

Article

Metaphorical Metaphysics in the Dao De Jing

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Abstract: Many readers of the *Dao De Jing* have identified an ontology associated with the text. In such ontological readings, the term *dao* 道 is taken to refer to some type of monolithic, eternal, abstract fundamental reality. They generally point to certain chapters of the text as supporting this interpretation. The implication seems virtually theological, at least in the impersonal “Advaitic Brahman” sense. However, if we carefully examine the passages to which such proponents refer as evidence of this position, it becomes clear that these chapters are metaphorical rather than metaphysical. I propose to examine several of these chapters to clarify the tentative and rhetorical nature of their expression.

Keywords: Daoism; Dao De Jing; ontology; metaphor; process

Many readers of the *Dao De Jing* have identified an ontology associated with the text. In such an ontological reading, the term *dao* is taken to refer to some type of monolithic (hence the use of the definite article “The *Dao*”), eternal (a troubling yet consistent translation of *chang* 常 in the first chapter), abstract (hence the use of the upper case for “*Dao*”), and uniquely ineffable fundamental reality (fundamental reality posits a reality on which all other realities depend, as opposed to the concept of reality as interdependent and inter-causal). As I argue elsewhere (Fox 2005, 2017, 2020), *daos* are pluralistic, temporal, concrete, and real, and all *daos* elude effability. Such interpretations generally point to certain chapters of the text as supporting this reading. The implication seems virtually theological, at least in the impersonal “Advaitic Brahman” sense. However, if we carefully examine the passages to which such proponents refer as evidence of this position, it becomes clear that these chapters are metaphorical rather than metaphysical. I propose to examine several of these chapters to clarify the tentative and rhetorical nature of their expression.

Articulations of distinctions such as “ontology” and “metaphysics” vary widely. Scholars such as Zheng Kai have addressed the distinction between ontology and other forms of metaphysical thinking (Zheng 2017), but unfortunately such discussions seem to only further muddy the water, introducing yet a third category, “meta-ontology”, without ever clearly articulating the distinctions between the terms. For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to come to a consensus regarding the central categories. Since my philosophical bias is linguistic, I will define metaphysics as a way of talking about reality and ontology as a way of talking about being or existence as something separate from beings or things that exist, that is to say, as an abstraction that is independent of and non-identical to any of its instances. As Zheng says, “...the object of discourse in *bentilun* [本體論 often understood in modern Chinese scholarship to refer to ontology] does not match up with that of [its original ancient Greek counterpart] i.e., ontology, namely ‘being qua being’” (Zheng 2017, p. 408).

Since ontology seems to refer to metaphysical views that understand reality in terms of some static, monolithic, abstract concept of “Being”, what I am calling “ontological” readings understand the term *dao* 道 as referring to “The *Dao*”, an abstract, monolithic, eternal, uniquely ineffable fundamental reality. This is a very dominant modern interpretation in both Chinese and Western scholarship on the text, including the recent and aforementioned Zheng¹. Certainly, a feature of almost all ancient cosmological thinking is some



Citation: Fox, Alan. 2023.

Metaphorical Metaphysics in the
Dao De Jing. *Religions* 14: 1188.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091188>

Academic Editor: Arndt Büssing

Received: 24 July 2023

Revised: 31 August 2023

Accepted: 12 September 2023

Published: 18 September 2023



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kind of primordial unity out of which is generated multiplicity. In the Chinese tradition, in particular, we find the idea of *hundun* 混沌 or “primordial non-differentiation or chaos”. However, the ontological view of *dao* goes further by characterizing it as monolithic, abstract, uniquely ineffable, and so on. Even *hundun* is commensurable with process thought, if we understand it as the phenomenological manifold of all processing that is articulated through designation, which is more of a cognitive or phenomenological distinction than a metaphysical one. Benjamin Schwartz’s chapter on Daoism in his still influential *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, for example, considers the *Dao De Jing* to represent some form of generic Gnosticism or mysticism, as indicated by the following:

