

China Perspectives

THE METAPHYSICS OF PHILOSOPHICAL DAOISM

Zheng Kai



The Metaphysics of Philosophical Daoism

Drawing on evidence from a wide range of classical Chinese texts, this book argues that *xingershangxue*, the study of “beyond form”, constitutes the core argument and intellectual foundation of Daoist philosophy.

The author presents Daoist *xingershangxue* as a typical concept of metaphysics distinct from that of the natural philosophy and metaphysics of ancient Greece since it focusses on understanding the world beyond perceivable objects and phenomena as well as names that are definable in their social, political, or moral structures. In comparison with other philosophical traditions in the East and West, the book discusses the ideas of *dao*, *de*, and “spontaneously self-so”, which shows Daoist *xingershangxue*’s theoretical tendency to transcendence.

The author explains the differences between Daoist philosophy and ancient Greek philosophy and proposes that Daoist philosophy is the study of *xingershangxue* in nature, providing a valuable resource for scholars interested in Chinese philosophy, Daoism, and comparative philosophy.

Zheng Kai is the Director of the Chinese Philosophy Department and the Director of the Center for Daoist Studies at Peking University, China. He is the author of several acclaimed books on pre-Qin Chinese philosophy and philosophical Daoism, including *Between De and Rituals: History of Thought in the Pre-Hundred-Schools-of-Thought Period* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Zhuangzi*. His most recent book is *Interpreting Daoist Political Philosophy*.

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Part 1

The meaning of *dao*, *de*, and metaphysics

The purpose of this book is to provide an account of the core thesis of philosophical Daoism; namely, a theory of metaphysics that is pregnant with profound insight and practical wisdom. To this end, a number of principal questions will be addressed in turn:

- 1 What is the core thesis, or the most significant characteristic, of philosophical Daoism? From a synoptic and structural perspective, this book will explain that the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) merits our attention as the most foundational and important thesis. In other words, the theory of *dao* (*daolun* 道論) and the theory of *de* (*delun* 德論), developed by Daoist philosophers around the concepts of *dao* 道 and *de* 德, encompass the theoretic core and basis of philosophical Daoism. They also mark the school's principal intellectual characteristic.
- 2 *Dao* is an important and characteristic concept of philosophical Daoism. Its meaning is deepened by Laozi with inventive intellectual ingenuity via the concept of *wu* 無 (i.e. “not”). If the theory of *dao* 道論 forms the core thesis of philosophical Daoism, it is elucidated by application of the concept of *wu*. *Wu* has implicated in it a series of meanings, including concepts such as formlessness (*wuxing* 無形), namelessness (*wuming* 無名), and non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為). Among these, namelessness and non-purposive action are the most significant and special.
- 3 In addition to the proposition of *dao*, philosophical Daoism from Laozi onward transformed the pre-established and long-standing intellectual tradition of *de* with creative ingenuity. The result of this endeavour is the concept of murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) and the profound and characteristic theory of murky-*de* 玄德論, which encompasses various and complex subjects, including ethics, political philosophy, and theory of heart-mind-nature (*xinxinglun* 心性論).
- 4 What is the nature of the kind of metaphysics that is to be ascribed to philosophical Daoism, if we can do so legitimately at all? In other words, on what ground do we judge philosophical Daoism to be a “metaphysical” (*xingershangxue* 形而上學) theory? It is incumbent upon this book to provide

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a comparative study of metaphysics, as it is conceived in the Western philosophical tradition and in its Chinese counterpart, i.e. *xingershangxue* 形而上學, before we can identify with specificity the characteristics of the metaphysics of philosophical Daoism.

We shall now address these questions in detail.

1 The meaning of *dao* and *de*

Philosophical Daoism's core thesis

The identification of the principal theme and distinctive characteristics of philosophical Daoism from Laozi onward continues to prove a controversial topic among commentators and interpreters. One may observe that spontaneously self-so (*ziran* 自然) and non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為) are regularly referred to in outlines of philosophical Daoism since the Wei and Jin period. However, I consider *dao* and *de* to be the two central concepts of philosophical Daoism (of Laozi and Zhuangzi) and the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) the fundamental theoretical basis of philosophical Daoism as a whole. In the following chapter, I shall offer a detailed discussion beginning with an account of the interpretive history regarding the meaning of *dao* and *de*. In *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools* 《論六家要旨》, Sima Tan 司馬談 states,

Daoists hold the idea of non-purposive action, which is also said to be all-achieving. [. . . They] base their theories on emptiness (of heart-mind), and argue for argue for governance as according with [the nature and circumstance of the governed]. 道家無為，又曰無不為。 以虛無為本，因循為用。

Why does Sima Tan omit the meaning of *dao* and *de* in his outline of Daoism? He does this because the Daoists he discusses in this passage refer primarily to Huang-Lao Daoists 黃老道家, who have markedly different theoretic emphases to those of Lao-Zhuang philosophy 老莊哲學.¹ The following account follows the interpretive track of his son, Sima Qian 司馬遷, for whom philosophical Daoism from Laozi onward is ultimately epitomised in the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意). We shall see that Sima Qian's interpretation is perhaps more convincing.

Strictly speaking, the name “Daoism” (*daojia* 道家) did not exist before the Han dynasty, although Daoist thinkers clearly predate that time frame. The term “Daoism” was coined by Han dynasty intellectuals in an attempt to differentiate the various intellectual schools and intellectual movements in the pre-Qin period. Among these intellectuals, Sima Tan and Sima Qian were first to use the term “Daoism”. In Sima Tan's *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools*, Daoism is also referred to as *Dao-de-ism* 道德家. An apparent mention of *Dao-de-ism* is similarly

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found in Sima Qian's *Shiji – Biographies of Mengzi and Xun Qing* 《史記·孟子荀卿列傳》.² These texts evidence that *Dao-de-ism* is another name for Daoism and is perhaps a more accurate designation. In the *Shiji – Biographies of Laozi and Han Fei* 《史記·老子韓非列傳》, Sima Qian writes,

Laozi revises *dao* and *de*. His philosophy places great importance on anonymity and namelessness. [. . .] Laozi produced a two-part volume of work, explicating the meaning of *dao* and *de*, containing roughly five thousand words. 老子修道德，其學以自隱無名為務。 老子乃著書上下篇，言道德之意五千餘言。

Repeated references to *dao* and *de* and the meaning of *dao* and *de* in Sima Qian's *Record* aptly reflect his astute academic acumen. The two-part volume of work refers to the two parts (*pian* 篇) of Laozi's work, which are respectively titled *Dao* and *De*. All existing versions of the *Laozi*, including the received text of Wang Bi 王弼, along with the excavated manuscripts of Mawangdui 馬王堆 and the Peking University bamboo slips, are divided into two parts, with titles that reference *dao* and *de*, respectively. The two parts that constitute the Mawangdui *Laozi* are titled *Dao Pian* 《道篇》 and *De Pian* 《德篇》, whereas those of the Peking University version are titled *Dao Jing* 《道經》 and *De Jing* 《德經》.³ The received text and manuscripts from archaeological finds are consistent with the records of the *Shiji* 《史記》, attesting to the fact that the *Laozi* is also known as the *Daodejing* 《道德經》. In brief, the bipartite thematic division of the *Laozi* corresponds to the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意). This correspondence warrants careful consideration, as it signals an interpretive approach inherent to the philosophy of Laozi.

Every classical text from ancient China has undergone a process of textual formation and canonisation (canonical texts taught and handed down by Confucians also underwent a process of Confucianisation). Evidence from archaeological finds and various surviving textual traditions show that the *Laozi* is no exception. During this process, the structure and philosophical character of the *Laozi* are given form. In brief, the earlier Guodian 郭店 texts (excavated from a tomb near an early capital of the state of Chu that is dated to the mid-Warring States period, containing three groups of *Laozi* texts, A, B, and C) have a chapter sequence that is evidently inconsistent with the current version of the *Laozi* (i.e. the received text of Wang Bi). The slightly later Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts (containing two versions, A and B) are much more similar to the current version than the Guodian texts (they are said to be remarkably similar to the Tang dynasty Fu Yi 傅奕 version of the *Daodejing*, as it is recorded in the *Daoist Canon* 《道藏》); a thematic division is present, although *de* part is placed before *dao* part, in contrast to a reverse arrangement in the current version. The Peking University version of the *Laozi* is still more similar to the current version than its preceding redactions: Not only is it divided into two parts, but the parts are also titled *The Upper Part of Laozi* (*Laozi Shangjing* 《老子上經》) and *The Lower Part of Laozi* (*Laozi Xiajing* 《老子下經》). This provides us with clear evidence that the *Laozi* was accorded the status

of a classic (*jing* 經) at that time.⁴ The bibliographical “Record of Art and Culture” of the *History of the Han Dynasty* 《漢書·藝文志》 reports that there were four works attributed to Laozi. These works have long been lost, but the *Record*’s account bears witness to one particular stratum in the process of the *Laozi*’s canonisation. Heshang Gong’s 河上公 textual version distinguishes itself from others, as it carries individual chapter titles. Wang Bi’s version has similarly undergone a complicated process of textual dissemination, which means the so-called received text of Wang Bi we see today has deviated from its original formulation. We may conclude that the *Laozi* the Grand Scribe, Sima Qian, had access to was close to a stable version and was textually very similar to the received text we have today. Correspondingly, the Grand Scribe’s understanding and summary of the *Laozi* are also relatively judicious and accurate.

From the perspective of the history of thought, one may observe that writers from before the Wei and Jin period mostly navigated their interpretation of Daoism through the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意). In *Shiji – Biographies of Laozi and Hanfeizi*, Sima Qian writes,

Zhuangzi decimates *dao* and *de* and writes without self-constraint. The main purport of his writing converges upon the notion of spontaneously self-so. [. . .] Hanfeizi imposes strict measures for moral behaviour on account of the law, devises clear categories for judgement between right and wrong, seldom acts charitably or forgivingly. All of these originate from the meaning of *dao* and *de*. 莊子散道德放論，要亦歸之自然。 . . . 韓子引繩墨，切事情，明是非，其極慘礪少恩，皆原于道德之意。

This particular comment points out that the meaning of *dao* and *de* is recognised as the principal thesis for both philosophical Daoism (Laozi and Zhuangzi) and Huang-Lao Daoism (including, to an extent, Daoist-Legalists and Legalists such as the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子》). In fact, the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) is an important strand of philosophical thinking that permeates many exponents of the various pre-Qin schools of thought. For example, “All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* relates a regrettable state of there being “no unity for *dao* and *de* 道德不一” (i.e. lack of consensus regarding how to interpret and apply the various sayings on *dao* and *de*) and that “the art of *dao* was about to be torn into fragments by the (various academic schools of the) world 道術將為天下裂” Interestingly, the same state of affairs is portrayed as “the way of the proper ruler wanes 王道陵夷” and “the *de* of Zhou withers and shrinks 周德衰微” by Confucians. *The Annals of Lü Buwei* 《呂氏春秋》 blends all of the various pre-Qin dynasty schools of thought into one melting pot (using a duodecimally structured astronomical and agricultural almanac advanced by the Yinyang School as its overall theoretical framework) and is highly praised by the Han dynasty commentator Gao You 高誘, who says it is “a great improvement upon the Hundred Schools 大出諸子之右”. Gao asserts that

