THE INEXPRESSIBLE DAO: A METAPHYSICS

Antonio P. Diluvio, MA

Introduction

I came initiated into the concept of the Dao when I was still
studying philosophy at the University of Sto. Tomas in 1962. I was then
writing a paper on an Asian concept of the Absolute Reality in contrast to
a Greek concept. It was in the book of Lao Zi, the Dao De Jing that I first
encountered the word “Dao.” Much later I was able to pick up Zhuang Zi’s
underlying on the Way, where I learned about the Daoist attitude towards
truth.

While going over my notes on that project, I have rekindled the
interest I used to have in the study of Dao De Jing. Most Sinologists consider
Dao De Jing as a sacred Chinese text believed to have been written about
500 years ago. Dr. Alfredo P. Co, a noted Filipino Sinologist, considers
his small classic as the most influential work, which addresses the essence
of human nature and the human condition. Co claims that the Dao De Jing is
the second most translated book after the Bible.¹ This is so because the
message of Dao De Jing is the foundation of the Daoist religion and one of
the primary underlying influences in Chinese thought and culture.²

After reviewing my notes on the Dao, the Ultimate Reality, I become
tempted to write a metaphysics of the Dao, the kind of metaphysics that
delves into the ultimate reality, the reality of being. I am tempted to develop
a metaphysics, not unlike that of Heidegger that defines reality with his
Being and Time, by coining words to suit his quest for reality, “Dasein”
“Ereignis” and other words, a metaphysics that understands the
inexpressible, the unnamable.

At this point I am confronted with a problem: is it possible to
present a metaphysics of the Dao? In my previous study I found the Dao
hard to find, and even harder to describe or characterize, for “the Tao that

¹ Alfredo P. Co, The Blooming of a Hundred Flowers: Philosophy of Ancient China
(Manila, Philippines: UST Printing Office, 1992), 129.

² S.G.F. Brandon, ed. A Dictionary of Comparative Religion (New York: Charles
Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 602.
can be spoken of is not the Tao itself.” The Dao is ineffable or inexpressible. This is to say that the Dao transcends the ordinary secular world to which language refers. This poses the question on how to express the inexpressible.

A study of the Dao De Jing yields a consistent answer to this question, which is not only of fundamental significance to the understanding of the Dao, but also constitutes a clue for the understanding of mysticism generally. The Dao De Jing recommends silence, first of all, as the appropriate response to the inexpressible; as it were, to emphasize and punctuate the difference between the ordinary secular world and the Dao. This silence functions as a kind of preface for what is to follow. Thereafter, the task of expressing the Dao, of speaking the unspeakable, of saying the unsayable in human language, consists of a combination of negation, paradox, and metaphor.

In this paper, I intend to do two things. First, I hope to present a metaphysics of the Dao, the Ultimate Reality, by asking the question: what is the “reality” of this Dao, this Ultimate Reality and to limit myself to this question. Specifically, I will try to answer this question on the Ultimate Reality through its metaphorical manifestations as found in the Dao De Jing. So, the manifestations that are presented here are nothing but metaphors. (1) The Dao as the Ultimate Reality is One; (2) the Dao as Ultimate Reality is Nameless; (3) the Dao as Ultimate Reality is Empty (Void); and (4) the Dao as Ultimate Reality is the Source of All things. Second, I will supplement the first task with the parallel texts from Zhuang Zi’s Wandering on the Way. In the presentation, I will “describe and not describe” but I will never “define” such Reality. In view of this, I have to acknowledge that this is not a discursive study but a meditative study on a “metaphysics” of the Tao. It is just a meditative exposition of the manifestations of the Ultimate Reality expressed in metaphors.

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3 Co, Blooming of Hundred Flowers, 143.

4 By metaphysics, I do not mean the classical metaphysics but the metaphorical metaphysics wherein the answer to the metaphysical question is in a metaphorical genre.

