

## 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 the 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 *Wandering on the Way*, where I learned about the *Daoist* attitude towards death.

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 this 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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

<sup>2</sup> S.G.F. Brandon, ed. *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 602.

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can be spoken of is not the Tao itself."<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Co, *Blooming of Hundred Flowers*, 143.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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*.

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## 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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 *Brahman* 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."<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

They call this reality the *Dao*, which originally meant "a path, a road or a way."<sup>10</sup> It is the way, or process of the Universe. It is the ultimate and indefinable reality.

<sup>6</sup> Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*, trans. and intro. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Mentor Book, 1983), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Co, *Blooming of Hundred Flowers*, 132.

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

<sup>9</sup> *Chuang Tzu*, trans. James Legge (New York: Ace Book, 1971), chap. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 6.

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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.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Zen teaches that one must come to the attainment of ultimate reality, which is the Emptiness or the Absolute.<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew religion maintains: "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord."<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.

<sup>11</sup> Brandon, ed., *Dictionary*, 303.

<sup>12</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Princeton Press, 1993), 153.

<sup>13</sup> Brandon, *Dictionary*, 304.

<sup>14</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 25.

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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.<sup>15</sup>

#### B. The Ultimate Reality is Nameless

This Reality, the Ultimate, is nameless, indescribable, beyond telling; and therefore anything said about it is faulty.<sup>16</sup>

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.'"<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup>

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 *Dao*. But is it valid, does it tell us anything? Something and Nothing!<sup>19</sup>

This same description is also found in the Exodus 3:14: "What is his name? ... God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. You must tell them

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<sup>15</sup> Zhuang Zi, *Wandering on the Way*, trans. Victor H. Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 102.

<sup>16</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., chapter 25

<sup>18</sup> Co, *Blooming of Hundred Flowers*, 143.

<sup>19</sup> Zhuang Zi, *Wandering on the Way*, 14.

“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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

Also in chapter 41, Lao Zi regards the “*Dao* is obscure and unnamed.”<sup>22</sup> 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 speech be so obscure that there are valid and not valid? Could it be that speech is present but just cannot name the unnamed?”<sup>23</sup> Lao Zi, in another chapter, describes the *Dao*, the Ultimate Reality as the formless Form, the 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.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., chapter 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., chapter 41.

<sup>23</sup> Zhuang Zi, *Wandering on the Way*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 14.

Since the *Dao* is essentially ineffable, Zhuang Zi often mentions it indirectly. 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.<sup>25</sup>

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 Jing*.

The Way (Tao) 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.

<sup>25</sup> Zhuang Zi, *Wandering on the Way*, 108.

A deep pool it is,  
Never to run dry!<sup>26</sup>

To say *Dao* is empty is to note that it is without characteristics. Co 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.<sup>27</sup> Chuang-ying Cheng considers it nothing, indeterminate and without form but itself responsible for the formation and determination of all things.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the emptiness of *Dao* is synonymous with its Non-Being (*wu*); this means having no qualities no characteristics. Being (*yu*) signifies having qualities, having characteristics. The import of these two aspects of the *Dao* is found in the passage: "All things are born of being, Being is born of non-being."<sup>30</sup> This paradox is again expressed in the passage: "Nameless indeed is the source of all things. But things have its mother and she has name."<sup>31</sup>

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

<sup>26</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup> Co, *Blooming of Hundred Flowers*, 132.

<sup>28</sup> Chuang-ying Cheng, "Chinese Philosophy and Symbolic Reference," *Philosophy East and West* 27 (July 1977): 316.

<sup>29</sup> This infinite capacity is similar to Aristotle's prime matter as pure potency. It has infinite capacity of being actualized into infinite forms.

<sup>30</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 40.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 53.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, chapt



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The *Dao* as non-being (*wu*) is becoming and the source of all becoming.<sup>32</sup> 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."<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> "The Way is always still, at rest, and yet does everything that's done."<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Orlando Ali Mandane Jr., "Spontaneity in *Tao Te Ching* and Its Relevance for Human Being's Authenticity," *Master's Thesis* (Cebu City: University of San Carlos Graduate Program, 1999), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Lao Tzu, *Way of Life*, chapter 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 32.

<sup>35</sup> This concept is the same as the Western concept of uncaused cause, the unmoved mover.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 37.

<sup>37</sup> *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."<sup>38</sup> 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

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<sup>38</sup> Amosa Velez, "Phenomenology of Nayanaya: A Filipino Philosophy of Survival Interpreted in the Light of Silence in Zhuang Zi." (Ph.D. dissertation, Cebu City: University of San Carlos, 1998), 20.

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something, but I do not know whether what I have said is really saying something or not.<sup>39</sup>

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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<sup>39</sup> Zhuang Zi, *Wandering on the Way*, 18.

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