The Annals of Lü Buwei is aimed at *dao* and *de*, is principled by non-purposive action, uses the standards of consummatory conduct and optimal

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appropriateness, and measures itself with judiciousness and reason. 以道德爲標的，以無爲爲綱紀，以仁義爲品式，以公方爲驗格。

Gao You's 高誘 *Preface to the Huainanzi* 《淮南子序》

Similarly, the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》, which assumes the theoretic basis of the then prevalent Huang-Lao Daoism and contains all sorts of topics far and wide, likewise proclaims that

20 *pian* or chapters are thus written to compose this book. The principle of heaven and earth is now thoroughly investigated, affairs of the human world are now unimpeded and productive, the art of governance of the ruler is now comprehensively understood. 故著書二十篇，則天地之理究矣，人間之事接矣，帝王之道備矣。

“Yaolue” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·要略》

Gao You 高誘 believes the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》 to be a collaborative product of the masters of esoteric arts (*fangshi* 方士) and scholars of various schools, who

[j]ointly elaborate on *dao* and *de*, unify the meanings of consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*), and thus write this book, . . . in order to reveal fully the meaning of *dao* and *de*. 共講論道德，總統仁義，而著此書 以窮道德之意。

“Xumu” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·敘目》

Gao You's comments are not at all groundless, for “Qisuxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·齊俗訓》 also states,

The meaning of *dao* and *de* is definite and unchangeable like (the paths of) the sun and the moon, like (the positions of) the southern side of the Yangtze and the northern side of the Yellow river. 道德之論，譬猶日月也，江南河北，不能易其指。

It is clear that the treatment of the meaning of *dao* and *de* as a fundamental topic of discourse was widely shared among thinkers of Huang-Lao Daoism as well as other schools of thought. The principal aim of Yan Zun's 嚴遵 *The Main Purport of Dao and De* 《道德指歸》 is to “follow the meaning of *dao* and *de*, and to study the heart-mind of heaven and earth 上原道德之意，下揆天地之心” as well as “to embrace the meaning of *dao* and *de*, and to attain the heart-mind of spiritual illuminations 上含道德之意，下得神明之心”. Such is the importance of the meaning of *dao* and *de*. The *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子》 asserts that “*Dao* means ‘withdrawing the self’, and *de* means ‘capable of benefiting others’ 所謂道者，無己者也。所謂德者，得人者也。” It also states that “the principle of *dao* and *de* provides for the activities and development of the myriad things, 道德之法，萬物取業。” (*Huanliu* of the *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子·環流》) and that “*dao* of the sage is attained from spiritual illuminations, for this reason it is called *daode*. 聖人之

道與神明相得，故曰道德。” (*Taihong of the Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子·泰鴻》)。In “Biography of Yangxiong” 《漢書·揚雄傳》 in the *History of the Han Dynasty*, Huan Tan 桓譚 reports that

[Laozi] wrote two *pian* of essays with words of emptiness and nothingness. He debases consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) and defames ritual propriety (*li*) and learning. Nonetheless, people who are partial to his writing consider it a work greater than the Five Classics. Accounts of this phenomenon have been recorded since the Emperors Wen and Jing of the Han dynasty and Sima Qian. 昔老聃著虛無之言兩篇，薄仁義，非禮學，然後世之好之者尚以為過於《五經》，自漢文、景之君及司馬遷皆有是言。

Ruan Ji 阮籍 believes that the main purport of the *Zhuangzi* lies in its “explication of the subtle and ingenious greatness of *dao* and *de*. 述道德之妙。” He also says that “the form and the spirit are in me and *dao* and *de* are complete. 形神在我而道德成。” (*Reaching Zhuangzi* 《達莊論》). The *daode* Ge Hong 葛洪 discusses in the *Inner Chapters of the Baopuzi* 《抱樸子·內篇》 is also to be differentiated from the *daode* in Confucian discourses; for example, he says, “Confucian and Mohist teachings gain audience when *dao* and *de* are lost. 道德喪而儒墨重矣。” In the preface of his annotation to Guo Xiang’s 郭象 commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 highlights the four key concepts of *dao* and *de*, twofold mystery (*chongxuan* 重玄), non-purposive action, and transformation by virtue of oneself alone (*duhua* 獨化) to offer his summary of philosophical Daoism in general and of *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy in particular. In addition, according to Wang Yinglin’s 王應麟 *Textual Research on the Record of Art and Culture* 《漢藝文志考證》，

Chaogongwu says, “In the forty-second year of the Emperor Ping of Zhou, (Laozi) produced a document upon the request of Yinxi. It consists of eighty-one chapters and contains five thousand and seven hundred forty-eight words. The theme of the work is the meaning of *dao* and *de*”. 晁公武曰：（老子）以周平王四十二年，授尹喜，凡五千七百四十有八言，八十一章，言道德之旨。

In the *Miscellaneous Essays on the Zhuangzi* 《讀南華真經雜說》，Lu Xixing 陸西星 advises that “before one reads the works of Laozi and *Zhuangzi*, one must first be acquainted with these two words: *dao* and *de*. 看老莊書，先要認‘道德’二字。” Jiao Hong 焦竑 also writes in the preface to his commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子翼》 that the five thousand words of Laozi propose to “explicate the meaning of *dao* and *de* 明道德之意”.

An abundance of evidence shows that the essence of Laozi and *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy is the meaning of *dao* and *de*. Notions such as non-purposive action, namelessness, and spontaneously self-so are derived from the meaning of *dao* and *de*; for example,

Dao emulates that which is spontaneously self-so. 道法自然。

(ch. 24 of the *Laozi*)⁵

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Dao never does anything [for the sake of doing it], and so there is nothing that it does not do. 道常無為而無不為。

(ch. 37 of the *Laozi*)

All things are produced by *dao* and nourished by *de*. They receive their forms according to the natural propensities of each and are completed according to their circumstances. Therefore, all things without exception honour *dao* and exalt *de*. This honouring of *dao* and the exalting of *de* is not the result of any ordination but is always a spontaneous and self-directed tribute. Thus, it is that *dao* produces (all things), and *de* nourishes them, brings them to their full growth, nurtures them, completes them, brings them to fruition, sustains them, and encompasses them. It produces them and makes no claim to possess them; it carries them through their natural processes and does not flaunt its ability in doing so; it brings them to maturity and exercises no control over them. This is called murky-*de*. 道生之，德畜之；長之育之；亭之毒之；養之覆之。生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。

(ch. 51 of the *Laozi*)

Non-purposive action is the *de* of heaven. [. . .] To act through non-action is an act of Heaven; to speak through non-purposive action is an act of *de*. 無為也，天德而已矣。 無為為之謂天，無為言之謂德。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)⁶

Placidity, indifference, silence, quietude, emptiness (of heart-mind), and non-purposive action: these are the qualities that maintain the level of heaven and earth and are the essence of *dao* and *de*. 夫恬淡寂寞，虛無無為，此天地之平而道德之質也。”

(“Constrained in Will” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Given the evidence at hand, is it not justified to say that *dao*, *de*, and the meaning of *dao* and *de* are more effective in revealing the core and fundamental thesis of philosophical Daoism than spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action?

If one grants that the greatest concern for Confucian thinkers is based on “the occasion for consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) 仁義之際”, then it seems obvious that the fundamental thesis of Daoism is tied to the meaning of *dao* and *de*. However, since Confucian philosophy emerged within the cultural framework of the Western Zhou dynasty that was nested in *de* and official rituals and was guided by the doctrine “let the will be set on *dao*; let every attainment of *de* be firmly grasped 志於道，據於德” (“Shu Er” in the *Analecets*), not to mention that it champions the benign rule of *de* and is undeniably a member of the schools that pursue *dao*, it is certain that Confucians would not stand by and let the Daoists claim *dao* and *de* exclusively for their own. Han Yu 韓愈 points out that “consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) have definite meanings, while *dao* and *de* are abstract expressions. 仁與義為定名，道與德為虛位。” He also differentiates between *dao* and *de* of Confucianism and of Daoist philosophy, stating, “All I have to say about *dao* and *de*

is said in accordance with consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*), 吾所謂道德云者，合仁與義言之也”，while Laozi speaks of *dao* and *de* to “eliminate consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 去仁與義云者。” Han Yu’s clarification of the essential difference between the Confucian and Daoist understandings of *dao* and *de* gains the approval of Zhu Xi 朱熹 in due course, as it is recorded in *Zhuzi Yulei* Vol. 137 《朱子語類》卷一三七. On a separate occasion, Cai Shen 蔡沈 questions Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 understanding of *dao* and *de* regarding his references to the meaning of *dao* and *de* in his previously quoted summary of the Daoist School and raises this question to his master Zhu Xi 朱熹: “To which school do ‘*dao* and *de*’ really belong?” According to his master, “‘*Dao* and *de*’ refer to themselves, and they are [not to be claimed by any particular school of thought]. 這‘道德’只自是他道德。” Cai Shen later passes judgement accordingly, saying, “[T]he Grand Scribe is of humble intellect. 太史公智識鄙下” (*Zhuzi Yulei*, Vol. 125). Cai’s verdict is perhaps rather too rash a critique of the ancient historian.

Dao and *de*, or the meaning of *dao* and *de*, in the context of intellectual and academic history have different meanings from *daode* (i.e. morality) in vernacular Chinese. The reason could be that *daode*, as it is used in the context of daily conversation, has absorbed and incorporated extensive Confucian influences over the centuries. In other words, Confucian thinkers have consistently interpreted *dao* and *de* with “consummatory conduct” (*ren* 仁) and “optimal appropriateness” (*yi* 義) (this tendency has increased since the Qin and Han dynasties), while philosophical Daoism, by contrast, insists upon separating and removing these two Confucian “virtues”, or *ren* and *yi*, from their understanding of what *dao* and *de* mean.⁷ This position is criticised by Ban Gu 班固, who says that “when the unruly and indulgent assume ruling positions, they would seek to uproot the rituals and learning, and abandon consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 及放者為之，則欲絕去禮學，兼棄仁義。” (“Record of Art and Culture” in the *History of the Han Dynasty* 《漢書·藝文志》). While Confucians insist on identifying “consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness” (*renyi* 仁義) with *dao* and *de*, and thereby making their important contribution to the field of ethics, does the Lao-Zhuang Daoist’s deliberate contrast between “consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness” and *dao* and *de* imply an outright rejection of ethics? In fact, the Lao-Zhuang Daoist’s understanding of the meaning of *dao* and *de* is more nuanced and profound than being merely a critical theory, for it incorporates theories of natural philosophy (including cosmology and physics) and metaphysics, social and political philosophy, and ethics. Although the ethics that Lao-Zhuang Daoism establishes with the essential concept of murky-*de* is a kind of anti-ethics, it is one that transcends ordinary life and the specifics of any particular moral maxim. It is one that is established without specific regard to any individual socio-political system or cultural convention. As such, the applicability of its contents is not confined by particular circumstances. The meaning of *dao* and *de* is pregnant with rich connotations, including not only physical and metaphysical issues concerning the relationship between *dao* and material objects and between *you* and *wu* but also those between the theories of murky-*de* and non-purposive action as well as

questions and issues ranging from the political and the social to the field of ethics. Hence, it is fair to say that the thoughts and theories incorporated in the meaning of *dao* and *de* are much grander and more profound than a simple reduction of *dao* and *de* to the normative virtues of “consummatory conduct” and “optimal appropriateness”, as maintained by Confucian scholars.