5 This process of describing and not describing is required since one of the characteristics of the Ultimate Reality is that it cannot be defined. All one can attempt to do is to describe and not describe. Thus it is necessary that this paper uses negation, paradox and metaphor to describe and not describe the Dao.
The Metaphors as Manifestations of the Dao

A. The Dao as the Ultimate Reality is One

Reality, however designated, is One; it is an all-embracing unity from which nothing can be separated.  

Co echoes Dao De Jing's description of such reality as One. He considers, as the Absolute Reality, the One, which embraces everything. Such one is so encompassing that from it nothing can be separated. This description of Reality is common to most Asian philosophies and religions. Most world religions describe the Ultimate Reality as One. The Hindus consider the Brahma as the Absolute Reality. According to Vedanta, the Upanishads teach the unity of reality and the identity of the ultimate Self with reality in passages such as Chandogya 7:25.2: "All this is Atman." 6.2.1

"There was only one Being at the beginning, it was One without second."x

The Chinese believe that there is an ultimate reality which underlies and unifies the multiple things and events we observe. They use different terms but they refer to the same ultimate reality. Thus:

There are three terms: "complete," "all-embracing," "the whole." These names are different, but the reality sought in them is the same: referring to the One thing.  

They call this reality the Dao, which originally meant "a path, a road or a way." It is the way, or process of the Universe. It is the ultimate and indefinable reality.

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7 Co, Blooming of Hundred Flowers, 132.

8 John M. Koller and Patricia Joyce Koller, Asian Philosophies (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 73.


The Japanese fundamentally believe that at the bottom of all created and manifested existence is an underlying unitary, a spiritual Reality, the absolute spiritual source of all things.\(^{11}\) Thus, Zen teaches that one must come to the attainment of ultimate reality, which is the Emptiness or the Absolute.\(^{12}\) The Hebrew religion maintains: "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord."\(^{13}\)

I have already mentioned that the *Dao* is hard to find and even harder to describe or characterize. Thus, *Dao De Jing* does not give any explanation for this Reality. It only describes it as the Unitary Force that from which nothing can be separated. Lao Zi expresses this hardship of finding the *Dao* in the following way:

Something there is, whose veiled creation
was
Before the earth or sky began to be;
So silent, so aloof and so alone,
It changes not nor fails but touches all:
Conceive it as the mother of the world.\(^{14}\)

The Daoists identify this Ultimate Reality as the *Dao*, the Way. They consider everything in the universe to take its greatness from the Way, the *Dao*. This is not a phenomenon, but a description and non-description of what the *Dao* is. It is nameless so that in fact it could be descriptionless. However, the Daoists need to have something to cling to when trying to “explain” to followers. They do this through meditative practices. This is understandable since the Daoist knowing is more intuitive than discursive.

On the other hand, Zhuang Zi, in his own way, tries to describe this Ultimate Reality as the One Lord. In his treatment on *Heaven and Earth*, the Master speaks of the greatness of the Way as one and unitary.

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\(^{11}\) Brandon, ed., *Dictionary*, 303.


\(^{13}\) Brandon, *Dictionary*, 304.

Although Heaven and Earth are great, their evolution is uniform. Although the myriad things are numerous, their governance is unitary. Although the masses of men are multitudinous, their ruler is the One Lord.\footnote{Zhuang Zi, \textit{Wandering on the Way}, trans. Victor H. Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 102.} 

B. The Ultimate Reality is Nameless

This Reality, the Ultimate, is nameless, indescribable, beyond telling; and therefore anything said about it is faulty.\footnote{Lao Tzu, \textit{Way of Life}, chapter 29.} 

The reality, which is Absolute Reality, is the One; it is the nameless Being. Lao Zi says: “I do not know the ‘Way’; pressed for designation, I call it ‘Great.’”\footnote{Ibid., chapter 25} Most Westerners use language to name things; consequently they would find it hard to comprehend a reality that is one and yet nameless. For a Westerner if it is one and it exists, then it has a name. But this is not the case with Daoism. “The Tao can be spoken of is not the Tao itself. The name that can be given is not the name itself. The unnamable is the source of the universe. The nameable is the originator of all things.”\footnote{\textit{Co}, \textit{Blooming of Hundred Flowers}, 143.} 