Among students of comparative religion, there seems to be some consensus concerning the earmarks of mystical orientations in religion. One will find considerable common ground in the writings of authors as diverse as Underhill, Stace, Jones, and Scholem, and among authorities on Indian thought. In all of them we find some notion of “ground of reality” or ultimate aspect of reality or a dimension of “nonbeing” (naturally all metaphors when applied to human language. It is a reality or dimension of reality beyond all determinations, relations, and processes which can be described in human language. Yet the mere assertion of the existence of such a reality does not in itself constitute mysticism. It is rather the profound faith or “knowledge” in the sense of gnosis that this reality—incommunicable in words—is nevertheless the source of all meaning for human beings which makes mysticism in some sense a religious outlook. ... All the above factors are, I think, present in and even central to the visions of the Lao-tzu... (Schwartz 1985, p. 193). In addition to the *tao* in its unnameable dimension, there is *tao* in its aspect as the “speakeable” and there are the “ten thousand things, which can be named. ... It is nonbeing (*wu*). I translate this term here with a term often used in Western writings on mysticism, since it seems to correspond adequately to its use in the translation of mystical literature in other cultures. (Schwartz 1985, p. 197)

Schwartz uses the comparative paradigm in a loose and over-simplified manner that overlooks major differences between different forms of mysticism as well as differences between Daoism and other forms of thought. Certainly, Harold Roth’s book on early meditation practices (Roth 2004) identifies them as mystical, but it is clearly a corporeal and immanent mysticism rather than a devotional type focused on identifying with some kind of deity. Although such interpretations admit that metaphorical language is used because of the ineffability of the “Tao”, they still seem to want to refer to ontological claims that cannot be described in language. The burden is to demonstrate that any such concepts are substantive and concrete rather than abstract and speculative, which is the nature of most ontological views of Daoism or any other system of thought.

It is clear that authors such as Schwartz and others do acknowledge the metaphorical nature of the text, but they seem to imply that these are metaphors for some type of fundamental reality of an ontological type.

However, there are many reasons to reject this assumption of universal mysticism, including historical, linguistic, and philosophical reasons. I mention just a few below.

Historically, there is no evidence of any kind of abstract metaphysics in China at the time the text was likely to have taken shape, toward the end of the Warring States period, around 400 or so BCE. That kind of thinking seems to have entered the Chinese philosophical landscape with the arrival of Buddhism in the first couple of hundred years of the Common Era. The influential commentator Wang Bi (226–249 CE) added a layer of metaphysical interpretation, but for the most part, what I am calling the ontological interpretation seems to be the result of Silk Route influences and ultimately the early European translators, who seemed to think that Daoism was the same as Advaita Vedanta, on the one hand, and wanted to read some type of theology into the text on the other. “The *Dao*” came to be seen as the same kind of abstract fundamental reality as the Vedantic Brahman. As Ames and Hall put it,

Chinese philosophy has been made familiar to Western readers by first “Christianizing” it, and then more recently by locating it within a poetical-mystical-occult worldview. To the extent that Chinese philosophy has become the subject of Western philosophical interest at all, it has usually been analyzed within the framework of categories and philosophical problems not its own. (Ames and Hall 2003, p. xi)

This kind of cultural appropriation has apparently and unhelpfully allowed scholars to impose their own understandings on to this extremely abstruse text. It becomes like a Rorschach blot, which reflects more the biases and inclinations of the observer than the actual properties of the observed.

Linguistically, it is important to note that the classical Chinese language lacks many features that are usually associated with grammar: for instance, there are no singulars or plurals and no definite or indefinite articles. Chad Hansen says, “The ubiquitous ‘the’ in other translations of *dao* is always added by the translator. [My] translation has opted for indefinite reference (a/some *dao*) or uses the plural (*daos*) and reserves singular form for modified *dao* (for example, my father’s *dao* = the sum of my father’s *daos*)” (Hansen 2009, p. 26). In addition, there is no upper case. This makes it extremely problematic to render the character *dao* 道 as “The *Dao*”. Doing so clearly represents several degrees of translator imposition. Since classical Chinese lacks an equivalent of the verb “to be”, it is incapable of describing a static metaphysical framework or equivalent of the idea of “Being”, as well as “Non-being”. As the noted philologist Peter Boodberg points out, “...we feel that the traditional translation of *Tao* as ‘the Way’ does little justice to the wealth of the Chinese term’s semantic connotations” (Boodberg 1957, p. 602). Brook Ziporyn puts it this way:

The reasons for this lay not only in the alternate versions that were already available to the tradition, but also in the extremely compressed and inexplicit mode of expression that distinguishes this text even from the already notoriously ambiguous corpus of ancient texts written in classical Chinese. For that language is among the most proficient in the world at evading disambiguation—lacking as it does cases, declensions, conjugations, tenses, singular and plural forms, noun-verb agreement, parts-of speech morphology, prefixes and suffixes, and gender; lacking the necessity of specifying subjects in sentences, lacking articles either definite or indefinite, lacking punctuation, line breaks, quotation marks, and capitalization. (Ziporyn 2023, p. xi)

In other words, the text is written in a language that is vastly different from the modern languages, perhaps especially English, into which it has been rendered. This means that it is a significant challenge to avoid translator imposition.