In sum, with regard to the root and theoretical structure of philosophical Daoism, the school’s essential doctrine can be summarised by the meaning of *dao* and *de*. From the Wei and Jin periods onwards, influential thinkers have consistently considered spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action to be the main principles of philosophical Daoism, overlooking the fact that these two notions are but manifestations of the meaning of *dao* and *de*.⁸ The fundamental disagreement between Confucianism and philosophical Daoism is also highlighted by their different interpretations of *dao* and *de*. As for ideologically motivated attempts to label philosophical Daoism as a philosophy for the feeble, sluggish, or pessimistic, along with other otherwise unprofitable interpretive experiments that see philosophical Daoism as a mystic, nihilist, relativistic, or sceptical school of thought, I do not think it would be worthwhile to give them further consideration here.

Dao and *de* in the phrase “the meaning of *dao* and *de*” ought to receive separate treatment as two distinct concepts that jointly constitute the core concepts of philosophical Daoism. In the following chapters, further investigation will be carried out along the theoretical paths set forth by the concepts of *dao* and *de*.

Notes

- 1 References to Daoism are found in Sima Tan’s *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools* 《論六家要旨》 and Sima Qian’s *Shiji – Hereditary House of Chen* 《史記·陳丞相世家》. However, what is noteworthy is that the predominant impression of Daoism in the minds of Han dynasty intellectuals derives mostly from Huang-Lao Daoism (cf. Zhang Shunzheng’s *On the Dao in Zhou and Qin Dynasties* 張舜徽《周秦道論發微》). In fact, Huang-Lao Daoism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism are not frequently distinguished in writings from that period. Ban Gu’s *Record of Art and Culture of the Book of Han* 《漢書·藝文志》 serves as an example in this regard. The interrelation of Huang-Lao Daoism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism must not obscure an inherent disparity. In brief, the principal theoretic import of Huang-Lao Daoism lies in “*Xingming Fashu* 刑名法术”, i.e. governance through law, title, and reward and punitive actions, and that of Lao-Zhuang Daoism, or the meaning of *dao* and *de*.
- 2 *Shiji – Biographies of Mengzi and Xun Qing* 《史記·孟子荀卿列傳》: “Xun Qing dislikes the politics of the corrupt world, where individuals bring the state to its destruction and confuse the roles of the ruler and the minister, fail to follow the great *Dao* and instead put faith in divination. Minor scholars spend time debating unimportant matters; similarly, people like Zhuang Zhou upset traditional customs with seemingly smart words. Therefore, Xun Qing sets down an account of the activities of Confucians, Mohists, and *Dao-De*-ists. He died after writing tens of thousands of words.” 荀卿嫉濁世之政，亡國亂君相屬，不遂大道而營于巫祝，信禱祥。鄙儒小拘，如莊周等又滑稽亂俗，于是推儒、墨、道德之行事興壞，序列着數萬言而卒。” “*Daode* 道德” in this passage is an abbreviation of *Dao-De*-ism.
- 3 The two parts of these texts are ordered differently to that of the received text, with the *De* part being the foremost portion of the text.

- 4 Wei Han 韓巍, “Textual Characteristics and Academic Value of the Bamboo Slips Laozi from the Western Han Dynasty 西漢竹書《老子》的文本特征和學術價值”, *Laozi: Peking University Collection of Western Han Bamboo Texts* 北京大學藏西漢竹書, Vol. 2 (2012): 207–225.
- 5 Translation of the *Laozi* in this book largely relies on the English translation by D. C. Lau, with minor editing. D. C. Lau, *Chinese Classics: Dao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1982).
- 6 Translation of the outer and miscellaneous chapters of the *Zhuangzi* throughout this book borrow heavily from the English translation by Burton Watson. Burton Watson (*trans.*), *Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 7 For example, Laozi says, “When *dao* is long neglected, there are virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 大道廢，有仁義。” (ch. 18), and also, “Exterminate consummatory conduct, discard optimal appropriateness, and the people will again be filial. 絕仁棄義，民復孝慈。” (ch. 19) “*Dao* and *de*” is first mentioned in the last sentence of “Webbed Toes” in the *Zhuangzi*, whose meaning is opposite to that of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness: “I do not venture to raise myself up in deeds of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness or to lower myself in deluded and perverse practices. 上不敢為仁義之操，下不敢為淫僻之行。” “Horses’ Hoofs” in the *Zhuangzi*, however, says, “[T]o take the destruction of *dao* and *de* as consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness, that is the error of the sages. 毀道德以為仁義，聖人之過也。” “Shuoshanxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·說山訓》 also says, “[C]onsummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) cannot surpass *dao* and *de*, as they are subsumed under *dao* and *de*. 仁義之不能大于道德也，仁義在道德之包。” Hence, it is clear that “*dao* and *de*” and “consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness” (*renyi* 仁義) are distinct in meaning in the context of philosophical Daoism.
- 8 This argument will be elaborated further in the following chapters.

2 *Dao*

A discussion with the meaning of *wu* at its centre

The intellectual discovery of *wu* 無 (whose meaning within the context of philosophical Daoism includes “not”, “not-having”, “indefinite”) is an important foundation for Laozi’s philosophy; it also sets an important measuring stick for the philosophical achievements made by scholars in the pre-Qin period.¹ Without this intellectual achievement, ancient philosophers would not have been able to “venture from the world of ordinary objects to the world of *dao*”, nor to venture “from the world of *you* 有 (the opposite of *wu*) to the world of *wu* 無”.² It was precisely the discovery of *wu* and Laozi’s original and ingenious interpretation of the *dao* of his predecessors through the notion of *wu* that made the *dao* of the *Laozi* philosophically significant. In one stroke, Laozi greatly enriched the meaning of *dao* while setting it completely apart from previous uses of the word.³

Dao underwent a process of conceptualisation under Laozi. *Dao* as a philosophical concept is distinct from ordinary, vernacular meanings of the word (including “way”, “road”, “discourse”, and “principle”). By the same reasoning, one must not attempt to interpret *dao* through its vernacular or lexical meanings (e.g. through analysis of the glyphic composition of *dao*). This is because the chief and foremost meaning of *dao* is *wu*. Daoist philosophers following Laozi developed the philosophical meaning of *dao* precisely through *wu* 無.⁴ In brief, *dao* as a philosophical concept is a product of a series of philosophical breakthroughs achieved by thinkers since the late Spring and Autumn period. The essential property of this concept is represented by the notion of *wu*. That is to say, concepts descriptive of *dao*, such as formlessness (*wuxing* 無形), imagelessness (*wuxiang* 無象), objectlessness (*wuwu* 無物), namelessness (*wuming* 無名), non-obsessive desire (*wuyu* 無欲), and non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為), as well as their derivatives deep and dim (*yaoming* 窈冥), solitary and still (*jimo* 寂寞), and indeterminate and indistinct (*huanghu* 恍惚), are devised to make *dao* intellectually discernible through written words.⁵ Among these, namelessness is one of the most important concepts in Laozi’s philosophy and is also one of the most bemusing.⁶ Name (*ming* 名) and namelessness in the ancient Chinese context are philosophically significant with regard to both philosophy of language and political philosophy. For this reason, the Daoist “theory of the nameless 無名論” ought to receive treatment in both of these regards. We shall first pay attention to the linguistic side of the problem and address issues concerning the relationship between *dao* and *yan* 言 (i.e. speech and discourse).⁷

The translation of *dao* is of interest to our discussion here. One of the *Daodejing*'s earliest exports to the West was made possible by Jean Pierre Abel-Rémusat's 1823 abridged translation, where *dao* is translated as the Greek word *logos*.⁸ *Logos* was singled out because Abel-Rémusat believed that *dao* simultaneously refers to three concepts: Absolute being, idea, and words. Later, Abel-Rémusat's disciple Stanislas Julien became the first scholar to translate the *Laozi* in its entirety for Western academia. Julien chose to translate *dao* as "the way", which proves to be a seminal decision. Abel-Rémusat's and Julien's translations are mentioned in Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology*, published in 1857, where Schelling puts forth his own interpretive theory:

[D]ao is not to be identified with reason (*Vernunft*) as previous translators have suggested. Daoist theories are likewise not rational theories (*Vernunftlehre*). *Dao* is a gate (*Pforte*). From the "non-existent" (*Nichtseiend*) to the "mere potential" (*bloss Können*), Daoist theories are a great gate into being through which all finite being enters to become real beings. [. . .] Passages of the *Daodejing* alternate between various metaphorical expressions for the massive and irresistible power of the "non-existent (*Nichtseiend*)".⁹

Judiciously speaking, one must acknowledge the fact that few Western scholars in history have enjoyed unmediated access to Chinese philosophical writings. Schelling's discussion reflects a Eurocentric mode of philosophical inspection. His interpretation of the "non-existent" and its relationship with *dao* is superficial and ultimately fruitless. Hanfeizi 韓非子, one of the forerunners in the hermeneutical history of philosophical Daoism, references "principle" (*li* 理) to interpret *dao*. This attempt ultimately falls short, for "principle" in the context of early Chinese philosophy primarily refers to "principles governing the natural world", i.e. laws that regulate the movement of physical bodies. *Logos* is a more adequate contender than "principle" for the translation of *dao*, but it is still not ideal, for *dao* is fundamentally nameless and thus differs from *logos* in this essential respect. "The way" has enjoyed popular acceptance in recent years, but it remains an unsatisfactory translation, for it steers too close to a stereotypical concept in vernacular language and risks misinterpretations that severely diminish the philosophical significance of *dao*. Western scholars have also written about the mother-son relationship in the *Laozi* with interest, although it served merely as a metaphorical illustration of the relationship between *dao* and things (*wu* 物) before it was left behind by later Daoist writers. There are indeed numerous allusions to "road" and "gate", including the "gates bestowed by heaven" (*tianmen* 天門), "gate of infinitude" (*wuqiongzhimen* 無窮之門), and "dim and deep gateway" (*yaomingzhimen* 窈冥之門).¹⁰ Nonetheless, these terms alone do not take us any closer to a more insightful analysis of the meaning of *dao* and *de*.

The Daoist notion of *wu* has attracted continuous academic interest.¹¹ Nonetheless, the contrast between *wu* and *you* can still benefit from further discussion. *Wu* does not appear in the world of experience, for it is not to be found therein. Just as the number zero is not a natural number, *wu* can only result from philosophical reflection.¹² From this, one may ascertain that attempts to infer the meaning of *wu* from vernacular uses of the word are necessarily bound to fail. Some scholars have

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scrutinised the relationship between *wu* 無, wizard (*wu* 巫), and dance (*wu* 舞)¹³ in search of the etymological origin of *wu*.¹⁴ This interpretive direction is similarly ill-informed.