Zhuang Zi is very clear regarding the use of speech. It is supposedly to be used not to name something but to point to something. He says that speech is intended to say something. But what is spoken is not necessarily valid. If it is not valid, has anything actually been spoken? Or has speech never actually occurred? One may use speech to name something, say, the \textit{Dao}. But is it valid, does it tell us anything? Something and Nothing\footnote{Zhuang Zi, \textit{Wandering on the Way}, 14.} 

This same description is also found in the Exodus3:14: “What is his name? …God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. You must tell them
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“the one who is called I AM has sent me to you.” In the Dao De Jing, Lao Zi speaks about this Ultimate Reality as the Unnamable, the Dao.

There are ways but the Way (Tao) is uncharted
There are names but not nature in words:
Nameless indeed is the source of creation
But things have a mother and she has a name. 20

In another chapter, Lao Zi continues to describe the Dao, as the eternal Way without name. He refers to it as a block of the uncarved virgin wood.

The Way eternal has no name.
A block of wood uncarved, though small,
May still excel the world...
Once the block is carved, there are names.21

Also in chapter 41, Lao Zi regards the “Dao is obscure and unnamed,”22 Lao Tzu, Zhuang Zi in echoing the obscure and the unnamed Dao muses: “How has the Way become so obscured that there are no true and false? How can non-name speech be so obscure that there are valid and not valid? Could it be that names things shapeless Shape.

Describe it as form yet unformed;
As shape that is still without shape;
Or say it is vagueness confused:
One meets it and it has no front;
One follows and there is no rear.24

20 Lao Tzu, Way of Life, chapter 1.
21 Ibid., chapter 32.
22 Ibid., chapter 41.
23 Zhuang Zi, Wandering on the Way, 15.
Once the Dao is essentially ineffable, Zhuang Zi often mentions it directly. Thus without mentioning the Dao he describes it as the Reality in the following manner:

In the grand beginning, there was only nonbeing,
But no being and no names.
Out of it arose the One;
There was one, but still no form.\textsuperscript{25}

All the above descriptions of the Dao point to the absolutely first principle of the Dao. Dao is completely without characteristics, being the very source and condition of all characteristics. In this sense it is Non-Being (wu). But it is not simply nothing, for it is the source of everything. Although it is prior to all existing things, it gives them life and function, and constitutes the oneness underlying all the diversity and multiplicity of the world.

The reason Dao cannot be named is that it is without divisions, distinctions, or characteristics. It is unified, like an uncarved block, changeless in itself, though the source of all change. This means that “Dao” is a non-name; it does not name anything. Rather, it points to that which enables things to be what they are.

C. The Ultimate Reality is Void (Empty)

Another manifestation of the Dao is that it is empty. This points to the function of the Dao. This is revealed in the fourth chapter of the Dao De

The Way (T’ao) is a void,
Used but never filled:
An Abyss it is,
Like an ancestor
From which all things come.
It blunts sharpness,
Resolves tangles;
It tempers light,
Subdues turmoil.

\textsuperscript{25} Zhuang Zi, \textit{Wandering on the Way}, 108.
A deep pool it is,  
Never to run dry.\(^{26}\)

To say *Dao* is empty is to note that it is without characteristics. Confucius considers the word "nameless" or "nothing" or "void" as the "Taoist medium of expressing the inexpressible — a nothing and a nameless from which something came into being. Non-Being is the cause of Being.\(^{27}\) Chuang-ying Cheng considers it nothing, indeterminate and without form but itself responsible for the formation and determination of all things.\(^{28}\) It is empty of all particularity, for it is the possibility and source of all particularity. Even though it is empty of particular things it is the most useful of all things. Just as the most useful thing about a house is its emptiness — its space — so the most useful thing about *Dao* is its emptiness of characteristics, for this means it has infinite capacity.\(^{29}\)

