between linguistic skepticism and moral skepticism in the *Daodejing*. I argue mainly from passages in the *Daodejing* (trans. Van Norden) that we have good reason to think that linguistic skepticism will bring about moral skepticism. I build upon the existing argument for linguistic skepticism and discuss two different interpretations of *wuwei*, which is a moral truth in the *Daodejing*, in order to show the relation between linguistic and moral skepticism. Here, I also consider a possible objection and construct a response against that. Lastly, I consider the great influence the *Daodejing* has on contemporary ethics in Eastern Philosophy. I propose the importance of my paper calling for a universal address of the presence of linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* and how it perpetuates moral skepticism. Should this issue not be addressed, the effectiveness of the *Daodejing* as a moral guide would significantly decrease.

³ See Hansen, C. (1981, July). Linguistic Skepticism in the Lao Tzu. *Philosophy East and West*, 31(3), 321-336. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1398577>

⁴ See Tanaka, K. (2004). The limit of language in Daoism. *Asian Philosophy*, 14(2), 191-206.

⁵ See Yu, A. C. (2003, December). Reading the “Daodejing”: Ethics and Politics of the Rhetoric. *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, 25, 165-187. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3594286>

Linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*

Chad Hansen is one of the strongest proponents of the existing argument that linguistic skepticism can be found in the *Daodejing*. Therefore, I refer to his article (See Footnote 3) the most in the exposition. He starts off with considering the possibility for the difference in the concept of knowledge between Western and Eastern philosophers when making his argument. This is important in recognising why the former might claim that there is linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* when it was never formally mentioned in the text itself. He argues that the Chinese philosophers have no concept of propositional knowledge⁶, unlike Western philosophers. Hansen thinks that linguistic skills are inherently tied to propositional knowledge, and knowing how to use language properly is the same as conforming to social conventions (cf. Hansen, 1981, p. 322). Hence, it follows that without the concept of propositional knowledge, it is difficult to properly command linguistic skills, which hinders the ability to conform to social conventions well. This hindrance propagates linguistic skepticism. Take A to be a Chinese philosopher in this case:

P1: If A has propositional knowledge, then A has linguistic skills.

P2: Having linguistic skills is the same as conforming to social conventions.

P3: From P1 and P2, if A has propositional knowledge, then A conforms to social conventions.

P4: If A is conforming to social conventions, then there is no linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*.

P5: A does not have propositional knowledge.

⁶ Propositional knowledge is a type of knowledge that can be determined as true or false, justified or unjustified.

C1: Therefore, from P3 and P5, A does not conform to social conventions.

C2: Therefore, from P4 and C1, there is linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*.

As part of his argument, Hansen considers the notion that the Chinese syntax in the *Daodejing* would call for a focus on different concepts of knowledge (cf. *ibid*). He proposes the Daoist concept of knowledge to be the ability to know how to act in accordance with social convention (cf. p 326). This ability is only achieved when one follows the *Dao*. But “the *Dao* that can be followed is not a constant *Dao*” (*Daodejing*, Ch 1, IVN, p. 163). So there lies a linguistic paradox here: In order to be guided by the *Dao*, we must not be guided by it. But when we are not being guided by the *Dao*, we are guided by it (cf. Tanaka, 2004, p. 191). It is thus very challenging for us to follow the *Daodejing* as a moral guide.

Furthermore, there are two main different interpretations of the *Dao* amongst scholars. The first interpretation of the *Dao* is of a metaphysical, “formless” (*Daodejing*, Ch 14, IVN, p. 169), “vague and elusive” entity (Ch. 21, p. 172) that cannot be conceived. The second interpretation is of a conceivable, natural path that guides us through moral truths⁷ for us to become sagely (cf. Yu, 2003, p. 171). While both Tanaka and Hansen noted that the first interpretation of the *Daodejing* perpetuates mysticism⁸, Hansen points out that it is inconsistent with the practical in the text (cf. Tanaka, 2004, p. 191; Hansen, 1981, p. 330). On one hand, the text hints that “we should give up

⁷ The ideas of *ziran* (自然), where we live in accordance with our natural propensity, and *wuwei* (无为), where we act without unnecessary effort.

⁸ Hansen further questions if the text perpetuates skepticism-mysticism (p. 330), where it not only makes the reader question the traditional knowledge about the metaphysical entity of the *Dao* that the text has to offer, but also propose ways for the reader to follow to seek a direct experience with the *Dao*.

names [and] knowledge” when describing the *Dao* (Hansen, 1981, p. 330). But on the other hand, it offers names and knowledge itself; by calling it “The Way” (*Daodejing*, Ch 25, IVN, p. 175), and stating the results of following the *Dao* (cf. Ch 22, p. 173) – making it very “statable” (Hansen, 1981, p. 330). Hence, this traditional view must be rejected (cf. Tanaka, 2004, p. 191). From this, Yu (2003) points out the “intrinsic limitations” (p. 171) of the Chinese syntax, which makes the individual words ambiguous, as a cause for the different interpretations of the *Dao*, further showcasing the presence of linguistic skepticism in the text (cf. p. 170). Here, we can see that the language used in the *Daodejing* is unable to fully guide one in conforming to social conventions well, thus perpetuating linguistic skepticism.