The first uses of *wu* are found on the oracle bones. Represented by the character 𠄎, it signifies a lack of *you*, meaning “something is neither here nor there, neither found in this moment nor any particular moment (i.e. not appearing in space or time)”.¹⁵ The cosmogonic proposition of “the first being emerged from non-being” is entertained by thinkers of several early civilisations. Apart from the well-known Greek example of Cosmos born out of Chaos, the *Rgveda* also includes a hymn that begins:

Then, there was neither existence nor non-existence. नासंदासीननो सदासीत्तदानीं
(*Rgveda* 10, 129, 1)¹⁶

Ancient thinkers (Chinese and otherwise) consistently interpreted non-being (*wu* 無) through the absence of being (*you* 有). Numerous examples of inter-substitutable uses of *wu* 無 and *wang* 亡, which represents “the state or process of vanishing or dying away”, in ancient Chinese texts support this analysis. The *Shuowenjiezi* 《說文解字》 says, “*Wang* means to escape. It is composed of the radicals ‘to enter’ and the ‘ya’ brush stroke. 亡, 逃也。从入, 从乚”.

However, the meaning and significance of *wu* in Daoist philosophy are not exhausted by the notion of not-having or not-being-there. *You* means “concrete existing beings”, i.e. objects that are found in space and time. By contrast, Laozi’s *wu* primarily refers to that which lacks form, phenomenon, and object. It also has the meaning of “namelessness” and “non-purposive action”. While the meaning of “being” in ancient Greece is given in clear terms, Laozi’s *dao* is an “x” that is not any *thing*. It is that which is nameless. Laozi’s *you* and *wu* must be understood in terms of the categorical opposites “having form” and “being formless”, “having name” and “being nameless”, “purposive action” and “non-purposive action”, “obsessive desire” and “non-obsessive desire”. *Wu* thus by no means signifies absolute emptiness or there being nothing at all; rather, it is an operative term that represents conceptual negation, deconstruction, and dialectic reflection.¹⁷ Therefore, the terse maxim “The movement of *dao* proceeds through contraries 反者道之動” (ch. 40 of the *Laozi*) offers an important interpretive clue for our understanding of *wu*. More specifically, *wu* is not “being without being anything specific”, but rather an “x that is not any being or thing” (other examples of entities that are *wu* include “that which turns things into things is itself not a thing 物物者非物”, “that which gives life to life is itself not living 生生者不生”, and “that which gives form to form is itself formless 形形者不形”). Far from being an empty signifier, this “entity which is not any *thing*” is represented concretely by the notions of formlessness, namelessness, non-purposive action, and non-obsessive desire.¹⁸

We shall now consider the concept of namelessness (*wuming* 無名) in greater detail. The first sentence of the *Laozi* states, “*Dao* that can be put into words (*dao*) is not the constant *dao*. The name that can be named is not the constant name. 道可道非常道, 名可名非常名”. The three instances of *dao* that appear in this

sentence have different meanings. The first and the third instances of *dao* refer to the ultimate concept of *dao* in Laozi's philosophy. The third *dao* refers specifically to constant-*dao* (*chang* 常 and *dao* 道 must be read in conjunction as a phrase, i.e. *changdao* 常道, and not as two separate words). The second *dao* uses the vernacular meaning of the word; namely, "to speak" or "to put into words".¹⁹ What exactly does this line contend? It is incumbent upon us to explain the problematic relationship between *dao* and "name" (including speech and discourse). Why is this relationship so worthy of attention that it must be highlighted in the first sentence of the *Laozi*? One of the reasons is that acknowledging the limits and shortcomings of moral customs and vernacular language is the first step to philosophising. That is to say, the art of philosophy requires an intellectual transcendence over normal codes of conduct and vernacular uses of language before ordinary actions, words, and discourse can be critically examined, for an implicit but pervasive network of cultural inculcation is at work behind their daily use and operation.

"The name that can be named is not the constant name 名可名非常名" is an important sentence, as it brings a certain intellectual condition to light: With regard to *dao*, its "name" is but a designative symbol. It does not mean that the name *dao* has a concrete referent, as do ordinary names. In other words, *dao* is not at all the referent of an ordinary name; it is not an object (*wu* 物). Essentially, *dao* is unnameable and unspeakable. It is noteworthy that the first and the second sentences in the *Laozi* are not given in parallel structure. Instead, "[t]he name that can be named is not the constant name 名可名非常名" takes the argument one step further. To contrast different kinds of uses of *dao* and "name" in the first two lines of the *Laozi*, the use of *dao* as a verb (second word in the first line) refers to verbal expression, which is a non-philosophical use of the word; but in the second line, "name" takes on a special meaning that is made possible only through philosophical reflection.²⁰ Considered in parallel, although these two words are similarly concerned with language and verbal expression, the move from an ordinary use of the word *dao* to a philosophically charged use of "name" is extraordinarily important and characteristic of Laozi's philosophy. This explains why the *Laozi* begins by highlighting this fundamental problem.

Furthermore, the acute sensitivity towards language is significant for philosophical Daoism as a whole since Laozi is the first person in history to express an awareness of the limits and constraints verbal expression has for the purposes needed in philosophical expression. This gives philosophical Daoism an important characteristic: It questions whether the use of name and language can serve the tasks of philosophy, be it the elucidation of the ultimate truth, the highest principle, or the fundamental substance. Laozi proposes the following theses:

Dao is dimly visible and has no name. 道隱無名。

(ch. 41 of the *Laozi*)

Dao, constant, has no name. 道常無名。

(ch. 32, ch. 37 of both A and B manuscripts of the Mawangdui *Laozi*)

Ceaseless in its action, it (*dao*) yet cannot be named 繩繩兮不可名。
(ch. 14 of the *Laozi*)

A logical paradox that arises with the self-reflexive function of language is implicit in the namelessness of *dao*. By calling *dao* “nameless”, is it still giving *dao* a name? Surely, “namelessness” is a “name”, but it belongs to a special class of names. For example, “unnamed” is the name of the “Unnamed Lake” at Peking University.²¹ It is in this sense that Laozi says, for *dao*, although “[he] does not know its name 吾不知其名” (ch. 25) and “it yet cannot be named 繩繩兮不可名” (ch. 14), it could still be “[given] the designation of *dao*. Making an effort further I give it the makeshift name of ‘the great’ 字之曰道，強為之名曰大” (ch. 25). Later writers such as Zhuangzi and Yinwenzi 尹文子 also elaborated on this idea; for example,

The great *dao* does not admit of being named. 大道不稱。
 (“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)²²

The great *dao* has no form, whereas all vessels with forms have corresponding names. 大道無形，稱器有名。
 (“Dadao Shang” in the *Yinwenzi* 《尹文子·大道上》)

Clearly, Laozi believes that *dao*, as an ultimate concept (the highest origin, the highest concept, and the highest principle) is fundamentally unspeakable and unnameable. In other words, names (due to their inherent limitations) are incapable and insufficient for the task of describing, delineating, illustrating, or expounding on *dao*. The tension between *dao* and “name” is therefore at the core of the *Laozi*’s philosophy of language. Laozi believes that *dao* is unspeakable. Words are inadequate. *Dao* is inapproachable via name. They remain separate, and they oppose one another. Zhuangzi, who deepens and elucidates Laozi’s philosophy, says,

Dao cannot be heard; what can be heard is not *dao*. *Dao* cannot be seen; what can be seen is not *dao*. *Dao* cannot be expressed in words; what can be expressed in words is not *dao*. Is it not the case that which gives form to form is itself formless? In the same way *dao* does not admit of being named. 道不可聞，聞而非也；道不可見，見而非也；道不可言，言而非也。知形形之不形乎？道不當名。
 (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The great *dao* does not admit of being depicted. The great argument does not require words. . . . *Dao* that presents itself obviously is not *dao*. Words that are argumentative do not reach the point. 夫大道不稱，大辯不言。 道昭而不道，言辯而不及。
 (“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Dao is not speakable; words do not reach *dao*. As soon as *dao* is spoken of, it is no longer the nameless *dao*. The fact that the *dao* of Lao-Zhuang philosophy

is unspeakable and unnameable is determined by the nature of *dao* on the one hand and the nature of word and language on the other. This is because words and language are artificial and *dao* is so-of-itself (*ziran* 自然). In other words, *dao* is spontaneously self-so, non-purposive, to which form and name have no application. By contrast, the determinative and divisive operations of name and language are the artificial work of humans. Zhuangzi takes this argument a step further. He says, “*Dao* has never known boundaries; speech has never had constancy. 道未始有封，言未始有常。” (“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*), which highlights the limitlessness of *dao* and the fact that objects are identified by their boundaries. As such, objects (*wu* 物) are nameable and speakable. Only *dao* is otherwise. In this light, the relationship between *dao* on one hand and name (*ming* 名) and speech (*yan* 言) on the other is worthy of consideration, as it constitutes the question of how *dao* and objects (*wu* 物) are related and how *you* and *wu* are related. Hence, we shall first turn to the problematic relationship between *dao* and name.

Yip Wai-lim 葉維廉 repeatedly points out that Daoist thinkers have put forward prophetic insights on language from very early on. The Daoist concept of “unspoken and self-guided development 無言獨化”, with its corresponding argumentative strategy,

touches upon a fundamental spirit that is best expressed by the twofold meaning of the English word “radical”. Firstly, it inspires a fundamental questioning that opens up a level of attainment where things are interconnected in an unhindered manner. Secondly, it offers a strategic style of writing that is unprecedented and radical.

What is the purpose of Zhuangzi’s characteristic writing style – the implausible and unsettling stories intended to shock and amaze, the satirical language, the peculiar logic, ambiguous phrases, and paradoxical expressions – if not to provoke and inspire?²³

Xu Fuguan’s 徐復觀 *Intellectual History of the Western and Eastern Han Dynasty* 《兩漢思想史》 explains brilliantly the relationship between name (*ming* 名) and social reality.²⁴ Yip Wai-lim similarly points out that Daoist philosophers have offered valuable insights into the implicit relationship between language and power, which is the source of injury to and alienation of human nature. Laozi’s repeated advocacy of namelessness takes aim at the “system of names” (*mingzhi* 名制) established since the Western Zhou dynasty, i.e. the feudal-patriarchal and religious-moral construct that prescribes the socio-cultural association of ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife via a rigidly structured cluster of names that is pertinent to the distribution of privilege, title, and land. Yip further argues that the creation of the “cultivation through names” (*mingjiao* 名教) and “education through rituals” (*lijiao* 禮教) are devised for the sole purpose of managing political and economic interest, and they exist solely in the world of language. Laozi’s incisive questioning penetrates the structure of names and reveals a danger that is inherent in language – that linguistic and political structures

correspond and are inseparable from one another. The Daoist critique of language and political power comes from an acute sensitivity towards any infringement upon natural human propensities. Therefore, the Daoist spirit is as aesthetic as it is political. Politically, Daoist philosophers seek to challenge the *dao* of the feudal political structure (e.g. the so-called *dao* of the ruler *wangdao* 王道 and *dao* of heaven *tiandao* 天道) and various networks of names prescribed by the system of names, with the express intent of liberating the previously suppressed, exiled, and isolated human natural propensities and instincts to restore, recuperate, and rejuvenate the natural human vitality. Daoist philosophers therefore provide us with another attitude towards language, one that would remove and overthrow the unnatural and abusive constraints placed upon our minds by tyrannical power, one that would return us to a free-spirited world where approaching *dao* is once again possible.²⁵ As Laozi provokes us with disconcerting expressions such as “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de* 上德不德” (ch. 38), “the greatest art seems clumsy 大巧若拙” (ch. 45), “renounce sageliness and discard wisdom 絕聖棄智” (ch. 19), and “renounce learning and have no troubles 絕學無憂” (ch. 20), his ambivalent “anti-logic” and ambiguous expressions are meant to break away from the limitations of the ordinary expectations and ordinary uses of language to guide us towards philosophical insights that lie beyond the world prescribed by rigid and conventional use of language.

