

## Article

Reexamining the Different Paths to the Dao of the *Daodejing*Jing Tan <sup>1,2</sup>  and Xiangfei Bao <sup>3,\*</sup> <sup>1</sup> School of Chinese Language and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China<sup>2</sup> Department of Chinese and History, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 999077, China<sup>3</sup> School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China

\* Correspondence: baoxiangfei@whu.edu.cn

**Abstract:** The *Daodejing* has inconsistent editions and versions. There are controversial issues that lie in the theme, the intention, the significance, and the semantic meaning of the *Daodejing*. This article takes “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*” as an anchor to reexamine the different paths to the Dao of the *Daodejing*. We regard all of the editions and versions as an enrichment of the *Daodejing*. Drawing on the Chinese exegetics, we obtain two basic meanings of the verb *dao* (“to speak” and “to follow”), and two basic meanings of the adjective *chang* (“eternal” and “common”). Based on a philosophical analysis and review of the sinological interpretations, we discriminate three ways of speaking (conceptual way, metaphorical way, and transcendental way), two modes of following (to imitate the Dao and to merge identically with the Dao), and three types of eternal (immutable eternal, constantly changing as eternal, and eternal in the core). By examining different paths to the Dao, we conclude that Laozi’s Dao cannot be expressed conceptually or metaphorically. We must comprehend the Dao in a transcendental way. The Dao constantly changes with a stable core or law but differs from physical law, dialectical logic, and logos in the Western context. People can follow the Dao and become identical to it.

**Keywords:** *Daodejing*; Chinese exegetics; ways of speaking; modes of following; types of eternal



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## 1. Introduction

There are three main categories of the global study of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (or Laozi 老子)<sup>1</sup>: Laozi studies, sinological study, and philosophical study. Each category distinguishes itself by research intentions and methodologies (Michael 2022). In this article, we do not limit our research to any specific category but utilize all of their existing results. Meanwhile, we do not intend to thoroughly compare and explain all versions of the *Daodejing* or each sentence in this classical work. It is an impossible task. Instead, based on the different editions, as well as various representative annotated, commented, and translated versions in either Chinese or Western languages, we will focus on the interpretations of the significant sentence “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*” 道可道非常道 in the *Daodejing*, and take it as an anchor to reexamine Laozi’s Dao.<sup>2</sup>

The sentence “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*”<sup>3</sup> in the *Daodejing* has undergone numerous semantic supplementations and formal alterations, and we cannot simply assert which option is the best (Pohl 2014). However, the entanglement and fuzziness of the *Daodejing* should not be regarded as a defect of this work, because it is the entanglement and fuzziness that can accommodate different interpretations. These different interpretations make the *Daodejing* still significant today.

In terms of the editions, the *Daodejing* includes the *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Guodian Chu tomb bamboo slips edition, “bamboo slips edition” for short),<sup>4</sup> the *Mawangdui boshu* 馬王堆帛書 (Mawangdui silk texts, “silk edition” for short),<sup>5</sup> the Beida Laozi edition,<sup>6</sup> and current editions.<sup>7</sup> Scholarly researches show that the text of the *Daodejing* was neither completed at one time nor contributed by one hand (Mair 2008, p. 36;

Perkins 2014; Yin 2008, pp. 34–37). In addition, there are various annotated versions, commentaries, and translations of the different editions of the *Daodejing* that have accumulated throughout history.<sup>8</sup>

It is not necessary to limit the study of the *Daodejing* to the so-called most original and authentic edition. The original edition may not be identified at all.<sup>9</sup> Gadamer's exposition on the relationship between "presentation" (Darstellung) and "archetype" (Urbild) lends us much methodological inspiration. Benefiting from Gadamer's exposition, various editions and versions of the *Daodejing* can better cooperate with and enlighten each other, thus forming a richer explanation of this classical work.

According to Gadamer, the archetype presents itself in the presentation, but the presentation is not limited to some special presentation. Each particular presentation is a kind of "process of being" (Seinsvorgang). Through various presentations, the archetype seems to have experienced an expansion of being (Zuwachs an Sein) (Gadamer 1999, p. 145). From Gadamer's perspective, all of the subsequent versions can be regarded as the "expansion of being" of the *Daodejing*. Accordingly, we can say that although this work has undergone so many additions, changes, annotations, and translations, it has not been derogated but enriched. In other words, we should not judge any particular edition or version of the *Daodejing* as more faithful to the original text, nor any particular interpretation of the authentic text as more correct, just as Thomas Michael states (Michael 2022).

Furthermore, Heidegger's explanation of the artwork is also worthy of reference here. In "The Origin of the Artwork" (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes), Heidegger delineates the truth as "unhiddenness" or "unconcealment" (Unverborgenheit) (Heidegger 1977, p. 43).<sup>10</sup> There is the happening of truth in the works of art (Heidegger 1977, p. 45). The effect of the works is based on a change of the unconcealment (truth) that happens out of the works.<sup>11</sup>

Analogically speaking, there is the happening of truth as unconcealment in all versions of the *Daodejing*. *Daodejing*'s influence lies in the change of truth that has taken place in various versions. So, it is the textual discrepancy that deserves our serious discussion. The contradiction or tension among these texts urges us to develop Laozi's thoughts in a more integrated way.

In this article, we display that the verb *dao* has two meanings: "to speak" and "to follow"; the adjective *chang/heng* 常/恆 carries two primary meanings: "eternal" and "common". By revisiting the Chinese exegetics and the sinological interpretations and drawing on the philosophical analysis, we differentiate three ways of speaking: conceptual, metaphorical, and transcendental. Meanwhile, "to follow" can be categorized into two modes: to imitate the Dao and to merge identically with the Dao. Furthermore, three types of eternal are analyzed, including immutable eternal, constantly changing as eternal, and eternal in the core. By examining various preunderstandings and interpretations of the Dao, we demonstrate that Laozi's Dao cannot be expressed conceptually or metaphorically. It must be uttered and comprehended in a transcendental way. The Dao is not a platonic idea that exists timelessly. In contrast, it constantly changes in time and space. More importantly, the Dao is not an everlasting chaotic change. It has a stable core or law that differs from physical law, dialectical logic, and logos in the Western sense.

## 2. "The Ruling Art of Monarch" or "Cosmological Ontology"?

Although we focus on the interpretation of the first sentence, the theme and intention of the *Daodejing* are essential because only with sufficient awareness of its theme and intention can we better analyze this sentence. However, the theme or intention of the *Daodejing* is a debated issue. One view is that the *Daodejing* aims at the "ruling art of the monarch", and another holds that this work mainly centers on cosmological ontology.