Even so, it might seem plausible that the *Daodejing* can still be used as a moral guide, albeit having multiple interpretations. If one manages to stick to the original language written in it (Ancient Chinese), then they could seemingly avoid the aforementioned problems. Furthermore, it seems that the *Daodejing* would have been written whilst taking into account the cultural and linguistic norms of that time period, and so, people of that time would not have encountered this problem. Hence, the opponent might consider whether the presence of linguistic skepticism within the text really denies it from being used as a moral guide. My response is yes, the *Daodejing* cannot be considered a moral guide the moment it has multiple interpretations, which causes linguistic skepticism. This is arguably the case regardless of time periods. Tanaka (2004) brings up an analogy of computer programming to showcase how humans process language (p. 193-194). “For the Chinese philosophers, what language is for humans is what a program is for a computer” (Tanaka, 2004, p. 194). So, language is essential in guiding human behaviour in society and helping us conduct our social lives (cf. *ibid*). Now, different Chinese philosophers have different

conceptions of what a *Dao* should be. While they all agree that a *Dao* must connote “the ‘best’ way to prescribe our social behaviour”, they have their own respective *Daos* (cf *ibid.*). It is akin to humans speaking different languages to bring across the same meaning. In that, “a *Dao* is a language” (*ibid.*). However, in order for different languages to bring across the same meaning, it is necessary for them to have a common interpretation across the board. We see, from above, that the *Daodejing* lacks that. By having multiple interpretations of moral guidance, it leaves room for misinterpretation of the original intention behind such guidance. With this, there is a significant chance that followers of the *Daodejing* might become morally misguided, should they follow the ‘wrong’ interpretation. Hence, this is a failure of the *Daodejing* to guide moral actions, significantly weakening its utility as a moral guide.

The relation between linguistic and moral skepticism

Thus far, it seems that we have good reason to believe that there is linguistic skepticism present in the *Daodejing*, which is a key contributor to its failure as a moral guide. From this, I argue further that there is a relation between linguistic and moral skepticism in the text, in that linguistic skepticism does bring about moral skepticism.

For us to determine whether there is moral skepticism as a result of linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*, we must first ascertain whether the text supports the definition that no one can have moral knowledge (see **Introduction**). As mentioned in **Linguistic Skepticism in the *Daodejing***, the concept of knowledge for Chinese philosophers is likened to knowing how to act in social conventions. Hence, if no one can have moral knowledge, then it is the case that no one can know how to act in social conventions. At first glance, the conclusion seems strange. What does it mean to not know how to act in social conventions? Here, I offer my own conditions for knowledge to help us answer this question, which is that in order to possess knowledge, we must understand a common interpretation of the concept. As such, this concept must have a singular definition, not multiple, for multiple interpretations hinder us from understanding a common, singular interpretation of the concept. From this, we can now proceed to determine if the *Daodejing* does suggest the presence of moral skepticism.

In addition to having multiple interpretations of the *Dao*, scholars have also come up with multiple interpretations of *wuwei*, further contributing to my argument. The first interpretation is the idea of effortless action, where one is proficient enough at a task such that one no longer needs

to put in any effort for optimal performance, thus allowing one to become harmonious with the *Dao* (cf. Slingerland, 2000, p. 295). The second interpretation is the idea of doing the bare minimum to obtain results and avoiding unnecessary effort. One is to “withdraw when the work is done” (*Daodejing*, Ch 9, IVN, p. 167) and to not abide by “excess provisions and pointless activities” (Ch 24, p. 174). Now, the interesting thing is that the second interpretation of *wuwei* is much more commonly found in the text itself. So, how did the first interpretation even come about?

While we saw the idea of effortless action being implemented in Cook Ting’s story in Chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi*^{9 10}, this idea was not yet explicitly mentioned in the *Daodejing*. Again, this reinforces the claim that the language used in the *Daodejing* allowed for multiple interpretations of concepts due to the ambiguous nature of individual Chinese words.