More importantly, Daoist thinkers demonstrate a reverse reasoning, or an inverse intellectual operation, with this characteristic writing style. Laozi reminds us that “words that are true seem contrary (*fan*) [to conventional wisdom] 正言若反” (ch. 78 of the *Laozi*), and “the movement of *dao* proceeds through contraries. 反者道之動。” (ch. 40 of the *Laozi*). The two instances of *fan* 反 have two meanings: “Contrary” and “to return”. “Words that are true seem paradoxical” highlights Laozi’s conscious subversion of the ordinary use of words. Notably, if we view the family of *wu*-related concepts as products of this subversive intellectual process, i.e. that “contrary” (*fan* 反) means *wu*, e.g. knowing without knowledge (*wuzhi* 無知), non-purposive action, namelessness, formlessness, objectless, and non-obsessive desire (*wuyu* 無欲), an extraordinary mode of thinking is immediately revealed. Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 calls this “the negative method”, and Yip Wai-lim calls it “negative construction” or “negative transcendence”.²⁶

Critical reflection is the hallmark of philosophy. The first burst of creative philosophical activity in China is born from a critical reflection on “name” that is conditioned by a self-conscious examination of the tension between language and thought. Indeed, the language of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* is markedly idiosyncratic. Just as Plato’s *Theaetetus* is celebrated as a “cosmic poem”, the *Laozi* deserves to be called a “philosophical poem”. Nonetheless, further inspection upon the literary form of the two works reveals that their stylistic achievements are not at all accidental (such as the result of personal preference or some spontaneous spur-of-the-moment impulse). There is, indeed, a necessity to their literary style, especially for the *Zhuangzi*, whose expansive consciousness does not overlook its own traits. We find passages in the *Zhuangzi* that describe its own style of writing; for example,

(Zhuang Zhou) uses strange and mysterious expressions, wild and extravagant words, and phrases to which no definite meaning could be assigned. He constantly indulged his own wayward ideas, but did not make himself a partisan, nor look at them as peculiar to himself. Considering that people were sunk in stupidity and could not be talked to in dignified style, he employed the words of the cup of endless application (*zhiyan*), with important quotations to substantiate the truth (*zhongyan*), and an abundance of corroborative illustrations (*yuyan*). He chiefly cared to occupy himself with the spirit-like operation of heaven and earth, and did not try to rise above the myriads of things. He did not condemn the agreements and differences of others, and so he lived in peace with the prevalent views. Though his writings may seem to be sparkling trifles, there is no harm in amusing oneself with them; though his phraseology be ever-varying, its turns and changes are worth being looked at – the fulness and completeness of his ideas cannot be exhausted. 以謬悠之說，荒唐之言，無端崖之辭，時恣縱而不儻，不以鱗見之也。以天下為沈濁，不可與莊語；以卮言為曼衍，以重言為真，以寓言為廣。獨與天地精神往來，而不敖倪於萬物，不譴是非，以與世俗處。其書雖瑰瑋而連犴無傷也，其辭雖參差而諷詭可觀。

(“All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Laozi and Zhuangzi set forth theories that take the idea of namelessness as a starting point. Their intellectual achievements are extremely rich, powerful, and profound. In this chapter, we will concentrate on the tension between *dao* and worded discourse (*yan* 言). The *Laozi*'s poetic narratives and the *Zhuangzi*'s self-conscious use of “spillover goblet words” (*zhiyan* 卮言) are philosophical instruments intended to illustrate and to point us towards the truth of *dao*! Their philosophical language is distinct from ordinary language, as the former touches upon *dao*, whereas the latter bears upon the world of objects.²⁷ In terms of subsequent influences in the history of Chinese thought, Wang Bi's 王弼 conscious employment of the neo-Daoist method of “forgetting the words once the meaning is attained 得意忘言” enabled him to elaborate on the theory of “*wu* being the ground of the myriad things between heaven and earth 天地萬物以無為本”. Buddhist philosophy in China, especially Chan 禪 Buddhism, advocates transcendence over name, word, and image and maintains that “the highest truths dwell beyond and above the forms of words, speech and mental activities – they can be grasped, but not expressed”.²⁸ This viewpoint certainly mirrors that of the Daoist “theory of the nameless 無名論”. It is said that the Western philosophical tradition has never deviated from the path of the subject/object division and the atomic/individualistic mode of thinking since its inception in ancient Greece and has since been closely intertwined with the doctrines of logocentrism and epistemic ontology, which are based on a dependence upon, if not absolute faith in, the use of language. In comparison, ancient Chinese philosophy (owing to remarkable contributions made by Daoist thinkers since Laozi) places an exceptional emphasis on the language-transcending “theory of the nameless 無名論”, setting an interesting contrast with the Western philosophical tradition. Ancient Greek philosophy has already touched

upon “the question of conformity between thought (language) and reality”, and this problem is once again taken up by modern philosophers, including Heidegger, who cast a profound doubt over the entire Western tradition of “logic-language-centrism”.²⁹ This inquisitive path even inspired a strong interest in the *Laozi* for the German philosopher. Could this all be a coincidence? Perhaps one may say the wisdom of the *Laozi* is indeed “deep and far-reaching, showing its possessor as opposite to others. 深矣，遠矣，與物反矣。” (ch. 65 of the *Laozi*).

Notes

- 1 Zhang Dainian 張岱年 once said, “Laozi’s so called ‘wu 無’ has three different meanings. The first points to the empty part within individual objects; the second points to that which comes before individual things existed and to the condition after all individual things cease to exist; the third points to the highest source that transcends all individual things.” For more details, see Dainian Zhang 張岱年, *On the Concepts and Paradigms of Classical Chinese Philosophy* 中國古典哲學概念範疇要論 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1989), 73–74.
- 2 Bo Wang 王博, “The Discovery and Establishment of *Wu*: Daoist Xingershangxue 無的發現與確立: 道家的形而上學”, in *Laozi Thought and the Way to Human Survival* 老子思想與人類生存之道 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2011), 3–11.
- 3 Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On the Nature and Characteristics of ‘Wu’ in the *Laozi* 試論《老子》中‘無’的性質與特點”, *Zhexuemen* 哲學門, No. 29 (2014).
- 4 Delin Ma 馬德鄰 says, “[C]ommentators have conventionally treated ‘dao’ as the highest philosophical concept in the *Laozi*, and have thus far neglected the importance of ‘wu 無’ in the philosophy of Laozi. ‘Dao’ has philosophical significance owing to ‘wu’, and ‘wu’ constitutes the entirety of Laozi’s metaphysical ideas. ‘Wu’ is also involved with all aspects of Laozi’s thought, and therefore the essence of Laozi’s metaphysical thinking lies in the notion of ‘wu 無’”. Delin Ma 馬德鄰, *A Study on the Metaphysical Thoughts of Laozi* 老子形上思想研究 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe 學林出版社, 2003), 31. I agree with Ma in noting that “‘dao’ has philosophical significance owing to ‘wu 無’”, but I disagree with the method of treating *dao* and *wu* separately. I want to emphasise that *wu* constitutes a necessary foundation for understanding *dao*, and the cluster of *wu*-related concepts, including formlessness, imagelessness, objectlessness, namelessness, non-obsessive desire, and non-purposive action, are used to adumbrate the almost inexpressible qualities of *dao*.
- 5 The concept of *wu* in Laozi’s philosophy is both abstract and concrete. In the *Laozi*, we find concrete expressions of the abstract *wu* in concepts such as formlessness, namelessness, non-obsessive desire, non-purposive action, objectlessness, imagelessness, and “without an intransigent heart-mind”. In brief, in the philosophical context of the *Laozi*, *wu* almost always appears with multiple concrete conceptual connotations. (There are few instances where *you* and *wu* appear alone without being in a phrase, e.g. “what has a positive existence (*you*) serves for profitable adaptation, and what has not that (*wu*) serves for actual usefulness. 有之以為利，無之以為用。”). Uses of such in the passage at the end of Chapter 11 can be considered abbreviations of formlessness and namelessness, for *you* and *wu* refer to concrete and specific things in this instance.) Cf. Bo Wang 王博, “The Discovery and Establishment of *Wu*: Daoist Xingershangxue 無的發現與確立: 道家的形而上學”, in *Laozi Thought and the Way to Human Survival* 老子思想與人類生存之道 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2011), 3–11. And also, Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On the Nature and Characteristics of ‘Wu’ in the *Laozi* 試論《老子》中‘無’的性質與特點”, *Zhexuemen* 哲學門, Vol. 29 (2014).