Zhang Shunhui 張舜徽 (1911–1992) claims that all of the thoughts of the scholars and philosophers in the pre-Qin period and the Qin dynasty take the ruling art of the monarch as their primary concern (Zhang 1982, p. 1). Their *de facto* "Dao" is a way of ruling or controlling the people in the monarchs' stance and has nothing to do with the inner cultivation of the *xinxing* 心性 (literally means the mind and feeling) (Zhang 1982, p. 31), not to men-

tion cosmological ontology. Yin Zhenhuan 尹振環 (1934–) criticizes Zhang’s statement as overgeneralized. For example, Zhuangzi’s thought is difficult to be included in this class because the text of *Zhuangzi* shows a strong sense of refusal to cooperate with monarchs. Nonetheless, Yin does agree with the opinion regarding the *Daodejing* as a guide for rulers. He adds that scholars and philosophers in the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC.–220 AD.) treated the *Daodejing* similarly (Yin 2008, p. 127).

Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–2021) emphasizes from the other side that cosmology or ontology is not the theme of the *Daodejing* (Li 1985, p. 93). In 1993, the unearthed Guodian Laozi manuscripts showed that the sentence “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*” does not exist in this bamboo slips edition. This edition contains only a few words about the metaphysical nature of the Dao. The only part that carries some metaphysical feature is: “There is a shape completed in chaos that was born before Heaven and Earth. [...] And the Dao is modeled on what is so of itself” (有狀混成先天地生 ... 道法自然) (Yin 2008, p. 373).<sup>12</sup> The bamboo slips edition has merely over 2000 characters, and most of the content can be classified as “the ruling art of monarch” indeed.<sup>13</sup> So, this edition provides supportive proof for scholars such as Li Zehou.

After Kant (1724–1804), Western philosophy has been generally divided into theoretical and practical sections (Ritter and Gründer 1989, pp. 731–39). Theoretical philosophy includes branches such as metaphysics and epistemology, while practical philosophy takes ethics as its center. Cosmology or ontology belongs to general metaphysics and subsequently, to theoretical philosophy. (Ritter and Gründer 1976, p. 1153) Cosmology and ontology discuss the origin and essence of the universe (world, things), epistemology discusses how people acquire knowledge about the universe (world, things), and practical philosophy discusses how people should act in real life. Based on this general classification, it is better to classify the bamboo slips edition of the *Daodejing* as “ethics” or “practical philosophy”.

The *Daodejing* has experienced textual changes from the bamboo slips edition via the silk edition to the current editions. The process of the change presents that the content of cosmological ontology and epistemology are gradually stacked (Perkins 2014). In Yin Zhenhuan’s opinion, the current editions of the *Daodejing* are improved in ontology compared with the bamboo slips edition (Yin 2008, pp. 35–36). Some scholars today even think the *Daodejing* is a book on epistemology, although Laozi’s theory of knowledge carries a mystical feature (Wilhelm 2010, “Vorwort,” p. 47).

Logically speaking, ontology is the foundation of epistemology and ethics. In other words, ontology precedes them. However, the typical situation is that people’s views of morality determine what type of epistemology they choose, and the epistemology they have chosen determines what kind of ontology they choose. Nietzsche once convincingly pointed out this characteristic in forming the philosophical system. He said: “We have no experience other than moral experience. All experiences are moral, even in the field of perception.”<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, it is not unnatural to meet the *Daodejing* as we see it today.

We do not need to provide a black-and-white answer to whether the *Daodejing* is about the ruling art of the monarch or a cosmological ontology. From Gadamer’s point of view, the added epistemology and ontology are the “expansion of being” of this work.

It is worth mentioning that Thomas Michael also proposes a *Yangsheng* 養生 (bodily cultivation) version of the *Daodejing*, which is different from the interpretation of “The Ruling Art of Monarch.” However, according to Michael’s study, the *Yangsheng* version was originally an oral text. This version circulated until the end of the Warring States period. Accordingly, the *Yangsheng* version could be most proximate to the original text of the *Daodejing* (Michael 2022).

### 3. “To Speak” or “To Follow”?

According to the current editions, the first sentence of the *Daodejing* is “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*”. Considering the parts of speech, we stipulate in advance that the capitalized *Dao* refers to its noun form, while *dao* in lowercase refers to its verb form.

For the verb *dao*, there are mainly two types of views. One view, which is also the mainstream, is that *dao* means “to speak”. Another view interprets *dao* as “to follow”.<sup>15</sup> These two different understandings of *dao* are closely related to the way of Chinese exegesis and its historical context.

Wang Bi’s 王弼 (226–249) commentary on the first sentence is that: “*ke dao zhi Dao* [...] *zhi shi zao xing fei qi chang ye gu bu ke dao*” 可道之道 . . . . . 指事造形非其常也故不可道 (B. Wang 2008, p. 1).<sup>16</sup> Rudolf G. Wagner translates Wang Bi’s commentary as “A *Dao* that can be spoken about [...] is a demonstrable process created shape, but not [the *Dao*’s . . . ] Eternal. This is because [the Eternal] cannot be spoken”.<sup>17</sup> We must note that the meaning of *dao* as a verb is still somewhat vague in Wang Bi’s commentaries. However, Wagner has already translated “*ke dao*” 可道 explicitly as “can be spoken”.

Ever since Wang Bi, the mainstream view has been that the verb *dao* appearing in “*ke dao*” means *yanshuo* 言說 (literally means to speak, or to express in words).

Li Daochun 李道純 (1219–1296, a famous Daoist priest in the late Song and early Yuan dynasties) comments in *Daode Huiyuan* 道德會元 that “*Daos*, those can be spoken of are not the *chang Dao*. Once man attempts to talk about it, he has already made a mistake” (道可道非常道開口即錯) (Li 1924, p. 1). Chai Yuangao 柴元皋 (a Daoist priest in the late Song and early Yuan dynasties) annotates in *Laozi Jie* 老子解 that “*chang Dao* cannot be articulated. [...] Not to speak is the essence” (常道无可言者也 . . . . . 不言是體) (Li 2015, p. 99). The Qing dynasty scholar Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) states in *Laozi Benyi* 老子本義 that “*Dao* cannot be fundamentally expressed in words or pursued by the traces of the name” (道固未可以言語顯而名跡求者也) (Wei 1986, p. 1).