In the *Daodejing*, *wuwei* can be seen as a moral truth (cf. Slingerland, 2000, p. 295). Thus, it is important for us to lay out the argument for how linguistic skepticism in the text can allow us to doubt if there is an objective interpretation of *wuwei*. The argument for linguistic skepticism in the context of *wuwei* is as follows:

⁹ Cook Ting claims that after training his craft for many years, he is now able to effortlessly perform it and that his method is ‘the method of the *Dao*’. See Sturgeon, D. (n.d.). *Zhuangzi : Inner Chapters : Nourishing the Lord of Life - Chinese Text Project*, Ch. 3.2. <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/nourishing-the-lord-of-life/ens>

¹⁰ This idea was important as the *Zhuangzi* was widely regarded as having built upon previous ideas within the *Daodejing*, such as *wuwei*. Hence, the *Daodejing* was known to be a ‘building block’ in describing important Daoist ideas, from which *Zhuangzi* referred to when crafting the *Zhuangzi*.

P1: If there is no linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*, then there wouldn't be multiple interpretations of *wuwei*.

P2: There are multiple interpretations of *wuwei*.

C1: Therefore, there is linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*.

As established earlier in the paper, a cause of linguistic skepticism is the ambiguity of individual Chinese words used in the text. This ambiguity allowed for multiple, different interpretations of *wuwei* to come about. Given that *wuwei* is a moral truth, having multiple interpretations of it would mean that there is no objective interpretation, showcasing moral skepticism in the text. Without an objective interpretation, there is no room for us to have knowledge of what *wuwei* is as a moral truth, thus perpetuating moral skepticism. For the *Daodejing* to not entertain moral skepticism is for there to be absolutely no ambiguity when proposing social conventions that are to be followed, and thus must only have a singular definition. In this case, in order for the *Daodejing* to not entertain moral skepticism, it must either deny *wuwei* as a moral truth, or to deny that there are multiple interpretations of *wuwei*. The first denial goes against the essence of the text itself (cf. *ibid*), and should be rejected. The second denial, if accepted, would largely support the anti-thesis that there is no linguistic skepticism in relation to *wuwei* in the *Daodejing*. This means that opponents of my argument will need to accept the second denial. However, as there are 2 clear, popular interpretations of *wuwei*, as mentioned earlier, it seems that as of now, there is no consensus on which interpretation is the 'correct' one, and therefore should be the singular definition. Until then, we must accept that there are multiple

interpretations of *wuwei*, hence rejecting the second denial. Therefore, we have now proven that no one has moral knowledge in the *Daodejing*, as a result of linguistic skepticism.

However, it is possible for an opponent to raise this question: In the text, is linguistic skepticism even present as a concept to begin with, given that there was no equivalent term mentioned in the text's original language, Ancient Chinese? Like Truth¹¹, skepticism in Chinese philosophy is a highly debated topic, given that most texts do not directly mention its presence. This could be attributed to 'linguistic skepticism' being a term that originated from Western philosophy¹². As such, it is possible that its concept has been assigned to the *Daodejing* by thinkers who are familiar with Western philosophy, instead of it being present within the text. Following that, the opponent would conclude that if linguistic skepticism is a purely Western concept, then it cannot be applied to the *Daodejing*, for it would only result in misapplication and the removal of key cultural attributes of the *Daodejing*, such as it being a moral guide. Should we choose to accept this objection, then the existing argument for linguistic skepticism and my argument for the relation between linguistic and moral skepticism will be significantly weakened.

¹¹ See Saunders Jr, F. (2022). Truth and Chinese philosophy: A plea for pluralism. *Dao*, 21(1), 1-18. Saunders Jr. provides prominent views about whether the early Chinese philosophers had the concept of truth.

¹² The Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, was one of the earliest thinkers who expressed there being a "fundamental problem regarding language". This was because "conventionalism about [language] is closely related to conventionalism about truth". See *Philosophy of language | Summary, Books, Topics, Philosophers, & Facts*. (2007, January 25). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-language/Skepticism> We see this being echoed in the discussion of how the language used in the *Daodejing* informs different interpretations of *wuwei* as a moral truth.

Henceforth, I argue that we should not choose to accept this argument. Just because there was no linguistic equivalent of the term ‘linguistic skepticism’ does not mean that the concept did not exist in the text at all. Instead, I propose that skepticism (both linguistic and moral) takes on a functional concept in the *Daodejing*. This means that the Daoists essentially have the same concept of linguistic skepticism, but they adopt different terms and explanations to bring it across instead of just using the language translation for ‘linguistic skepticism’ as a placeholder for naming the concept.