- 6 “Namelessness” receives repeated mentions in the *Laozi*. (*Wuming* 無名 in ch. 1 cannot be read separately as two words. It is a multi-character phrase throughout the *Laozi*.) Sima Qian also concludes that the main purport of philosophical Daoism is expressed by the concept of namelessness.
- 7 Briefly put, the “truth of the *Dao*” pursued by Daoist thinkers cannot be attained without reference to an investigation beyond form and language (i.e. a study of that which goes beyond form *xingershangxue* 形而上學). Therefore, the problem of *dao* and speech involves *you* (having form and having name) and *wu* (formless and nameless) as well as the issues revolving around the notion of “indeterminate and indistinct”. The problem is also related to the various problems of a transcendental political vision and historical rationality in the political philosophy of non-purposive action.
- 8 Abel-Rémusat’s partial translation, entitled *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu, philosophe chinois du VIe siècle avant notre ère, qui a professé les opinions communément attribuées à Pythagore, à Platon et à leurs disciples*, contains only five chapters of *Daodejing* (1, 14, 25, 41, 42).
- 9 Fredrich W. J. Schelling, *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, Augsburg: J.G. Cotta, 1856), 564.
- 10 Also, “path of myriad transformations” (*wanhuaazhitu* 萬化之途) (“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*).
- 11 For example, Qingzhong Lu 魯慶中, “On Laozi’s ‘wu’ 論老子之‘無’”, in *Laozi and Chinese Civilization Inheritance and Innovation* 老子與華夏文明傳承創新 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2013), 198–211; and Zhixue Wu 伍至學, “Laozi on *Wu* 老子釋無”, in *Laozi and Chinese Civilization Inheritance and Innovation* 老子與華夏文明傳承創新 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2013), 212–226.
- 12 Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Lectures on Zhuangzi Philosophy* 莊子哲學講記 (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press 廣西人民出版社, 2016), 82–83.
- 13 Tang Lan 唐蘭 considered *wang* 亡 to be the etymological root-script for *wu* 舞, but this hypothesis is contested by many philologists. See Min Yu 俞敏, *Collected Works on Jingzhuanshici* 《經傳釋詞》札記 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1987), 180.
- 14 Li Zehou 李澤厚 has argued for this position. See Zehou Li 李澤厚, *Jimao Five Essays* 己卯五說 (Beijing: China Film Press 中國電影出版社, 1999), 65–67. But these arguments are soundly rejected by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭. See Xigui Qiu 裘錫圭, *Ten Lectures on Ancient Documents Excavated in China* 中國出土古文獻十講 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press 復旦大學出版社, 2004).
- 15 Min Yu 俞敏, *Collected Works on Jingzhuanshici* 《經傳釋詞》札記 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1987), 47–48, 181–184.
- 16 Translation adapted from Zongyi Rao 饒宗頤, *Heart of Extraction* 澄心論萃 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文藝出版社, 1996), 148.
- 17 Wang Dianji 王奠基 says that Laozi “advanced the dialectical concept of ‘the theory of being nameless (*wuming*)’ which does well in summarising this negative concept, which is the existential principle of ‘wu.’ Laozi’s so-called ‘wu,’ as a ‘negating form’ and logical ‘negative concept,’ is both an absolute substance as well as a mutual co-dependent”. For more details, refer to Dianji Wang 汪奠基, *Laozi’s Logic in Simple Dialectics – The Theory of Namelessness* 老子樸素辯證法的邏輯思想 – 無名論 (Wuhan: Hubei People’s Press 湖北人民出版社, 1958), 44–45.
- 18 Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On the Nature and Characteristics of ‘wu’ in the *Laozi* 試論《老子》中‘無’的性質與特點”, *Zhexuemen* 哲學門, Vol. 29 (2014).
- 19 *Logos* from ancient Greek philosophy incorporates various meanings, such as utterance and principle, and has led many scholars to believe it is similar in meaning to *dao* in Laozi’s philosophy.
- 20 *Ming* also has political connotations in this context; namely, structured and artificial uses of “name” in law, governmental positions and responsibilities, and moral teaching.

22 *The meaning of dao, de, and metaphysics*

- 21 The “Unnamed Lake” (*Weiminghu* 未名湖) is the largest lake located on the Peking University campus.
- 22 The translation of passages from the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are adapted from Brook Ziporyn’s translation. Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi The Essential Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009).
- 23 Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉, *Daoist Aesthetics and Western Culture* 道家美學與西方文化 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 2002), 95.
- 24 Fuguan Xu 徐復觀, *The Intellectual History of the Han Dynasty* 兩漢思想史, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2001), 41.
- 25 Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉, *Daoist Aesthetics and Western Culture* 道家美學與西方文化 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 2002), 95–96, 100.
- 26 Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉, *Daoist Aesthetics and Western Culture* 道家美學與西方文化 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 2002), 102.
- 27 For a more detailed discussion of the socio-political and aesthetic implications of the Daoist “theory of the nameless 無名論”, cf. Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On the Daoist ‘Study of Names’ 道家‘名學’鉤沉”, *Zhexuemen* 哲學門, Vol. 11 (2005).
- 28 Fancheng Xu 徐梵澄, *Revisiting the Classics* 古典重溫 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 2007), 112.
- 29 Delin Ma 馬德鄰, *A Study on the Metaphysical Thoughts of Laozi* 老子形上思想研究 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe 學林出版社, 2003), 137–192; Delin Ma 馬德鄰, “On Two Philosophical Ways of Thinking Concerning Language – The ‘Grammatical-logical’ and the ‘Metaphorical’ 論兩種有關語言的哲學思想 – ‘語法 – 邏輯的’和‘意象的’”, *Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition)* 上海師範大學學報(社會科學版), Vol. 32, No. 2 (2003).

3 *De*

With *xuande* as an example

De is a central intellectual theme shared by the thinkers of the pre-Hundred-Schools-of-Thought period. It also forms the common backdrop and foundation upon which thinkers of the Hundred-Schools-of-Thought flourished.¹ Intriguingly, in addition to their opposing stance on identifying *daode* with the virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness (*renyi* 仁義), the Confucian School and the Daoist School also took separate paths in the theoretical development of their respective intellectual legacies of *de*. More specifically, the Confucian School advocates radiant-*de* (*mingde* 明德), whereas the Daoist School champions murky-*de* (or mysterious-*de*) (*xuande* 玄德).² Murky-*de* forms the principal part of the Daoist theory on the subject of *de*. It is also where Daoism parts ways with Confucianism. Murky-*de* receives a number of notable mentions in the *Laozi*; for example,

It gives them life yet claims no possession; it benefits them yet exacts no gratitude; it is the steward of all yet it exercises no authority. Such is called the murky-*de*. 生之、畜之，生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。
(ch. 10 of the *Laozi*)

All things are produced by *dao* and nourished by *de*. They receive their forms according to the natural propensities of each, and are completed according to their circumstances. Therefore, all things without exception honour *dao* and exalt *de*. This honouring of *dao* and exalting of *de* is not the result of any ordination, but always a spontaneous and self-directed tribute. Thus, it is that *dao* produces (all things), *de* nourishes them, brings them to their full growth, nurtures them, completes them, brings them to fruition, sustains them, and encompasses them. It produces them and makes no claim to the possession of them; it carries them through their natural processes and does not flaunt its ability in doing so; it brings them to maturity and exercises no control over them. This is called “murky-*de*”. 道生之，德畜之；長之育之；亭之毒之；養之覆之。生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。
(ch. 51 of the *Laozi*)

Of old, those who excelled in the pursuit of *dao* did not use it to enlighten the people but to hoodwink them. The reason why the people are difficult to

govern is that they conduct themselves with cleverness (*zhi*). Hence to rule by cleverness will be to the detriment of the state; not to rule by cleverness will be a boon to the state. These two are approaches (*jishi*) (to governing a state). Always to know the approaches is known as “murky-*de*” (*xuande*). “Murky-*de*” is deep and far-reaching, showing its possessor as opposite (*fan*) (to conventional wisdom). Only then is utterly unobstructed transformation realized. 古之善為道者，非以明民，將以愚之。民之難治，以其智多。故以智治國，國之賊；不以智治國，國之福。知此兩者亦稽式。常知稽式，是謂玄德。玄德深矣，遠矣，與物反矣，然後乃至大順。

(ch. 65 of the *Laozi*)

In addition, Chapter 2 of the *Laozi* states,

The myriad creatures rise because of it; yet it claims no authority. They procreate because of it; yet it claims no possession. It benefits them yet; it exacts no gratitude. It accomplishes its task; yet it does not hold to its achievements. 萬物作焉而不辭，生而不有。為而不恃，功成而弗居。³

And Chapter 81 states, “The *dao* of heaven benefits and does not harm. The *dao* of the sage is bountiful and does not contend. 天之道，利而不害；聖人之道，為而不爭。” Both of these passages can be considered further explications on the notion of murky-*de*, albeit without explicit reference to the term. We can also find elaborations on the notion of murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Wenzi* 《文子》; for example,

In the very beginning, there was nothing; no being, no name. Out of it arose one; there was one, but it had yet to have form. Things getting hold of it and coming to life is what is called *de*. Before things had form, that they had their allotments and were not cut off from one another is what is called the propensity of circumstances. Out of the flow and flux, that things were born, and as they grew, they developed distinctive shapes is what is called form. That these forms and bodies held within them a spirit, each with its own characteristics and limitations, is what is called their natural propensities. If this nature is nurtured, you may return to *de*, and *de* at its perfection is identical with the very beginning. Being identical, you will be empty; being empty, you will be great. You may join in the cheeping and chirping, and when you have joined in the cheeping and chirping, you may join with heaven and earth. Your joining is obscure and indistinct, as though you were stupid, as though you could not see. This is called murky-*de*, and you become one with the transformations of the world. 泰初有無，無有無名，一之所起，有一而未形。物得以生，謂之德；未形者有分，且然無間，謂之命；留動而生物，物成生理，謂之形；形體保神，各有儀則，謂之性。性修反德，德至同於初。同乃虛，虛乃大。合喙鳴，喙鳴合，與天地為合。其合緜緜，若愚若昏，是謂玄德，同乎大順。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

It rears and nurtures, matures and brings them up, benefits all without being partial, and joins with heaven and earth. This is called *de*. 畜之養之，遂之長之，兼利無擇，與天地合，此之謂德。

(“Daode” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·道德》)

These passages represent writings that are most directly related to the notion of murky-*de* in ancient China. However, to formulate an adequate interpretation of the term, we need to expand our scope to include other related concepts in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* as well as other ancient texts. By doing so, we will be able to appreciate the intellectual lineage of the term, particularly the way it emerged from its preceding background of *de*-related ideas, and understand why this emergence ought to be seen as an important philosophical breakthrough.

A number of synonymous words are used to refer to the notion of murky-*de* in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.⁴ They include expressions such as constant-*de* (*changde* 常德), highest-*de* (*shangde* 上德), extensive-*de* (*guangde* 廣德), vigorous-*de* (*jiande* 建德) (ch. 28, 38, 41 of the *Laozi*), perfect-*de* (*zhide* 至德), and heavenly-*de* (*tiande* 天德) (“Horses’ Hoofs” and “Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*). These terms are, to different extents, dissimilar to the meaning of *de* before the Hundred-Schools-of-Thought began to emerge. By contrast, the Confucian notion of illustrious-*de* (*mingde* 明德) represents a renewed iteration of the tradition of *de* and ritual. The following passages are demonstrative of this contrasting relationship:

The highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de*. The lower-*de* never strays from *de* and that is why he is without *de*. The former never acts purposively yet leaves nothing undone. The latter acts (with clear purposes and methods) but there are things left undone. A person with the most consummatory conduct (*ren*) acts, but from no ulterior motive. A person who does with the most optimal appropriateness (*yi*) acts, but from ulterior motive. A person most conversant in ritual proprieties (*li*) acts, but when no one responds he rolls up his sleeves and resorts to persuasion by force. Hence when *dao* was lost there was *de*; when *de* was lost there was consummatory conduct; When consummatory conduct was lost there was optimal appropriateness; When optimal appropriateness was lost there were the ritual proprieties. 上德不德，是以有德；下德不失德，是以無德。上德無為而無以為；下德為之而有以為。上仁為之而無以為；上義為之而有以為。上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

(ch. 38 of the *Laozi*)

The highest-*de* is like the valley; the sheerest whiteness appears sullied; extensive-*de* seems insufficient; vigorous-*de* seems indolent; plain truthfulness seems soiled. The great square has no corners; the great vessel takes long to complete; the great note is rarefied in sound; the great image has no shape. *Dao* conceals itself in being nameless. 上德若谷；太白若辱；廣德若不足；建德若偷；質真若渝；大方無隅；大器晚成；大音希聲；大象無形；道隱無名。

(ch. 41 of the *Laozi*)