Modern scholars, such as Zhan Jianfeng 詹劍峰 (1902–1982), Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 (1916–2009), Gao Ming 高明 (1926–2018), and Chen Guyin 陳鼓應 (1935–) all follow the mainstream view and explain the verb *dao* as “to speak”. Zhan Jianfeng advocates explaining the *dao* in “*ke dao*” as “to speak” directly (Zhan 2006, p. 116). Ren Jiyu’s intralingual translation is that the *Dao* that can be spoken is not an eternal *Dao* (Ren 2006, pp. 1–2). Gao Ming annotates that “*ke dao*” equals “*ke yan*” 可言 (literally means can be spoken) (Gao 1996, p. 222). Chen Guying clarifies that the *Dao* that can be expressed in words is not the *chang Dao* (Chen 1984, p. 62).<sup>18</sup>

In addition, other textual evidence at the early stage also supports that the verb *dao* means “to speak”. For example, the maturity of the *Zhuangzi*<sup>19</sup> is not much later than that of the *Daodejing*. In chapter 22 “*Zhi bei you*” 知北遊 (literally means “Knowledge Travels North”),<sup>20</sup> it is stated that “*Dao* cannot be heard. Heard, it is not *Dao*. *Dao* cannot be seen. Seen, it is not *Dao*. It cannot be spoken. Spoken, it is not *Dao*” (道不可聞, 聞而非也; 道不可見, 見而非也; 道不可言, 言而非也) (Chen 1983, p. 580).<sup>21</sup> Obviously, “*Dao* cannot be heard” and “*Dao* cannot be seen” emphasize the non-perceptual characteristics of *Dao* as shown in Wang Bi’s commentary; while “*Dao* cannot be spoken. Spoken, it is not *Dao*” also proves that the verb *dao* carries the meaning of speaking.

However, the mainstream view presented above has also been challenged. Wu Cheng 吳澄 (1249–1333, an outstanding scholar of neo-Confucianism of the Yuan Dynasty) clearly expressed in *Daode Zhenjing Zhu* 道德真經註 that “*Dao* is like a road. *Ke dao* means can be trodden and practiced. It says that the *Dao* is like the road and can be trodden and followed” (道猶路也, 可道, 可踐行也, 若謂如道路之可踐行) (Wu 2018, p. 5). Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾 (1918–2012) does not agree with interpreting the verb *dao* simply as to speak, either. From the perspective of the history of semantic change, he points out that *dao*, as a verb, did not carry the meaning of speaking until the Tang and Song dynasties. The colloquial language at that time differed from that of the pre-Qin period. “To speak” should correspond to *yue* 曰 but not *dao* during the pre-Qin period (Nan [1974] 2012, p. 35). Zhou Shanfu



周善甫 (1914–1998) holds the same opinion as Nan Huaijin and comments that: “all the previous annotations explain *dao* as *jiangshuo* 講說 (literally means to speak, to talk). They are not correct” (Zhou 1997, p. 2).

Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽 (1961–) takes Wu Cheng’s interpretation to explain *dao* as to follow or to practice. He claims that “Wang Bi adds the new meaning of speaking to the verb *dao*, but Wang does not neglect *dao*’s original meaning of practicing.” In Zhao’s assertion, “*Dao ke dao*” means that the Dao has rules and can be followed (Zhao 2011, pp. 8–9). So, he interprets the first sentence this way: “The Dao with rules that can be followed is not the universal Dao” (Zhao 2011, p. 7).

Zhao Tingyang highlights that the disadvantage of interpreting “*ke dao*” as “can be spoken” is to shrink Laozi’s broad metaphysical, political, ethical, and intellectual values merely to an epistemological aspect or even to a mystical epistemological one. Such interpretation leads to a partial and parochial understanding of the *Daodejing* (Zhao 2011, p. 8).

Zhao’s analysis has its justification. However, as criticized by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 (1935–), Zhao’s opinion is not in line with Laozi’s original intention (Qiu 2020, pp. 96–97). One of the essential teachings of the *Daodejing* is that monarchs should follow the Dao (*shun dao* 順道). In the historical context of the pre-Qin period, if we agree that the universal Dao cannot be followed, then the work of the *Daodejing* would have made no sense, and no monarch would be willing to read it or take practical instruction from it. After all, the purpose of the *Daodejing* is not to assert that there is a mysterious Dao that cannot be followed or practiced.

From the perspective of Chinese exegetic interpretation, one cannot confirm that *dao* did not mean “to speak” in the pre-Qin period.<sup>22</sup> The above analysis presents that “to speak” and “to follow” both have justifications and the happening of “truth” in Heidegger’s sense. We should look beyond the dilemma of the Chinese exegetics of the verb *dao*. According to Laozi, some ways of speaking and some ways of following will undoubtedly be rejected. So, further philosophical analysis of “how to speak” and “how to follow” must be put on the agenda. Before we discuss this critical issue in detail in the fifth part, we will examine first the meaning of *chang* in *chang Dao* 常道.

#### 4. “Eternal” or “Common”?

It is a widespread view that *chang Dao* be interpreted as “eternal Dao”. Many Chinese intralingual translations have demonstrated this view. Through the interlingual translations of “道可道非常道” by the Western sinologists below, we can also see that *chang* is rendered as eternal.

François Noël’s (1669–1740) Latin translation: “Ratio quae potest ratiocinando comprehendere, non est Aeterna Ratio.”<sup>23</sup>

Stanislas Julien’s (1797–1873) French translation: “La voie qui peut être exprimée par le parole n’est pas la Voie éternelle.” (Julien 1842, p. 3)<sup>24</sup>

Richard Wilhelm’s (1873–1930) German translation: “Der SINN, der sich aussprechen lässt, ist nicht der ewige SINN.”<sup>25</sup> (Wilhelm 2010, p. 3)

In the translations above, “Aeterna”, “éternelle”, and “ewige” are all equal to “eternal”. Is Laozi’s *chang Dao* really eternal? In order to answer this question, we must analyze the meaning of “eternal” further.

Informed by a comprehensive view of the philosophical discussion of “eternal”, the understanding of this word does not exceed the following three types: I. Immutably eternal (“eternal” in Plato’s sense); II. Constantly changing as eternal;<sup>26</sup> III. Constantly changing with immutable core or law as eternal (“eternal in the core” for short).<sup>27</sup>

According to Plato, all ideas are eternal. “Eternal” means self-same, not in time and space, beyond the perceptual senses, and with no origin or change (Hirschberger [1949] 1996, pp. 175–90).<sup>28</sup> Laozi’s *chang Dao* cannot be reached through the perceptual senses,<sup>29</sup> which is similar to Plato’s eternal idea. However, Laozi’s Dao has its origin (先天地生, which means it is born before Heaven and Earth)<sup>30</sup> and moves continuously and untiringly

(周行而不殆)<sup>31</sup>. As Qiu Xigui sums up: “The Dao is constantly moving, producing new things; the things newly produced are constantly dying and returning to the Dao” (Qiu 2020, p. 109).