Philosophically, the idea of eternity, that is, of changeless entities existing outside of time, is not really consistent with the doctrine of change and flux that is otherwise found throughout the *Dao De Jing* and more broadly within pre-Buddhist Chinese thought in general. Boodberg comments, “*Ch’ang* 常, ‘constant’, ‘regular’, ‘common’, ‘ordinary’, ‘persistent’, ‘conventional’, ‘enduring’, never meant ‘eternal’ or ‘absolute’ in our sense, as wrongly used by so many translators of the first couplet of the *Lao Tzu*. As an epithet, it is used to characterize ‘long-customed’, ‘long-vested’ things and habits, both in the positive sense of ‘time-honored’... and in the negative sense of ‘time-worn’” (Boodberg 1957, p. 599). There is also the usual problem of infinite regress in identifying *dao* as a “first cause”. In fact, the idea that *dao* was there before the world began ignores the claim of Chapter 40 of the *Dao De Jing* that “the movement of *daos* is reversal *fan zhe dao zhi dong* 反者道之”. This means that if the world comes out of some primordial source, then it is also possible to argue that the primordial source comes out of the world. That is, it seems to proceed in both directions. If everything proceeds from a source, it also resolves back into the source, cyclically, so why ontologically privilege one pole of the oscillation?

Hall and Ames point out,

As a parody on Parmenides, who claimed that “only Being is”, we might say that for the Daoist, “only *beings* are”, or taking one step further in underscoring the reality of the process of change itself, “only *becomings* are”. That is, the Daoist does not posit the existence of some permanent reality behind appearances, some unchanging substratum, some essential defining aspect behind the accidents of change. Rather, there is just the ceaseless and usually cadenced flow of experience. ... “particular things” are in fact processual events, and are thus *intrinsically* related to the other “things” that provide them context. Said another way, these processual events are porous, flowing into each other in the ongoing transformations we call experience. (Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 13–15)

Additionally, reading *dao* ontologically leads to dozens of non-sequiturs and contradictions in the text, which are arguably reduced significantly if we read *daos* as concrete dynamic and pluralistic processes, rather than as a monolithic static abstraction. The ontological reading renders *dao* as eternal, which means outside of time entirely, which means unchanging and therefore static. Elsewhere I argue more specifically in favor of a process metaphysics reading of the *Dao De Jing*.

However, the focus of this paper is to point out chapters that are often used to support ontological readings and carefully examine the nature of the language used in those chapters. It becomes clear that the ostensible claims regarding *dao* are always expressed using metaphorical language, such as “it is as if it were this way” or “it is almost as if it were this way”. This undermines the ontological reading because the text is clear on the point that words are insufficient to adequately capture any aspect of reality in all its subtlety.

The first point to make is that there are very few chapters that even seem to address or support the ontological reading. Most chapters focus on practical issues, including moral, political, and psychological matters. Thus, for the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on what seem to be the most obvious ones here, which number only six: Chapters 1, 4, 14, 21, 25, and 42. There are others that might be discussed, but they usually involve quotation of ancient aphorisms, so it is hard to characterize them in any way other than mythical, such as Chapter 51, which quotes an old saying. Fung Yu-lan, in his *Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, singles out several of these chapters in his introduction to the subject:

All things that “lie within shapes and features” have names, or, at least, possess the possibility of having names. They are namable. But in contrast with what is namable, Lao Tzu speaks about the unnamable. Not everything that lies beyond shapes and features is unnamable. Universals, for instance, lie beyond shapes and features, yet they are not unnamable. But on the other hand, what is unnamable most certainly does lie beyond shapes and features. The *Tao* or Way of the Taoists is a concept of this sort. In the first chapter of the *Lao-tzu* we find the statement: “The *Tao* that can be comprised in words is not the eternal *Tao*; the name that can be named is not the abiding name. The Unnamable is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; the namable is the mother of all things”. And in chapter thirty-two: “The *Tao* is eternal, nameless, the Uncarved Block. ... Once the block is carved, there are names”. Or in chapter forty-one: “The *Tao*, lying hid, is nameless”. In the Taoist system, there is a distinction between *yu* (being) and *wu* (non-being), and between *yu-ming* (having-name, namable) and *wu-ming* (having-no-name, unnamable). These two distinctions are in reality only one, for *yu* and *wu* are actually simply abbreviated terms for *yu-ming* and *wu-ming*. Heaven and Earth and all things are namables. ...The *Tao*, however, is unnamable at the same time it is that by which all namables come to be. This is why Lao Tzu says: “The Unnamable is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; the namable is the mother of all things.”²