Thus, the emptiness of *Dao* is synonymous with its Non-Being, while it is own *wu*); this means having no qualities no characteristics. Being (*yi*) signifies possessive, having qualities, having characteristics. The import of these two aspects of thing returns the *Dao* is found in the passage: "All things are born of being, Being is born things come from non-being.\(^{30}\) This paradox is again expressed in the passage: "Nameless or revert back indeed is the source of all things. But things have its mother and she has

**D. The Ultimate Reality is the Source of All Things**

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29 This infinite capacity is similar to Aristotle’s prime matter as pure potency. It has infinite capacity of being actualized into infinite forms.


31 Ibid., chapter 53.
The Dao as non-being (wu) is becoming and the source of all becoming. Lao Zi enunciates this concept in chapter 42: "The Way begot one, and the one, two; then the two begot three and three, all else." The Dao is like an ancestor from which all things come. This concept Lao Zi expresses in chapter 34:

O the great Way overflows
And spreads on every side!
All beings come from it;
No creature is denied.

This concept is paradoxical, since the Dao does not initiate the causation of things. This is the principle of Wei wu wei. The Dao does all things that occur without doing anything. "The Way is always still, at rest, and yet does everything that’s done." It is one of the manifestations of the Dao that, while it is omnipresent, involved in everything, giving life to all, it is never possessive. The fact that everything depends on the Dao indicates that everything returns to the Dao. Lao Zi is very clear in this when he notes that all things come from one source and work together but then all things return or revert back to the roots.

All things work together:
I have watched them reverting,
And have seen how they flourish
And return again, each to his roots.

33 Lao Tzu, Way of Life, chapter 42.
34 Ibid., chapter 32.
35 This concept is the same as the Western concept of uncaused cause, the unmoved mover.
36 Ibid., chapter 37.
37 Ibid., chapter, 16.
Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to present a “metaphysics” of the Dao as an answer to the question: what is the “reality” of the Dao? I base my answer on the light of Dao’s manifestations. I consider these manifestations: the Dao is one, nameless, empty and source of all things as metaphors primarily taken from Lao Zi’s *The Way of Life* and Zhuang Zi’s *Wandering on the Way*. Amosa Velez writes that “in the world of men and women where language mediates human interaction, things are referred to by their names. The name table, for instance, calls attention to an object called table ... By their name things are distinguished from one another. How they come to be called such, however, is completely arbitrary, for logic states that names are terms and terms are conventional signs.”38 The discussion above uses language to name the Dao. The Dao is the Ultimate Reality; the Dao is One. The One from which nothing is separated is Empty (Void). But the names used do not name the Dao. I have tried to interpret these names as metaphorical manifestations, paradoxes and negations. Lao Zi is generous with hints leading to the Dao. These manifestations are nothing but symbolic expressions of the nature of the Dao, without claiming the identity of the Dao. I definitely consider the manifestations as principles of understanding the Dao, without categorizing the Dao, since Dao is beyond categorization.

As a fitting conclusion, let me quote Chuang Tzu:

Now I have something to say here. I do not know whether or not what I have to say is of the same category as “THIS.” But, whether it is of the same category or now, like them it is a category, thus in the end it is no different from “THAT.” Let me try to explain myself.

There is beginning. There is a time before beginning. There is a time before the time before beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a stage before nonbeing. There is a stage before the stage before nonbeing. Suddenly there is being and nonbeing. Still, as for being and nonbeing, I do not know which is really being and which is nonbeing. Now I have just said

something, but I do not know whether what I have said is really saying something or not. 59

I can echo the thoughts of Zhuang Zi, that I have written something. Whether that something is something or nothing, I really do not know. All I can say that to produce a Daoist metaphysics is an area worth delving into, if ever it is possible without using discursive reason. What I have done is a surface scratching. In the future I may have to dig deeper, really get into the marrow of the subject but then in the end find and do not find the Reality. Then I may just say: “Heaven and earth are non-active, yet there is no action left undone.”

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