A modern English translation provided by the Dutch sinologist Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak (1889–1954) also highlights that Laozi’s Dao is not a platonic eternal idea. His translation is: “The Way that may truly be regarded as the Way is other than a permanent way.” Duyvendak’s English translation *Tao Te Ching, The Book of the Way and Its Virtue* was published in London by John Murray in 1954. However, we use the online version here because the printed version is not available now. (Terebess Asia Online 2022). Thomas Michael shares the same understanding with Duyvendak that Laozi’s Daos are not constant (Michael 2015, p. 235). However, Arthur Waley (1888–1966) translates it as: “The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way” (Waley 1999, p. 3). Apparently, Arthur Waley platonizes Laozi’s Dao by emphasizing the ideal invariance. It should be noted here that under the influence of Plato, Western sinologists usually interpret *chang* as immutably eternal.<sup>32</sup> Briefly speaking, the platonic immutable idea is not Laozi’s Dao.

Is it appropriate to understand the *chang* in the *Daodejing* as “constantly changing”? In other words, does Dao change constantly? This view lacks textual support from the *Daodejing*. What we obtain from the text is that the Dao is independent and has an unchanging law as its core (獨立不改)<sup>33</sup>. The Dao is not a bunch of chaotic or irregular changes.

Consequently, Laozi’s *chang Dao* can only be “eternal in the core”. It is the eternal core that endows the Dao with the identity, so it can be named *yi* 一 (literally means the One) in the *Daodejing*.<sup>34</sup> However, the Dao may have various manifestations as different names reveal, such as *da* 大 (literally means greatness), *shi* 逝 (literally means death), *yuan* 遠 (literally means farness), *fan* 反 (literally means reverse), and so on.

Relying on newly unearthed materials, some scholars have put forward different understandings of *chang Dao*. In the Mawangdui silk edition, the first sentence appears as “*Dao ke dao ye fei heng Dao ye*” 道可道也非恆道也 (Gao 1996, p. 221), which challenges the widely known “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*” of the current editions.

Scholars have long pointed out that this is a naming taboo of replacing *heng* 恆 with *chang* 常 to avoid mentioning the name of Emperor Wen, Liu Heng 漢文帝劉恆 (203 BC.–157 BC.) of the Han Dynasty (202 BC.–220 AD.). That explains it. However, it is worth noting that there is an extra character *ye* 也 added twice here. Qiu Xigui points out that, firstly, the added character *ye* here is very significant and has changed the usual punctuating mode of the sentence (Qiu 2020, p. 98); secondly, he insists that “*heng*” here does not mean “eternal” but “common” (Qiu 2020, pp. 99–100). Therefore, the sentence should be punctuated as “*Dao ke dao ye, fei heng Dao ye*” (道可道也, 非恆道也); subsequently, it can be interpreted as meaning Dao can be spoken, but it is not the common Dao in people’s daily life (Qiu 2020, p. 100).

Qiu Xigui’s interpretation differs significantly from the usual understanding. In his sense, Dao is no longer unspeakable; however, it is not the common Dao, such as knitting or gardening. Liu Weiyong 劉惟永, a Daoist priest in the Yuan dynasty, annotates that *chang Dao* does not mean the Dao as Confucianists usually talk about (Liu 1924, p. 1). It is in this sense that the famous Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong 許淵冲 (1921–2021) renders the whole sentence as: “The divine law may be spoken of, but it is not the common law” (Xu 2003, p. 2).

We must consider the different understandings of *chang* and *heng* put forward by some modern scholars. Otherwise, our analysis will be incomplete. The consensus of these scholars is that the original meaning of *chang* is measurement and standard, and the meaning of *heng* always carries the feature of temporality.<sup>35</sup>

Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 understands *heng* as enduring and everlasting in time. So, *heng dao* is unlimited in time but not beyond time and space as an unchanging entity (Z. Wang 2022).

Through etymological examination, Wang Qingjie 王慶節 points out that *chang* is a unit of measurement for length or a standard of things. It is then gradually interpreted

as constancy; *heng* links to movement and thus possesses the nature of temporality (Q. Wang 2000). Thomas Michael generally agrees with Wang Qingjie's distinction between *chang* and *heng*, and develops this interpretation (Michael 2021, pp. 65–116). According to Wang Qingjie's interpretation, the connotation of "common" and "ordinary" derives from the original meaning of *heng*. In this sense, Wang's explanation does not contradict Qiu Xigui's exegetic interpretation.

These studies inspire us to revisit the above three types of eternal from the perspective of temporality. The "immutably eternal" of the first type is an invariably timeless eternal beyond time and space. In this sense, there is no equivalence between *heng* and Platonic eternal.

Furthermore, *heng* is understood as everlasting and enduring in time and space. Some scholars believe that enduring in time and space is the right word to describe Tao. For instance, Günter Wohlfart interprets *chang* exactly as "constantly changing" (Wohlfart 2001, p. 49).

Chen Ligui 陳麗桂 claims that Dao is not merely a continuous alternation in time and space. It has an innate invariant. Such an invariant is not an entity beyond time and space but a law, namely *fu* 復. *Fu* implies a state or process of continuous regression to the origin (Chen 2017). Such a state or process is the fundamental law corresponding to our third type of "eternal in the core".

It can be seen that the meanings of *chang/heng* presented by these scholars still fall into the three types of eternal listed above. The scholars' arguments focus on whether *chang/heng* is eternal or common, but they ignore the further semantic analysis of these two words. Through the distinction of the three types of eternal, the view that Dao is "eternal in the core" is supported by the text of the *Daodejing* and in line with the traditional Chinese cognition of *tian dao* 天道 (literally means the Heaven and the Dao).<sup>36</sup> However, under Qiu Xigui's exegetics, Dao becomes speakable, which enriches our understanding of the *Daodejing* but contradicts the mainstream view and leaves many questions with vague boundaries. These questions can be clarified and answered only after further analysis of the verb *dao*.

### 5. "The Way to Speak" or "The Way to Follow"?

As we have analyzed above, Laozi's Dao is not a platonic idea, and subsequently, not a concept with clear connotations and extensions that modern people understand. So, it cannot be expressed in a conceptual or inferential way. In this sense, the Latin translation by François Noël seems much more appropriate. His version is "Ratio quae potest ratiocinando comprehendendi, non est Aeterna Ratio" (The reason that can be comprehended by reasoning is not an eternal reason) (Von Collani 2015, p. 73).