In the *Daodejing*, we see instances where Laozi acknowledges that language is not sufficient in encapsulating the full meaning of the *Dao* and the teaching of moral truths such as *wuwei*. The idea of “what is not there”, “not seen” (*Daodejing*, Ch. 11 & 35, IVN, p. 168, 180) and “nameless” (Ch. 1, 32, 37, IVN, p. 163, 178, 180) is recurrent in describing the *Dao* throughout the text. Furthermore, the teaching of moral truths is said to be “without words” (Ch. 2 & 42, IVN, p. 163, 184). Here, the irony is that a book with words claims that moral truths should be taught without words, but also aims to impart said moral truths to the reader. If I were to go one step further, there is reason to believe that the *Daodejing*, in itself, is an irony. This can be explained through the viewpoint that the *Daodejing*, as part of Daoism, critiques morality under the guise of a moral guide. Fraser (2018) explains what exactly is the Daoist critique on morality in his article ‘A Daoist Critique of Morality’¹³. In this paper, I focus on his idea that Daoism “advocates that morality be jettisoned entirely, on the grounds that its practice and the associated ideology are detrimental to the exercise of our virtuosity and our following the Way” (Fraser, 2018, p. 17).

¹³ See Fraser, Chris (2018). A Daoist Critique of Morality. In Justin Tiwald (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Chinese Philosophy*. <https://philpapers.org/rec/FRAADC-3>

Moreover, the rejection of morality lies in the call for it as an “action guidance”, which could lead to the basis for justification of different actions and thus how we lead our lives (cf. *ibid*). So, how we interpret moral actions will largely depend on our own circumstances and not on a fixed scale. This disregards the notion that there is a common interpretation of morality, hence perpetuating moral skepticism.

Furthermore, the idea of the *Daodejing* being used as a moral guide also goes against the idea of *ziran* and *wuwei* in the *Daodejing*. For if we were to follow rules on how we should act to be moral, then there is a problem. Not everyone finds it natural to follow certain societal moral guidelines, which contradicts *ziran*. If it is not natural for someone to follow these moral guidelines, then they require more action in order to do so, which contradicts *wuwei*. After all, if “the good strives to be good, it is no good” (*Daodejing*, Ch. 2, IVN, p. 163). By striving to be something that is unnatural, it goes against the *Dao*. Here, the *Daodejing* seemingly propagates moral subjectivism. Whatever is moral is the “most harmonious way forward” depending on circumstances, and not on what was written in a book (*ibid*). Therefore, the irony remains strong here; the *Daodejing* is written as how a guidebook would be, lending to its supposed function as a moral guide. However, it does not call for one to follow its guidelines. Instead, it rejects morality as a “source of action guidance” (Fraser, 2018, p. 17). Thus, while the first irony propagates the concept of linguistic skepticism once again, the second irony discussed supports the idea that there is moral skepticism within the text itself; that no one has moral knowledge. As such, even though there is no Ancient Chinese equivalent term for ‘linguistic skepticism’ in the *Daodejing*, the concept, together with moral skepticism, certainly exist functionally in the text, making it still worthwhile of discussion.

Implications

The *Daodejing* has greatly influenced the study of contemporary ethics in Eastern Philosophy. Most Eastern philosophers engage with the text in their articles when discussing the field of ethics. However, the discussion about the presence of linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* and how it brings about moral skepticism is still quite novel, hence, I propose my paper to call for a universal address of the presence of linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* and how it perpetuates moral skepticism. By acknowledging this aspect of the text, it opens up further discussion on the possibility of using the *Daodejing* to serve as a political guide, instead of a moral guide. Given that the text was originally written for rulers to follow to establish political order in the state, it is not unjustified for us to limit its purposes to politics. Else, we can accept that while there are no objective moral truths that can be gained from reading the text, it is still possible for social harmony to be brought about even when there are different understandings of the moral truths. This is because ultimately, the *Daodejing* aims to promote social harmony and thus, no matter how we interpret its teachings, we ought to keep this aim in mind and act accordingly. Should we fail to do so, the fault lies with ourselves, rather than the ambiguity of the text.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced the existing argument for the presence of linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing*. This was shown through the multiple interpretations of the *Dao* as a result of the ambiguous nature of the language used in the *Daodejing*. In my thesis, I have argued for the relation between linguistic and moral skepticism in the *Daodejing*, in which the latter is a product of the former. In accounting for this, I built off from the existing argument and discussed multiple interpretations of *wuwei*, which showcases the presence of moral skepticism in the text as well. Moreover, I considered the argument that the *Daodejing* is intrinsically an irony, given that it, as part of Daoism, rejects morality as an action guide, while it is written to be read as a moral guidebook. The 2 ironies discussed in **The relation between linguistic and moral skepticism**, the first being a linguistic irony and the second as aforementioned, greatly supported my overall argument that the linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* perpetuated moral skepticism. Lastly, I considered the implications of my paper on the present discussion of linguistic skepticism in the *Daodejing* and drew more attention to the link between linguistic and moral skepticism there.

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