Non-purposive action is the *de* of heaven. 無為也，天德而已矣。
 (“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Chapter 38 of the *Laozi* is titled “On *De*” in Heshang Gong’s version of the text, indicating that the subject matter of the chapter is the relationship between *dao* and *de* (i.e. highest-*de shangde* 上德) on the one hand and consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, and ritual propriety on the other. Seemingly paradoxical phrases such as “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de* 上德不德，是以有德。” reveal that a distinction is made between the meaning of highest-*de* and ordinary *de*. The former is variously expressed as the great-*de* (*kongde* 孔德) (ch. 21), constant-*de* (*changde* 常德) (ch. 28), extensive-*de* (*guangde* 廣德) (ch. 41), or murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) (ch. 10, 51, 65). These terms invariably refer to a philosophically distilled *de* that is contrasted with *de* in the ordinary sense of the word; namely, particular moral virtues and moral behaviours, including consummatory conduct (*ren* 仁), optimal appropriateness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 智), doing one’s utmost (*zhong* 忠), family reverence (*xiao* 孝), culture (*wen* 文), and refinement (*mei* 美).⁵ By contrast, highest-*de* refers to spontaneously self-so (*ziran* 自然), non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為), unadorned and uncarved (*supu* 素樸), emptiness (of heart-mind) and at rest (*xujing* 虛靜), placidity and indifference (*tian dan* 恬淡), maintaining female amenability (*shouci* 守雌), noncontending (*buzheng* 不爭), and keeping a low position (*chuxia* 處下). For example, the *Wenzi*’s interpretation of “[t]he highest-*de* does not keep to *de* 上德不德” is that

heaven covers over the myriad things. It implements its *de* and nourishes them. It supplies without taking. Therefore, the vigour and spirit [of the myriad things] adhere firmly to it. 天覆萬物，施其德而養之，與而不取，故精神歸焉。

(“Shangde” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·上德》)

In other words, the *Wenzi* uses “[*de*] supplies without taking 與而不取” to explain the idea of “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de* 上德不德，是以有德” because it also coincides with an important aspect of murky-*de*; namely, “supplying (all things) without expecting requital; nourishing (all things) without presiding (over them) 為而不恃，長而不宰”. From the Daoist point of view, highest-*de* is so called owing to its superiority over *de* in the ordinary sense. Since highest-*de* does not consider the ordinary *de* of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness to embody the true significance of *de*, it achieves genuine *de*.

Focussing on Chapter 38 of the *Laozi*, the phrase “striving for it” (*weizhi* 為之), which appears repeatedly, means “purposive action” (*youwei* 有為), the opposite of non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為). *Yiwei* 以為 refers to deliberate actions that are driven by narrow purposes or are methodologically obsessive. In other words, they are actions that originate from and are limited by various purposes and intentions (e.g. from selfish motivations to ideological objectives). According to the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子》 and the Fu Yi 傅奕 version of the *Laozi*, *yiwei* 以為 is

replaced by *buwei* 不為, and the sentence reads, “[T]he highest-*de* is characterised by non-purposive actions and it achieves all (*wubuwwei* 無不為); the lower-*de* acts purposively and fails to accomplish all (*youbuwwei* 有不為)”. This means that purposive and non-purposive actions are expressions of highest-*de* and ordinary *de*, respectively. In this regard, the core meaning of murky-*de* lies with non-purposive action. The last sentence of the chapter explains that the genesis of moral values is caused by decadence in values: *De* results from degradation of *dao*; the subsequent degrading of *de* then produces consummatory conduct (*ren* 仁), whose fall creates optimal appropriateness, which generates ritual propriety (*li* 禮) when it fails.⁶

In sum, murky-*de* and highest-*de* are almost synonymous with *dao*, for they represent the highest and most profound *de* and are the most radical expressions of *dao*. From the founding of the Western Zhou dynasty, the word “radiant-*de*” (*mingde* 明德) accrued a complex meaning that includes religious, political, moral, and philosophical aspects.⁷ Interpreting Laozi’s murky-*de* as the antithesis to radiant-*de* further highlights the political and moral nature of Laozi’s critique of the latter.

The theory of murky-*de* is important because it is deeply rooted in the Daoist political theory of non-purposive action and its ethics of spontaneously self-so. Radiant-*de* is a glowing symbol of values that have their origins in the royal government of the Western Zhou dynasty. Early Confucians consciously endeavoured to inherit and rejuvenate this tradition, whereas Laozi chose to emphasise an antonymic murky-*de* to give voice to values that were overlooked by the former.⁸ For example, Confucius says, “[R]ecompense injury straightforwardly and truly, and recompense kindness with kindness. 以直報怨，以德報德。” (*The Analects*, 14.34), while Laozi says, “[R]ecompense injury with kindness 報怨以德” (ch. 63 of the *Laozi*). Laozi’s words seem to come from a viewpoint beyond the opposition of injury (*yuan* 怨) and kindness (*de* 德). Also interpreting the notion of “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de* 上德不德”, “Renshu” in the *Lüshichunqiu* 《呂氏春秋·任數》 says,

[T]he wisest abandons wisdom; the most consummate forgets what is consummate; perfect-*de* keeps not to *de*; without words and without thought, awaiting the opportune time in quietude, responding when the time comes. 至智棄智，至仁忘仁，至德不德。無言無思，靜以待時，時至而應。

In other words, the Daoist critique of the limitations of *de* not only was given in response to its obvious failings at the time but also served to justify “reforming laws and principles following the circumstances of the time 因時變法”. “Nanmian” in the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子·南面》 says,

If Guan Zhong had not transformed (the laws and political system of) Qi, if Guo Yan had not altered (those of) Jin, then the Emperor Huan and the Emperor Wen would not have achieved their dominance. 管仲毋易齊，郭偃毋更晉，則桓、文不霸矣。

Hanfeizi’s 韓非子 analysis points out that the way to strengthen a country since the Spring and Autumn period was to transform laws and principles according to

the circumstances of the time. According to Meng Wentong 蒙文通, the core of the system that propelled the states of Qi and Jin to international leadership lay in the creation of laws (*fa* 法) by Guan Zhong 管仲 and Guo Yan 郭偃, whose purpose was to “reform and extend the ritual system of the Zhou dynasty 更張周禮”.⁹ This process required a liberation from conventional thought before a government could comprehensively free itself from the bonds of the Western Zhou tradition of *de* and rituals. As such, the advancement of a systematic and political reform necessitated the “intellectual banner” of perfect-*de* and murky-*de*. Let us consider Guo Yan’s argument for political reform (*bianfa* 變法) in his speech to the Emperor Wen of Jin:

Those who deliberate on the perfect-*de* do not harmonize themselves with what is customary; those who accomplish great things do not make their plans with the multitude. 論至德者，不和於俗；成大功者，不謀於眾。

(“Political Reform” in the *Shangjunshu* 《商君書·更法》, *Shiji – Hereditary House of Zhao* 《史記·趙世家》, and *Shiji – The Rulers of Shang* 《史記·商君列傳》)

The same line was quoted by Shang Yang 商鞅 when he attempted to convince the emperor of Qin of the benefits of political reform, and also by Fei Yi 肥義 in addressing the Emperor Wuling of Zhao on the subject of promoting the tradition of foreign clothing within the government (“Zhao Documents II” in the *Zhanguoce* 《戰國策·趙策二》). These quotations testify to the extensive influence of these ideas and also illustrate the profound philosophical thought implicit in the notions of perfect-*de* and murky-*de*, which go beyond the scope of ordinary *de* and radiant-*de*.

Theses such as “govern a large country as you would cook small fish 治大國若烹小鮮” (ch. 60 of the *Laozi*) and “*dao* accomplishes all constantly through non-purposive actions 道常無為而無不為” (ch. 37 of the *Laozi*) epitomise the Daoist non-purposive political philosophy. Following our previous analyses of Chapters 38 and 65 of the *Laozi*, we can reliably confirm that murky-*de* embodies the guiding principle of Daoist non-purposive political and ethical theories. The *Laozi* criticises governing with cleverness 以智治國 and takes aim at the system of *de* and ritual 德禮體系, or more specifically, the political and social structure of the feudal-patriarchal system (ritual *li* 禮) and the ideology founded upon it. With regard to political ideals and the principles of governance, murky-*de* is fundamentally and markedly different from the Confucian doctrine of cultivation of *de* (*dejiào* 德教) and from the Legalist doctrine of principled governance through codified punishment and reward (*xingfa* 刑法). One can reasonably surmise that governing with cleverness 以智治國 includes the political policies of influencing and controlling the minds of the people through rituals and laws (*lifa* 禮法), advocated by the Confucians and Legalists, and through the promotion of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness by the Confucians and Mohists. By contrast, not governing with wisdom 不以智治國 is equivalent to non-purposive governance. The *Laozi* states:

Not to honour men of worth will keep the people from contention; not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep them from theft; not to display

what is desirable will keep them from being unsettled of mind. Therefore, in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act. Do that which consists in taking no purposive action, and order will prevail. 不尚賢，使民不爭；不貴難得之貨，使民不為盜；不見可欲，使心不亂。是以聖人之治，虛其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨。常使民無知無欲。使夫知者不敢為也。為無為，則無不治。

(ch. 3)

Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs; the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs. 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。

(ch. 5)

Govern the state by being straightforward; wage war by being crafty; but win the empire by not being meddlesome. How do I know that it is like that? By means of this. The more taboos there are in the empire, the poorer the people; the more sharpened tools the people have the more benighted the state; the more skills the people have the further novelties multiply; the better known the laws and edicts the more thieves and robbers there are. Hence the sage says, I take no action and the people are transformed spontaneously of themselves. 以正治國，以奇用兵，以無事取天下。吾何以知其然哉？以此：天下多忌諱，而民彌貧；民多利器，國家滋昏；人多伎巧，奇物滋起；法令滋彰，盜賊多有。故聖人云：我無為，而民自化。

(ch. 57)

Reduce the size of the population and the state. Ensure that even though the people have tools of war for a troop or a battalion they will not use them; and also that they will be reluctant to move to distant places because they look on death as no light matter. Even when they have ships and carts, they will have no use for them; and even when they have armour and weapons, they will have no occasion to make a show of them. Bring it about that the people will return to the use of the knotted rope, will find relish in their food, and beauty in their clothes, will be content in their abode, and happy in the way they live. Though adjoining states are within sight of one another, and the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another, yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another. 小國寡民。使有什伯之器而不用；使民重死而不遠徙。雖有舟輿，無所乘之，雖有甲兵，無所陳之。使民復結繩而用之，甘其食，美其服，安其居，樂其俗。鄰國相望，雞犬之聲相聞，民至老死，不相往來。

(ch. 80)

These passages form the basis of Zhuangzi's ideal, the world of perfect-*de* (*zhidezhishi* 至德之世). Clearly, the political ideals of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* are

utterly utopian. They are not to be found in reality and exist merely as an ideal; that is, if we approach the *Laozi* sympathetically, its true purpose lies not in founding and sustaining an unprecedented political and social structure that transcends the feudal-patriarchal system. Rather, its purpose is to challenge the validity and sustainability of the feudal-patriarchal socio-political structure and its complementary ideological and cultural construct (e.g. the virtues of consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, doing one's utmost, making good on one's word, family reverence). Expanding from the meaning of *dao* and *de*, Daoism thus forms a radical and wide-ranging response to the dramatic socio-political changes of its time. It is an intellectual creation that reflects and expresses the spirit, wisdom, and political vision of its time while simultaneously transcending the scope of its contemporaries. It is for this reason that it is a shared and enduring intellectual resource and spiritual inheritance for China and the world.