If Dao cannot be articulated conceptually, does it mean that the statement about Dao belongs to perceptual knowledge? In the domain of perceptual knowledge, there is no strict concept or idea but only metaphorical naming. Perceptual knowledge is not established on the absolute distinction of concepts. Its primary concern is not "distinct" but "clear".<sup>37</sup> The names of perceptual things are metaphorical other than conceptual. Consequently, formal logic does not work in the field of metaphor.

Meanwhile, perceptual knowledge is entangled and complicated. As the German aesthetician Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) points out, "the perceptual knowledge, according to its name derived from its essential meaning, refers to knowledge about all representations that do not possess strict logical distinctions" (Baumgarten 1983, p. 11).<sup>38</sup> In Baumgarten's theory, if we want to gain the beauty, fineness, and ugliness of perceptual knowledge with the help of strict logical distinction, we will soon be overwhelmed (Baumgarten 1983, p. 11).

However, according to the expression of the *Daodejing*, Dao is not a perceptual object because when "looking at it, we do not see it", "listening to it, we do not hear it", and "grasping it, we do not get hold of it" (Gao 1996, p. 282). Therefore, such statements about Dao are not perceptual knowledge.

If the statement of Dao is neither conceptual knowledge (rational knowledge) nor perceptual knowledge, how should we deal with the Dao? What is the nature of Laozi's statement about the Dao?

In terms of the style of the utterance, the *Daodejing* primarily adopts a metaphorical expression. Since Dao is not a perceptual object, as the previous analysis shows, the metaphorical expression seems inappropriate from the beginning. Then, how should we deal with the expressions in the *Daodejing*?

In the discussion so far, we can at least make one point clear: if we insist on interpreting the verb *dao* as "to speak", we cannot limit it to the domain of conceptual and metaphorical discourse; we have to transcend the concrete ways of speaking to comprehend the Dao. Consequently, we can further differentiate two more secondary ways. One is conceptual speaking beyond conceptual inference; the other is metaphorical speaking beyond concrete metaphors. Both can be called the transcendental way of speaking. That is to say that people should not stick to concrete metaphors and reasoning but go beyond them to grasp the Dao. Early Taoist philosophers all called for a transcendental understanding of their concrete words,<sup>39</sup> according to which we may ascribe Laozi's expression to the transcendental way of speaking.

When interpreting the *dao* as "to follow", there are at least two modes of following. The first is to imitate the Dao (not one hundred percent identical to the Dao), and the second is to merge and become one with the Dao (identical to the Dao). The first one implies a platonic presupposition, upon which Dao should have been a self-same idea; one can imitate it in the perceptual world. Nevertheless, the imitated Dao is no longer the self-same Dao. Although Laozi might not oppose the platonic imitation, the text of the *Daodejing* presents the inclination of merging identically with the Dao.

Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) agrees with the second mode. He states that Dao is unvarying, but man can deal with it flexibly; Dao is not the usual rule, but man can be one with it (不廢“常”，則人機通；無所“可”，則天和一) (F. Wang 1962, p. 15). To merge with the Dao means transforming with the Dao without any artificial manipulation. In Laozi's sense, this is *wu wei* 無為 (literally means non-interference or nonaction). As Karl-Heinz Pohl (1945–) highlights, *wu wei* does not signify "doing nothing". It means that one should not interfere with the process consciously or out of personal purpose but instead let it happen and live in harmony with this spontaneous and unfathomable way of nature (Pohl 2014).

Interpreting Dao as unspeakable is acceptable if we confine the ways of speaking to the conceptual and metaphorical domains. Nevertheless, it cannot answer the question: what way of speaking are these five thousand words of the *Daodejing*? The transcendental way of speaking proposed in this article is the solution to this problem. As the previous analysis shows, the appeal of merging with the Dao contradicts the ways of conceptual and metaphorical speaking but can logically coexist with transcendental speaking.

## 6. Some Pre-Understandings and Interpretations of the Dao

The interpretation of "*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*" is never based solely on grammar and lexical meaning. The pre-understandings of the Dao are always involved in shaping the interpretation of this sentence. Furthermore, any explanation based on the pre-understanding is a paraphrase and cannot be a repetition. Therefore, deviation from the original text exists in any interpretation. In this sense, each interpretation is a creative misunderstanding. So, there is also the vicissitude of "truth" in misunderstanding. It is always beneficial and significant to point out what the pre-understandings are and where the misunderstandings exist.

Here, we examine three representative pre-understandings and their subsequent misunderstandings of Laozi's Dao, though these misunderstandings can be creative.<sup>40</sup>

First, Dao is assumed as a physical law, such as Newton's laws of mechanics or Einstein's theory of relativity. A remarkable difference is that Laozi's Dao cannot be articulated in precise mathematical language. As stated by the French mathematician and



philosopher Poincaré (1854–1912), physical laws are either differential equations or rules based on mathematical statistics (Poincaré 2017, pp. 104–34). It is worth emphasizing that all physical laws are artificial to some extent and can be constructed only through the idealization and simplification of time, space, and other premises.<sup>41</sup> Newtonian mechanics and Einstein’s theory of relativity are no exception. The physical laws are not inherent in things, but comprehensible intersubjective laws endowed to things by human beings. In contrast, Laozi’s Dao is more objective than the physical laws if we understand objectivity as independent of human will.

Second, Dao is taken as dialectic (Dialektik) in the Hegelian sense. According to Hegel’s thought, dialectic is not a formal method but must be understood as the “process of the thing itself” (Gang der Sache selbst) (Ritter 1972, p. 189). The subject is the substance at the same time. So, the movement of the reason is also the movement of things (Hegel 1998, p. 16). In the dialectic movement, the separated things transform into each other. For example, the dialectical nature of being (Sein) and nothing (Nichts) is to present their unity of changing (Werden) as the truth (Hegel 2002, p. 146). Hegel’s dialectic is a movement of triads in which thesis and antithesis transform into each other, reach a higher unity, and then move to the next phase. Such a movement is ceaseless.