Beginning with the first chapter, one of the most representative ontological readings can be found in John Wu’s translation (Wu 1989), which is beautiful but also seems to take for granted previous (mis)readings of the text. The evidence produced here for the idea of an eternal *Dao* seems to be a mistranslation rather than a metaphor, but it is an extremely

common one, and so it is worth including in this discussion. Wu's translation of the first couple of lines of chapter one states,

Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao.

Names can be named, but not the Eternal Name.

As the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless.

As "the mother" of all things, it is nameable. (Wu 1989, p. 3)

Notice, first of all, the numerous capitalizations. It is important to emphasize that Chinese characters cannot be capitalized. When we capitalize words in English, we reify them, or turn them into abstractions. As Hall and Ames put it, "Further, the use of a capital 'W' invests this 'Way' semantically as a metonym for the transcendent and Divine" (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 13). For instance, when I say to my wife, "I love you", the reference is to a concrete, specific instance of love. However, when I capitalize the term and refer to "Love", the reference shifts to an abstract and non-specific concept of love, such as the Greek *agape*. This is all translator imposition and is not at all unusual in English translations of the *Dao De Jing*. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Boodberg emphasizes that reading *chang* as "eternal" is implausible. There is also no necessity to read *dao* as singular—this is also a translator's choice.

The process approach understands *daos* as pluralistic and concrete rather than monolithic and abstract. Keeping in mind the gerundial nature of the language, Chinese characters can often be read as neither simply nouns nor verbs. As I argue elsewhere, I understand the term *dao* to reference actual things understood concretely as specific processes rather than as an abstract and non-specific object, as dynamic events rather than static entities, and, in that sense, the way things proceed through time. In that case, we can speak of theoretically ideal *daos*, which would proceed without interruption or interference, but no such processes could ever be actual, since actual *daos* always experience some measure of interference, given the infinitude of actual *daoings*. However, this results in a problematic equivocation in the text between actual *daos*, with *daos* with interference and hypothetical and counterfactual ideal *daos*, which would only experience interference if the world was different than it is. In that case, an alternative translation that avoids such difficulties would be as follows:

Daos that can actually *dao* are not ideal (that is, constant or uninterrupted) *daos*.

Designations that can actually designate are not ideal (that is, constant or universally valid) designations.

The absence of designations leads to the world as a whole.

The presence of designations generates the ten thousand things.³

So, because there are so many translator choices at work here—the use of the singular, the use of the definite article, the capitalization, the reference to eternity—it is not at all clear that this chapter unequivocally supports the ontological reading that the translators seem to take for granted.

There are other chapters that are frequently cited as evidence for the idea of an eternal ontological Dao. However, as I will demonstrate, they all employ metaphorical language and therefore even in translation are all less emphatic and definitive than usually understood. We will start with perhaps the most significant and most often cited of these chapters, Chapter 4. John Wu translates it thus:

The Tao is like an empty bowl,

Which in being used can never be filled up.

Fathomless, it seems to be the origin of all things.

It blunts all sharp edges,

It unties all tangles,

It harmonizes all lights,

It unites the world into one whole.
 Hidden in the deeps,
 Yet it seems to exist forever.
 I do not know whose child it is;
 It seems to be the ancestor of all, the father of things. (Wu 1989, p. 9)

There are many issues in this translation, which again call the ontological reading into question. Aside from the same problems as in Chapter 1, including the use of the definite article and the upper case, we see a significantly non-emphatic position here regarding the metaphysical nature of *dao*. To begin with, the term “bowl” is not clearly found in the text, although some scholars, including John Wu, do identify 冲 *chong* as a loan-graph for 盅 *zhong*, which does in fact mean a bowl. *Daos* are described as “[inexhaustively] empty” (*chong* 冲) or “unfathomable” in the sense that the depths cannot be completely or precisely plumbed, more like a bottomless well or ocean than a bowl. Most significant for this discussion, however, is the use of so many terms indicating that these statements are all metaphors rather than ontological claims. In the first part of the chapter, the comparison of *dao* to a deep well is qualified by the term *huo* 或 or “almost, maybe, perhaps, might, possibly”. The proposition is not that *dao* IS a deep well, but that it is LIKE one in some certain sense, the sense that its usage or functioning *seems to be* inexhaustible.