However, compared with Hegel’s dialectic, Laozi’s Dao does not pursue the reach of unity or synthesis, nor does it advance continuously. Laozi’s Dao does not possess such a progressive view as Hegel. Instead, it shows a regressive view, such as “returning to the state of infancy” (復歸於嬰兒).<sup>42</sup> There are other expressions in *Daidejing* that stress such a view. For example, in chapter 40: “Reversal is the movement of the Dao. Suppleness is the function of the Dao” (反者道之動, 弱者道之用);<sup>43</sup> and in chapter 48: “Those who pursue study increase daily. Those who pursue the Dao decrease daily. They decrease and decrease until they reach a point where they act non-intentionally. They act non-intentionally and nothing is left undone” (為學日益, 為道日損. 損之又損. 以至於無為. 無為而無不為).<sup>44</sup>

Third, Dao is assumed as logos. Through abundant references and citations, Zhang Longxi 張隆溪 (1947–) argues that logos has the dual meanings of ratio (reason)<sup>45</sup> and oratio (utterance); the character Dao in Chinese also embodies such dual meanings. So, he concludes that Dao and logos share remarkable similarities (L. Zhang 1992, pp. 26–27).

However, as the previous analysis shows, Laozi’s Dao is far from reason in the Western sense. Moreover, it is still controversial to interpret the verb *dao* simply as “to speak”. So, the similarities between Dao and logos suggested by Zhang Longxi are few. What if logos does not have the meanings of both reason and utterance as prescribed in Zhang’s hypothesis? What if Dao and logos share similarities somewhere else?

Heidegger has examined the semantic history of “logos”. The word logos originates from the Greek verb “λέγειν” (equals *legere* in Latin), which does not have the meaning of utterance and reason in its origin. Logos is cognate with the German word “lesen”, whose original meaning is to collect (sammeln) (Heidegger 1979, pp. 267–70). However, the Dao in the *Daodejing* has no relation with “gathering and collecting”. Its basic meaning is “road, path”. Laozi’s proposition can be summed up this way: to abandon the individual will and desire, not to manipulate or interfere with the natural process, and to follow the path directly.

Two more traditional interpretations of the Dao, namely Heshang Gong’s 河上公 commentary and Xuanzong Yuzhu 玄宗御註, have profoundly influenced the reception of the *Daodejing*. They turn out to be the pre-understandings of later generations.

According to Heshang Gong’s commentary, the Dao is not merely a guide for managing or ruling the state. So, the feature of the so-called “ruling art of monarch” is diminished; besides, *chang Dao* is interpreted as the Dao of natural longevity (自然長生之道). That is to say, *chang Dao* means to cultivate the mind and feeling by doing nothing, to put the people in peace and contentment by ceasing political activities, to hide the brilliance, and to delete the traces of actions (無為養神, 無事安民, 含光藏輝, 滅跡匿端) (Heshang 1924, p. 1). Heshang Gong establishes the connection between ruling the state and self-cultivating one’s mind and health. (Kamitsuka 2021, pp. 40–46) Such an understanding of the *Daodejing*

has dramatically influenced the interpretation of the thoughts of the Daoist school, thus initiating the philosophy and practice of health regimens with Chinese characteristics in later Daoism (Zhang 2018, pp. 260–64).

*Xuanzong Yuzhu* is a commentary of the *Daodejing* by the Tang emperor Li Longji 李隆基 (685–762, ruling period 712–756). Tang Xuanzong does not interpret the verb *dao* as “to speak” or “to follow”. He comprehends *dao* from an unusual perspective of *yong* 用 (literally means “to use”) (Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 417).

According to *Xuanzong Yuzhu*, Dao is useful. Due to Dao’s characteristic of “extreme empty” (*xuji* 虛極), it has terrific functions (*miaoyong* 妙用). That is to say, Dao can be used in all things but is never limited to some concrete things. Therefore, specific names are not suitable, and Dao is only a temporary name. As we have presented previously, to interpret the *Daodejing* in a practical way has long been influential. For instance, the *Daodejing* was treated as the ruling guide or as the way of bodily cultivation. However, it is unique to explain the Dao from the perspective of “to use” and to make this explanation effective in an omnipresent way. It is worthy of our continued attention.

## 7. Conclusions

The sentence “*Dao ke dao (ye) fei chang (heng) Dao (ye)*” can be illuminated by two different punctuating modes.<sup>46</sup> The first one is “Dao that can be *dao*-ed, is not the *chang* Dao”. It is a complete sentence with an attributive clause. The second one is “Dao can be *dao*-ed; it is not the *chang* Dao”. These are two sentences with the same subject.

As a verb, *dao* has two primary meanings: “to speak” and “to follow”. Under the meaning of “to speak”, there are three main ways: the conceptual way, the metaphorical way, and the transcendental way. Under the meaning of “to follow”, two modes can be distinguished. One is to imitate the Dao; the other is to merge and become one with the Dao.

The adjective *chang/heng* also possesses two primary meanings: eternal and common. Under the meaning of “eternal”, there are three categories: I. immutably eternal; II. constantly changing as eternal; III. changing with the immutable core as eternal.

To sum up, the verb *dao* has five meanings, and the adjective *chang/heng* has four meanings. Based on the two punctuating modes and the total of nine meanings of the *dao* and *chang/heng*, the sentence “*Dao ke dao (ye) fei chang (heng) Dao (ye)*” will accommodate around 40 possible meanings by combination. If Xuanzong’s interpretation of the verb *dao* as “to use” is also taken into account, this sentence will derive more possible meanings.

We depict it as follows by reexamining the different paths to Laozi’s Dao.