There are several characters in the chapter that emphasize that what is going on here is rhetorical and poetic rather than metaphysical, especially in any kind of overtly ontological sense. We have already indicated the use of the term *huo* in the first line. In the second line, we see another term that conveys a similar sense of simile or metaphor: *si* 似, which would translate as “as if, to seem, to appear, to resemble, similar, like, pseudo-, etc. Once again, the text is not claiming that *daos* ARE the origin of all things, but rather that they are *as if* or “*seem to be*”. Thus, *dao*ing is *almost as if* (或) inexhaustible, and it *seems to be* (似) the origin of all things. Even more emphatically, the next to last line doubles up on these characters: “It is almost as if it seems to be *si huo* 似或 going on forever (*cun* 存)”.

Brook Ziporyn avoids many of these ontological commitments in his translation:
 The course:

a gushing through
 a jumbling together
 an emptying out—
 Yet harnessed for use
 by every random unfilled space.
 So deep an abyss it seems
 the very source of all the ten thousand things—
 blunting their edges
 untangling their knots
 blending with their shines
 merging with their dusts.
 So translucent,
 a mere semblance of a presence,
 something without known parentage:
 an image of what precedes
 even the highest deity. (Ziporyn 2023, p. 5)

There is also a fair amount of epistemological caution and ambivalence on display here expressed in the last line: *wu bu zhi shei zhi zi* 吾不知誰之子 “I don’t know from who/what/where it comes”. In other words, “I don’t know what it is, I don’t know where it came from or what preceded it, but I know it is happening right now!” The chapter ends

with another metaphorical indicator—*xiang* 象, “shape, form, appearance, or to imitate”. Thus, the chapter ends on a very tentative metaphysical view at best: “It *appears to be* the predecessor of all things”.

Even the venerable D.C. Lau, a most sober and reliable commentator, is forced to admit that the language here is tentative and rhetorical, although he does still suggest that this is somehow uniquely true of the idea of “The *Tao*”. Here he seems to reluctantly acknowledge the limitations of the ontological approach: although he translates two lines of Chapter 4 as, “Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creature. ... It images the forefather of God”. He comments on this as follows:

“To say that it is ‘like’ the ancestor of the myriad creatures and that it ‘images’ the forefather of God is to say that the *tao* produced the universe only in a figurative sense”. (Lau 2001, p. xvii)

This significant qualification highlights and illustrates my concern—if the language is totally metaphorical and “figurative”, to what extent does it constitute an ontological, or even generally metaphysical, claim? The answer is none. This is poetry, not ontology. Scholars such as Victor Mair have argued that the text should not be read as philosophy but rather as literature.

The next chapter frequently cited in support of ontological readings is Chapter 14. Here is John Wu’s translation:

Look at it but you cannot see it!
 Its name is *Formless*.
 Listen to it but you cannot hear it!
 Its name is *Soundless*.
 Grasp it but you cannot get it!
 Its name is *Incorporeal*.
 These three attributes are unfathomable;
 Therefore they fuse into one.
 Its upper side is not bright:
 Its underside not dim.
 Continually, the Unnameable moves on,
 Until it returns beyond the realm of things.
 We call it the formless Form, the imageless Image.
 We call it the indefinable and unimaginable.
 Confront it and you do not see its face!
 Follow it and you do not see its back!
 Yet, equipped with this timeless Tao,
 You can harness present realities.
 To know the origins is initiation into the Tao. (Wu 1989, p. 29)

As John Wu translates it, “its name” is, variously, “*Formless*”, “*Soundless*”, and “*Incorporeal*”. First of all, the way the English sentence is constructed makes it seem as if the text is talking about the name of a thing or entity of some kind. But there is a lot being added here that arguably reflects the bias of the translator rather than the position of the text. To begin with, there is no real equivalent in the Chinese text to the pronoun “it”, even though Wu employs the word in his translation of this chapter eighteen times by my count. The first line makes no mention of the actual subject—it doesn’t clearly say “look at *it* but you cannot see *it*”, but more conservatively “looked for but not seen” 視之不見 *shi zhi bu jian*. The term *zhi* 之 is sometimes used as a pseudo-pronoun, but it generally functions as a form of possessive marker and does not clearly refer to an entity as opposed to the reference of the sentence, whatever “it” is.