Laozi’s Dao cannot be expressed conceptually or metaphorically to some extent; it can be uttered and comprehended in a transcendental way. The Dao can be followed and practiced but does not belong to daily skills or techniques. The Dao has its feature of temporality, which differs from a timeless platonic idea. It is a constantly changing Dao with a stable core or law but is not equivalent to physical law or dialectical logic. People may even merge with and become identical to the Dao. In addition, Laozi’s Dao and logos in the Western context share no similarities.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Beida edition of the *Daodejing* first takes *Laozi* as the title. See (Z. Wang 2013).
- <sup>2</sup> It is known that chapter 1 is constructed in an “interlocking parallel style” in the transmitted text. Eliminating the juxtaposed sentence “*Ming ke ming fei chang Ming*” 名可名非常名 in this article seems to impair the wholistic understanding, but it helps to focus on examining the significant characters *Dao/dao* and *chang/heng*.
- <sup>3</sup> For the interpretation of classical Chinese texts, *judou* 句讀 (punctuation) is fundamental and significant. When analyzing the text of the *Daodejing*, different punctuations produce different divisions of character groups, hence different interpretations of Laozi’s thought. On this basis, the punctuation of this sentence “道可道非常道” becomes one of the critical issues in this article. Therefore, when quoting the original text of the *Daodejing* in this article, we adopt the writing format of *pinyin* 拼音 plus the non-punctuated Chinese text to avoid misleading the readers.
- <sup>4</sup> In 1973, the silk edition was unearthed in Mawangdui Han Tomb in Changsha, which was labeled as *jia ben* 甲本 and *yi ben* 乙本. They have slight differences in content. Archaeologists date the text between 3 BC.–2BC.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1993, the bamboo slips edition was unearthed from the Guodian Chu tomb in Jingmen. These bamboo slips are divided into three groups (*jia* 甲, *yi* 乙, and *bing* 丙) according to their shape and length. All three groups have copies of chapter 64, but the characters are pretty different. Except for chapter 64, the contents of the three groups have no overlap. Archaeologists date the text between 4BC.–3BC.
- <sup>6</sup> This edition was written on bamboo slips and was donated to Peking University in 2009. Archaeologists date the text around 100BC.
- <sup>7</sup> Since the early Tang dynasty, the *Daodejing* has been disseminated mainly over two commentaries, those of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and Heshang Gong 河上公. These are the main bodies of the “current editions”. Scholars in the Tang dynasty, such as Lu Deming 陸德明 (556–627) and Fu Yi 傅奕 (554–639), spoke highly of Wang Bi’s version; but Heshang Gong’s version was more popular till Song Dynasty. With the works of the scholars and Daoist priests of the Song dynasty, such as Fan Yingyuan’s 范應元 *Laozi Daodejing Guben Jizhu* 老子道德經古本集註, these current editions have been well preserved.
- <sup>8</sup> The *Daodejing* has many versions of annotations, commentaries, and interlingual and intralingual translations. The Daoist priests of the Yuan Dynasty Zhang Yucai 張與材 (?–1316, the 38th generation of Heavenly Master of the Zhengyi Sect (正一教天師)) said: “The 81 chapters of the *Daodejing* has witnessed over three thousand commentators.” See (Du 1924, “preface No. 2”). Li Ruohui’s 李若暉 research shows that from the Han Dynasty (202 BC.–220) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), there are 668 versions recorded in bibliographical works. Li’s work *Laozi Jizhu Huikao* 老子集注匯考 is completed based on over 400 versions of the *Daodejing*. See (Li 2015, p. 885). For a collection of the early editions, see (Michael 2022); for a collection of English translations, see the (Terebess Asia Online 2022); for a complete bibliography of interlingual and intercultural translations of *Laozi*, see (Tadd 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> Qiu Xigui points out that there are textual differences between group *jia* and Group *bing* of the bamboo slips edition, which shows that there was already more than one kind of the *Daodejing* in circulation around 4BC.–3BC. See (Qiu 2020, p. 17). Some scholars even infer that the bamboo slips edition is an excerpt. See (Wilhelm 2010, “Vorwort,” p. 21).
- <sup>10</sup> English translation of “Unverborgenheit” refers to (Davis 2010, pp. 116, 288).
- <sup>11</sup> Heidegger’s original German is: “Im Werk ist das Geschehnis der Wahrheit am Werk. Die Wirkung des Werkes beruht in einem aus dem Werk geschehenden Wandel der Unverborgenheit des Seienden.” See (Heidegger 1977, p. 60).
- <sup>12</sup> This quotation is from the bamboo slips edition, which corresponds the Chapter 25 of the current editions. It differs in the bamboo slips edition, the silk edition, and the current editions. The English translation refers to (Michael 2015, p. 244), with minor change.
- <sup>13</sup> Yin Zhenhuan holds that Laozi’s Dao is significantly different from the art of controlling the courtiers designed by Shen Buhai 申不害 (385 BC.–337BC.) and Han Fei 韓非 (ca. 280–233BC.). Laozi’s Dao is more of an art of leadership that offers suggestions on the morals and cultivation of the monarchs. See (Yin 2008, pp. 134–35).
- <sup>14</sup> The original German text is “Es giebt gar keine anderen als moralische Erlebnisse, selbst nicht im Bereiche der Sinneswahrnehmung.” See (Nietzsche 1882, p. 145).
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas Michael has a distinctive translation: “*Daos* can lead, but these are not constant *daos*” (Michael 2015, p. 235). Here we classify “lead” into the view of “to follow” because “lead” takes Dao as the subject, whereas “follow” takes a human being as the subject.
- <sup>16</sup> Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147, or ca. 30–ca. 121) explains in *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 that *zhishi* 指事 refers that the meaning can be obviously grasped according to the form of the character, for example, *shang* (上, literally means “up”) and *xia* (下, literally means “down”) (指事者, 視而可識, 察而可見, 上下是也) (Xu 2007, p. 754). According to Lou Yulie’s 樓宇烈 (1934–) annotation, *zhishi zaoxing* 指事造形 means concrete thing with gestalt, which can be seen and recognized (可識可見有形象之具體事物) (B. Wang 2008, p. 2). Therefore, *chang Dao* 常道 does not refer to the concrete Dao (things) with gestalt that can be seen and recognized; hence, it cannot be *dao*-ed (*dao* functions as a verb here).
- <sup>17</sup> English translation refers to (Wagner 2003, p. 121), with minor changes.
- <sup>18</sup> Chen Guying does not interpret *chang* as “eternal”.