Furthermore, the phrase “Its name is”, which appears in the first three couplets, is also a misleading choice of translation for the phrase 名曰 *ming yue*. There are many words used in the text to refer to names, titles, labels, eponyms, etc. In this case, the first part of the compound, *ming* 名, refers to some kind of specific designation. Chapter 1 made it very clear that even though designations actually designate, there are no invariable designations (*ming ke ming fei chang ming* 名可名非常名). Designation is what articulates specific figures out of the experiential manifold or ground—naming things brings them into presence, at least in a cognitive sense. In many traditions, it is understood that there are “true names”, names that have ontological significance, such as cases in which knowing the name of something is supposed to establish power over that thing. That is not the kind of name being invoked here. Here, it is simply a way of picking a figure out from the ground, a distinguishing feature or prominent aspect—it is not a “true name”. In modern Chinese as well, *ming* can also refer to one’s fame or reputation, in the sense that it is how one comes to be known or picked out of a crowd, and *ming*s can change over time in the sense that different designations can be used to pick out the same entity in different situations or at different times.

The second part of the compound is *yue* 曰, which generally means to speak, to call something something, or to describe it in some way. The implication of the compound *mingyue* is that it is a human contrivance, a descriptor assigned by us to refer to some aspect of our experience. I would translate *mingyue* as “we call it” such and such. This is a phenomenological notation at best, rather than an ontological one. The point is repeatedly made that we cannot say what anything is essentially; all we can do is describe some of its aspects or qualities. So, since the passages seem to be about ways in which we describe things, the phrases can be at least consistently read as “what can be looked for but not seen is called invisible; what can be listened for but not heard is called inaudible; what can be reached for but not grasped is called subtle”. Read that way, it is again more about what we are calling things than what they are.

The final conclusions of the chapter are also totally rhetorical, that is, poetic rather than philosophical. Wu translates *wuming* 無名 as “the unnameable”. It also sounds like a metaphysical reference to some unique entity that is singularly ineffable. But the ineffability of things is not idiosyncratic, it is universal. All *daos* resist precise determination. Designations point to events but do not completely express or exhaust them in all their subtlety. Moreover, since Chinese is gerundial, *wuming* is at least as likely to refer to the inability to provide universally valid designations for things as it is to refer to some unnameable entity.

Finally, the translation makes reference to some ostensible Oz-like location “beyond the realm of things”. As indicated earlier, this kind of intuition is really not characteristic of pre-Han Chinese thought. The term is “*wuwu* 無物” or “no particular thing” and can refer to some precognitive, non-specific phenomenological manifold before it is disrupted into specificity by the act of naming, which engenders the ten thousand things (*wu* 物), according to Chapter 1. The mystical idea that there is some other world, more real than this one and lurking behind or below the surface of it, seems clearly imposed by translator assumptions and preconceptions.

Moving on to Chapter 21, John Wu’s representative version reads like this:

It lies in the nature of Grand Virtue
to follow the Tao and the Tao alone.
Now what is the Tao?
It is Something elusive and evasive.
Evasive and elusive!
And yet It contains within Itself a Form.
Elusive and evasive!
And yet It contains within Itself a Substance.

Shadowy and dim!
 And yet It contains within Itself a Core of Vitality.
 The Core of Vitality is very real,
 It contains within Itself an unfailing Sincerity.
 Throughout the ages Its Name has been preserved
 In order to recall the Beginning of all things.
 How do I know the ways of all things at the Beginning?
 By what is within me. (Wu 1989, p. 43)

At first sight, an uncritical reader of this translation can't help but take it as referring to some kind of abstract, monolithic, abstract fundamental reality. However, a closer look at the actual text reveals much more complexity and subtlety. First of all, once again, notice all the capitalizations, not including the starts of sentences. Ten unique terms are given the upper case. Even "It", "Form", "Substance", and "Name", among many other terms, are capitalized. These are translator choices, to be sure, because, as should be clear at this point, there is no Chinese upper case.

D.C. Lau's translation has it this way:
 In his every movement a man of great virtue
 Follows the way and the way only.
 As a thing the way is
 Shadowy, indistinct.
 Indistinct and shadowy,
 Yet within it is an image;
 Shadowy and indistinct,
 Yet within it is a substance.
 Dim and dark,
 Yet within it is an essence.
 This essence is quite genuine
 And within it is something that can be tested.
 From the present back to antiquity
 Its name never deserted it.
 It serves as a means for inspecting the fathers of the multitude.
 How do I know that the fathers of the multitude are like that?
 By means of this. (Lau 2001, pp. 32–33)

There are significant differences between the two translations, even though both are substantively ontological. Most importantly, Lau correctly represents the initial claim. "As a thing" is his translation of the Chinese phrase *wei wu* 為物. These characters are not represented at all in Wu's translation, except as a rhetorical question about the nature of *dao*. *Wei* means to regard, to deem, to take one thing as another, in addition to many other meanings. However, in this case, it makes the most sense to read it as "if we regard *dao* as a thing". Not that *dao* IS a thing, but if we were to counter-thetically regard it as a thing, this is the kind of thing we would regard it as. It is like the softball interview question, "If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be" or "if you were a character on *Game of Thrones*, which character would you be?" Lau, as committed as he seems to be to an ontological reading, is clearly ambivalent about it. He says,

The difficulty is indicated by saying that it is 'shadowy and indistinct', that it is 'the shape that has no shape, the image that is without substance'. In fact, even to say that it produced the universe is misleading. It did not produce the universe in the same way that a father produces a son. (Lau 2001, p. xvii)

In this regard, he also says,

...even the term *tao* is not its proper name but a name that we use for want of something better, and if we insist on characterizing it in some manner we can only describe it, if not altogether appropriately, as 'great'...The difficulty of finding appropriate language to describe the *tao* lies in the fact that although the *tao* is conceived of as that which is responsible for the creation as well as the support of the universe, yet the description the Taoist aimed at was a description in terms of tangible qualities as though the *tao* were a concrete thing. (Lau 2001, p. xv)

Even Lau acknowledges that the language used to describe *dao* as though it refers to a thing is completely metaphorical.

Ziporyn again manages to avoid making the chapter about ontology while managing to convey what might have been the rhyme scheme in the original text. Here is the first part of the chapter:

But what kind of thing is this course, with which we are called to comply?

Naught but confusion, pure indistinction, is there to meet our eye.

So very unclear, so very confused!

In this itself is an image construed.

So very confused, so very unclear!

In this itself does a something appear.

So very unreachable, so very dimmed!

In this a kernel, an essence, is limned.

A life-giving kernel so real and true—

for in it is something reliable too. (Ziporyn 2023, p. 25)

The tentative and poetic nature of the text is successfully conveyed here without overstating the nature of the metaphysical claim. *Dao* is so vague and ungraspable that all words fail, leaving us only to rhapsodize rather than philosophize. Ziporyn also makes it clear that the image is “construed”—which means that it is a product of our own imagination or intellect, again, like the Rorschach blot.

Moving on to the beginning of Chapter 25, Wu has the following:

There was Something undefined and yet complete in itself,

Born before Heaven-and-Earth.

Silent and boundless,

Standing alone without change,

Yet pervading all without fail,

It may be regarded as the Mother of the world.

I do not know its name;

I style it “Tao”;

And, in the absence of a better word, call it “The Great”. (Wu 1989, p. 51)

Lau translates it as follows:

There is a thing confusedly formed,

Born before heaven and earth.

Silent and void.

It stands alone and does not change,

Goes round and does not weary.

It is capable of being the mother of the world.

I know not its name

So I style it ‘the way’.

I give it the makeshift name of ‘the great’. (Lau 2001, p. 37)

The first line in Chinese reads, “*you wu hun cheng*” 有物混成. These characters suggest that something is present, but it is chaotically established. That is, there is *something* there, but it is impossible to exactly establish what it is. Once again, this is a very tentative metaphysical claim. However, Wu reads *cheng* as “complete in itself”. There are no characters that correspond to the second two words in Wu’s phrasing. *Cheng* can mean complete or, as I said, establish, but to even say that it is complete does not suggest anything like “in itself”.