- Concerning the book *Zhuangzi*, scholars incline to believe that chapters 1 to 7, collectively called “Inner Chapters” (*nei pian* 內篇), are undoubtedly written by Zhuang Zhou (ca. 4BC.–3BC.). In contrast, chapters 8 to 22, collectively called “Outer Chapters” (*wai pian* 外篇), and chapters 23 to 33, collectively called “Miscellaneous Chapters” (*za pian* 雜篇), are supposed to be added by Zhuangzi’s disciples.
- Chapter 22 belongs to the “Outer Chapters” and is possibly written by Zhuangzi’s disciples.
- English translation refers to (Giles 1889, pp. 288–89).
- In *The Analects* of Confucius, the verb *dao* in “*fu zi zi dao*” 夫子自道 is interpreted as “to say”. See (Zhu 2011, p. 146). The sinologist William Soothill translates this sentence into “That is what you yourself say”. See (Soothill 1910, p. 689).
- This translation is the only extant Latin translation of the *Laozi*, which is now preserved in the British Museum. See (Von Collani 2015, p. 73).
- Previous Latin translations use “ratio” to interpret the character “Dao”. For example, the Jesuitic Sinologist Martino Martini (1614–1661) states that “Tao, sive magna ratio non habet nomen” (Dao, or the great reason, has no name). See (Von Collani 2015, p. 42). However, Julien’s French translation uses “voie” (road) instead of “ratio”.
- Wilhelm considered that the meaning of Dao and Sinn is consistent in different aspects, see (Wohlfart 2001, p. 35). “Sinn” corresponds to “sense” in English. Its original meaning is “way” and “direction”.
- Everything is changing, and there are no rules to follow. Only permanent change is immutable.
- According to Nan Huaijin’s interpretation of *Zhouyi Qianzaodu* 周易乾鑿度, all things change constantly and never stop; such a change is not a disorderly one but a change with immutable laws for people to follow. See (Nan and Xu [1974] 1983, p. 2).
- A passage from Socrates clearly shows that “idea” carries the characteristic of immutability. “But there was also a difference between different sciences, since one kind deals with a subject matter that comes to be and perishes, the other is concerned with what is free of that, the eternal and self-same. Since we made truth our criterion, the latter kind appeared to be the truer one” (Cooper and Hutchinson 1997, p. 451).
- The silk edition describes the non-perceptual characteristics of the Dao as follows: Looking at it, we do not see it. Listening to it, we do not hear it. Grasping it, we do not get hold of it (視之而弗見，聽之而弗聞，握之而弗得). See (Gao 1996, p. 282).
- This description of the origin appears in all of the *Daodejing*’s editions. English translation refers to (Michael 2015, p. 244).
- “周行而不殆” appears only in the current editions. English translation refers to (Wagner 2003, p. 201).
- Western translators and sinologists usually translate *chang* to the following vocabularies: eternal, lasting, absolute, everlasting, real, constant, timeless (zeitlos), true, invariant, enduring, and unchanging. These words all have platonic features. See (Terebess Asia Online 2022).
- There is a slight textual difference among all the editions.
- This description appears in Chapter 14 of the silk edition and the current editions. In some scholars’ opinion, the Dao and *yi* are identical. See (Z. Wang 2013).
- Wang Qingjie states that Laozi has a preference for *heng* rather than *chang* in expressing what it means by Dao; the use of *chang* is primarily due to the rhyme scheme of the text (Q. Wang 2000). However, Wohlfart points out that *chang* in the *Daodejing* is always used in a positive sense (Wohlfart 2001, p. 32).
- According to traditional Chinese thought, although people think everything is constantly changing, there is an immutable core, called “Heaven” or “Dao”, in all these changes. The representative view comes from Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 (179BC.–104BC.) “the Heaven and the Dao remain unchanged” (天不變道亦不變). See (Ban 1960, p. 2519).
- Descartes has the following explanations for “clear” and “distinct” in his *Principles of Philosophy*: “I call ‘clear’ that perception which is present and manifest to an attentive mind: just as we say that we clearly see those things which are present to our intent eye and act upon it sufficiently strongly and manifestly. On the other hand, I call ‘distinct’, that perception which, while clear, is so separated and delineated from all others that it contains absolutely nothing except what is clear.” (Descartes 1982, p. 20) According to Descartes’ argument, distinct things can be logically classified under its conceptual prescription, while clear things, such as pain, cannot be distinguished by logical discrimination and classification (Descartes 1982, p. 21). This dichotomy of “clear” and “distinct” is similar to the distinction between the *Pratyaksha pramana* (literally means first-hand sensory knowledge) and *Amumana pramana* (literally means inferential knowledge) in the influential school of Buddhist thought called the East Asian Yogācāra (Prasad 2002, p. 5), which is the source of *wei shi zong* 唯識宗 in China. However, what is logically distinct can be unclear. Descartes does not seem to admit this situation. In fact, this situation does exist. For example, when stating the distinct sentence in mathematics that “real numbers are more than natural numbers”, we do not have any clear picture of this sentence in our mind.
- The original German text is “Die sinnliche Erkenntnis ist gemäß der von ihrer wesentlichen Bedeutung hergeleiteten Benennung die Gesamtheit der Vorstellungen unterhalb der Schwelle streng logischer Unterscheidung.” See (Baumgarten 1983, p. 11).
- The early Taoist thought proposes grasping the meaning beyond the language to understand the Dao. For example, “*Dao ke dao fei chang Dao*” in the *Daodejing* is a representative expression. In the “*Wai wu*” 外物 of the “Miscellaneous chapter” of *Zhuangzi*, it says: “The *raison d’être* of language is an idea to be expressed. When the meaning is grasped, the language may be ignored” (言者所以在意，得意而忘言). See (Chen 1983, p. 725). English translation refers to (Giles 1889, p. 362) with minor changes.



Based on these remarks, the later metaphysical school of the Wei Jin period (220–420) developed a significant discourse on the distinction between “language and meaning”.

- 40 Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978) identifies six meanings of the Dao. To sum up, Dao refers to (1) the general rule of the cosmos; (2) the metaphysical substance; (3) the phenomenon of the Dao; (4) the Dao that is identical to the De 德; (5) the cultivation of the De and the way of life; (6) the state of things and the state of personality (Tang 2005, pp. 224–34). These six meanings of Dao are beneficial for understanding the *Daodejing*. However, they overlap the preunderstandings and interpretations of the Dao discussed in our article. So we will not deal with them particularly.
- 41 If the universe is an “artifact” (Wilkinson 1992) and the physical laws are pure fiction, then as the French scientist and philosopher Pierre Duhem (1861–1916) criticizes, this claim must be too strong (Duhem 2017, p. 271). However, the establishment of physical laws cannot exclude the choice of questions, methods (Ravetz 1990, p. 25), and results or even the choice of value (Klemke et al. 1998, pp. 482–83). Therefore, its absolute objectivity is impossible. In addition, the view of objectivism is also harmful. It hinders people’s understanding of science’s meaning and its development (Komesaroff [1986] 2008, pp. 375–76).
- 42 This expression only appears in the current editions (chapter 28) and the silk edition with a slight difference. English translation refers to (Duyvendak 2022, item 28).
- 43 English translation refers to (Michael 2015, p. 251) with minor changes. There is little difference among all the versions.
- 44 English translation refers to (Michael 2015, p. 253). Though there is a slight difference among all the versions, it does not affect our argument here.
- 45 “Logos” and “logic” are paronyms. According to Heidegger’s criticism of western philosophy, logic has become the metaphysics of logos. As metaphysics, logic defines and controls logos. As a result, logos is often translated by the equivalent Latin word “ratio”. See (Heidegger 1979, pp. 254–55).
- 46 There are also some other alternative punctuating modes. However, judging from the semantic aspects, those alternative sentences brings no difference. See (Li 2015).

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