Most important, however, is the familiar hedging of the metaphysical claim with very tentative and metaphorical language, which seems to be more about what we are going to CALL it rather than what it IS. We don’t even know what to call it, so we call it “*dao*”. The text does not say that *dao* IS the mother of the world (*tianxia* 天下) but that it can be regarded as (*wei* 為) such. Furthermore, even those attributions and designations are offered reluctantly by the text: *qiang wei zhi ming yue da* 強為之名曰大. The indication here is not, as Wu puts it, “for lack of a better word”, nor, as Lau puts it, “I give it the makeshift name”. The word *qiang* implies force, compulsion, or even violence, so it makes more sense to render the phrase as “if I am forced to give it a name/call it something, I call it ‘great’”. It does seem as though if the author had their way, they wouldn’t call it anything.

The final passage under our consideration is the opening of Chapter 42. As Lau puts it,

The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures. (Lau 2001, p. 63)

The term *yi*—or “one”—is a very obscure though common term in early proto-Daoist texts, including the *Nei Ye* (Roth 2004), *Taiyi Sheng Shui* (Henricks 2000), and others. Most ontologically minded readers take it to refer to “The *Dao*” in its unique ineffability. But in cognitive terms, it can refer to the phenomenological manifold out of which ostensible things are articulated as they are designated, or as the figure is differentiated from the ground. The world as a whole is represented as this unity, while at the same time, it is also represented as the ten thousand things. Otherwise, it seems to suggest that *dao* begot itself. Lau says about this passage, “Although here it is said that ‘the way begets one’, ‘the One’ is, in fact, very often used as another name for the ‘*tao*’. Understood in this way, we can see that it is ‘the One’ or the ‘*tao*’ which is responsible for creating as well as supporting the universe” (Lau 2001, p. xv). However, this claim needs to be placed in the context of Lau’s previously noted comment on Chapter 21, “... even to say that it produced the universe is misleading. It did not produce the universe in the same way that a father produces a son” (Lau 2001, p. xvii). Lau seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. Although he says, “Thus we can see that no term can be applied to the *tao* because all terms are specific, and the specific, if applied to the *tao*, will impose a limitation on the range of its function. And the *tao* that is limited in its function can no longer serve as the *tao* that sustains the manifold universe” (Lau 2001, p. xviii), he nevertheless is forced to admit, “There is no actual textual support for such an interpretation in the *Laozi*, but in all fairness it must also be pointed out that there is nothing in the text which is inconsistent with this interpretation either. Whether this is a correct interpretation of the original intention of the Lao Tzu or not, it is a possible one and has the merit of being interesting philosophically” (Lau 2001, p. xviii). However, we have shown here and elsewhere that, depending on translation, there are many places where the text seems inconsistent with this reading.

There are other scholars who also take issue with what I am describing as the ontological interpretation, including those quoted above, such as Roger Ames, Chad Hansen, Brook Ziporyn, and even the venerable D.C. Lau, who seems somewhat ambivalent in that his translation is ontological even though his commentary challenges the idea that the metaphysical statements are anything but rhetorical. Not all these scholars advance a process reading explicitly or consistently,⁴ but they all identify significant concerns with the translator impositions underlying the ontological approach. Aside from the various linguistic, historical, and philosophical reasons to prefer the process reading, this paper has

attempted to demonstrate that the ontological approach is standing on very shaky ground, since all the alleged references to a fundamentally real, monolithic, and abstract *dao* should be read more as poetry than as metaphysical claims.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ “For example, [according to] Fang Dongmei, if we say that Western philosophy since the ancient Greeks is an ontology then the philosophical pursuit of Laozi for the ‘dark and mysterious gate of a multitudes’ (*zhongmiao zhi men* 眾妙之門) is a kind of ‘meta-ontology’ (Fang 2012, p. 126). He not only says that works of Daoist philosophy must be appreciated from an ontological perspective, but that it is even more so the case that we must explain these in terms of a “meta-ontology” because the philosophical questions Daoists are concerned with are not limited to ontology. Instead, the course proceeds from ‘non-being’ to ‘being’, such that ‘it takes ontology and inquires upwards, it becomes a ‘meta-ontology’ and also becomes a ‘non-meta-ontology’. It conceives that behind, outside, or above any universe, there is a real source of the universe even further away, even deeper, even higher’ (Fang 2012, p. 187). As quoted in (Zheng 2017, p. 410).
- ² Fung (1948, pp. 94–95). He also mentions Chapter 32, but even John Wu disagrees with Feng’s translation, so it seems a straw man for the purposes of this argument.
- ³ My translation.
- ⁴ For instance, although Ames and Hall do advocate a process reading, still their translation of Chapter 1 includes references to “The nameless” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 77).

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