Murky-*de* entails a supra-cultural mode of governance (political ideal) and a supra-morality that is unconstrained by local and particular ethical codes.¹⁰ But at the same time, it also implies a certain view that "human nature is absolutely good".¹¹ This is particularly noteworthy.

In ancient Chinese, *can daode* 道德 (commonly translated into English as "morality") be identified with consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*)? On this subject, Daoists and Confucians hold different, even opposite, views. We may even observe that it is the intellectual tension between *daode* and consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness that best reflects the difference between the two schools. Guidance and cultivation with *de* 道之以德 and ritual, music, and principled governance through codified punishment and reward 禮樂刑法 can be seen as antithetical to murky-*de*.

The Daoist naturalistic theory of ethics has, at its foundation, a naturalistic theory of human nature, the principal concept of which is constant-*de*, i.e. another expression for murky-*de*. In fact, murky-*de* has implicit within it all of the particular virtues of the *Laozi*, including malleable and infirm (*rouruo* 柔弱), maintaining female amenability (*shouci* 守雌), keeping a low position (*chuxia* 處下), noncontending (*buzheng* 不爭), and not displaying what is desirable (*bujiankeyu* 不見可欲). Therefore, the *Laozi* unreservedly criticises the virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness and the study and practice of rituals. It says:

When *dao* is long neglected, there are the virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. When cleverness emerges, there is great hypocrisy. When the six relations are at variance, there are filial children. When the state is benighted, there are loyal ministers. 大道廢，有仁義；智慧出，有大偽；六親不和，有孝慈；國家昏亂，有忠臣。

(ch. 18)

Exterminate the sage, discard the wise, and the people will benefit a hundred-fold. Exterminate consummatory conduct, discard optimal appropriateness, and the people will again be filial. Exterminate ingenuity, discard profit, and there will be no more thieves and bandits. These three, being false adornments, are not enough. And the people must have something to which they can

attach themselves: Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block; have little thought of self and as few desires as possible. 絕聖棄智，民利百倍；絕仁棄義，民復孝慈；絕巧棄利，盜賊無有。此三者以為文不足。故令有所屬：見素抱樸，少私寡欲。

(ch. 19)

The Guodian 郭店 “A” text of the “bamboo-slip *Laozi*” has “Do away with hypocrisy, get rid of deceit 絕偽棄詐” in place of “Do away with consummatory conduct, get rid of optimal appropriateness 絕仁棄義”.¹² Some interpreters mistakenly treat this textual variation as evidence for arguing that Laozi does not oppose consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. Laozi’s condemnation of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness is definite and unreversed. This is attested to by the ancient commentators. Yang Xiong 揚雄 says,

Laozi’s sayings on *dao* and *de*, I have assimilated in part. Laozi’s denunciation of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness and his censure of the study and practice of rituals, I have not assimilated at all. 老子之言道德，吾有所取焉耳。及搥提仁義，絕滅禮學，吾無所取焉耳。

(“Wendao” in the *Fayan* 《問道·法言》)

Ban Gu 班固 says,

If an unbridled ruler governs [with Daoist thoughts], he would seek to do away with the study and practice of rituals, and similarly get rid of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. (道家) 及放者為之，則欲絕去禮學，兼棄仁義。

(“Record of Art and Literature” in the *History of the Han Dynasty* 《漢書·藝文志》)

Han Yu 韓愈 also says that the *dao* and *de* of Laozi are “sayings that reject consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 去仁與義之言也.” These commentaries are ample evidence of the fact that the *dao* and *de* of the *Laozi* are not merely different from the values of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness, they are opposed to them. The profundity of the *Laozi* is such that it offers a comprehensive philosophical critique of the values of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. It deeply challenges the system of rituals and music in which these values are embedded and goes on to question all cultural and artificial symbols and constructs that mask and deform our unadorned and uncarved nature as humans. The *Laozi* fundamentally subverts the assumed validity of the ideological and political constructs of its time. By doing so, it also questions the value and meaning of morals, culture, and most of the political systems. The *Laozi* uses characteristic and seemingly paradoxical expressions such as “the greatest consummatory conduct does not fall into the category of a consummatory conduct 大仁不仁”, “the perfectly consummatory person has no close relations 至仁無親”, “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de* 上德不德”, and

“the extensive-*de* seems deficient 廣德若不足” to explain repeatedly the notion that *de* goes beyond particular and practical ethical norms such as consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, doing one’s utmost, and making good on one’s word, which are also appendages to the feudal-patriarchal socio-political structure. Therefore, also arguments regarding human nature and politics in the *Laozi* have naturalistic tendencies. For example, Chapter 79 says that “*dao* of heaven shows no favouritism. It is forever on the side of the good person. 天道無親，常與善人。” This sentiment is echoed by the *Wenzi* 文子, which says that “*dao* of heaven shows no favouritism. It only sides with those with *de*. 天道無親，為德是與。” (“Fuyan” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·符言》). These sayings arguably allude to the earlier “*dao* of heaven shows no favouritism. It assists only those with *de*. 天道無親，唯德是輔。” (“Fifth Year of Duke Xi” in the *Spring and Autumn Annals – Commentary of Zuo* 《左傳·僖公五年》), a saying that became gradually more accepted after the Western Zhou dynasty. Looking at these texts comparatively, the “*dao* of heaven” (*tiandao* 天道) in the *Laozi* has a meaning that is close to spontaneously self-so, which is why Laozi says,

Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs; the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs. Is not the space between heaven and earth like a bellows? 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？

(ch. 5)

The “*dao* of heaven” of the *Commentary of Zuo*, by contrast, has incorporated within it a profound, secular, human-centred way of reasoning about the world.

We have just quoted Ban Gu 班固 and Yang Xiong 揚雄 in regard to their understanding of and comments on the Daoist negative attitude towards the value of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. Huan Tan 桓譚 also says,

Lao Dan has formerly written two essays on emptiness and *wu*, undermining the value of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness, and attacking the study and practice of rituals. And now people who are interested in them consider them to be greater than the five ancient classics.

(“Biography of Yangxiong” in the *History of the Han Dynasty* 《漢書·揚雄傳》)

In Sun Sheng’s 孫盛 criticism of Laozi and Zhuangzi, his “accusation” is their denunciation of the value of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness and abandonment of the study and practice of rituals as well as their allowing individual nature to stray without restraint (*Laozi Yiwenfanzhun* 《老子疑問反訓》). It seems that for Confucians, *daode* 道德 lies in upholding consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness, whereas for the Daoists, *daode* 道德 implies the renunciation of the latter. The Song dynasty scholar Wang Mao 王楙 says,

In his *Yuan Dao*, Han Tui says, “*dao* and *de* are empty seats”. This view was often criticized in the past, for Han Tui seems to have adopted the position of a Buddhist

or of Laozi. However, I beg to differ. Han Tui's words are not unfounded. His argument is similar to that of the *Zhonglun* by Xu Gan of the Later Han period. In Xu Gan's *Xudao*, he also writes, "Is the pursuit of *de* not similar to an empty vessel? An empty vessel can be filled, and stops when it is full. Therefore, an exemplary person always empties his heart-mind and is thus ready to receive". Han Tui's "empty seats" are equivalent to Xu Gan's "empty vessels". 韓退之《原道》有曰“道與德為虛位”，或者往往病之，謂退之此語似入於佛老。仆謂不然。退之之意，蓋有所自。其殆祖後漢徐幹《中論》乎。幹有《虛道》一篇，亦曰：“人之為德，其猶虛器與？器虛則物註，滿則止焉。故君子常虛其心而受之。”退之所謂虛位，即幹所謂虛器也。

(Vol. 17, *Yekecongshu* 《野客叢書》卷十七)

In summary, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* attack the value of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness with the aim of explaining the meaning of *dao* and *de*. Therefore, their *daode* 道德 is at odds with consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness and different from any morality in the ordinary sense of the term. Consequently, we believe that the ethical theory contained within the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* is not to be confused with immoralism. It is, in essence, a supra-moralism. Laozi says,

When *dao* is long neglected, there are the virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. When cleverness emerges, there is great hypocrisy. When the six relations are at variance, there are filial children. When the state is benighted, there are loyal ministers. 大道廢，有仁義；智慧出，有大偽；六親不和，有孝慈；國家昏亂，有忠臣。

(ch. 18)

Exterminate consummatory conduct, discard optimal appropriateness, and the people will again be filial. 絕仁棄義，民復孝慈。

(ch. 19)

Hence when *dao* is lost there is *de*; when *de* is lost there is consummatory conduct; when consummatory conduct is lost there is optimal appropriateness; when optimal appropriateness is lost there is ritual. 故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

(ch. 38)

Laozi clearly opposes the Confucian promotion of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. Zhuangzi, being the intellectual heir to Laozi, uses a bold, unconstrained, and inventive literary style to challenge the presumptuous moralising of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. Zhuangzi writes,

Yao has already tattooed your face with consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness and amputated your nose with right and wrong. 夫堯既已黥汝以仁義，而劓汝以是非矣。

(“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Ever since Yu started waving his consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness around to stir up the world, everyone flies quickly away from his allotment of life to gallop after these ideals. 自虞氏招仁義以撓天下也，天下莫不奔命於仁義。

(“Webbed Toes” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Destruction of *dao* and *de* with the purpose of making consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness was the fault of the sages. 毀道德以為仁義，聖人之過也。

(“Horses’ Hoofs” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In ancient times the Emperor Huang was the first to use consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness to meddle with and confuse the minds of men [. . .] and the world falls into a great confusion where each tread on another. The crime lay in this meddling with men’s minds. 昔者黃帝始以仁義撓人之心。 天下脊脊大亂，罪在撓人心。

(“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*)

These criticisms are all formulated against the Confucian School. The Confucians advocate “consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, and the cultural education of rituals and music”, but *Zhuangzi* says, “[T]hese men of the middle states are educated in ritual principles but ignorant of the heart-minds of men. 中國之民，明乎禮義而陋乎知人心。” (“*Tian Zifang*” in the *Zhuangzi*). For *Zhuangzi*, consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness are nothing short of oppressive punishments and spiritual prisons for the natural development of human beings and produce nothing other than broad confusion. The fault of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness is the beguiling and confusion of minds, leading to the degradation of *dao* and *de*. These values are gratuitous things that cripple and deface the natural aspects of human nature. They do injury to us as yokes to horses and tattooing and amputating the nose to the human body. Hence, one of the basic tenets of Daoism is liberation from all the artificial bonds that bring nothing but pain to so many aspects of life. The moral values that Confucians allege are fetters to human nature and obstacles to living happily. In this light, is not *Zhuangzi*’s denial of identifying consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness with moral value an example of “transvaluation”, as Nietzsche calls it?

The *Zhuangzi* was written and developed mostly in the middle to late Warring States period. It was a time of rampant deception, treachery, and hypocrisy, with widespread indifference towards right and wrong. It was a time when

stealing a belt buckle gets you executed, but stealing a state gets you the title of a feudal lord. Consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness are only found in the houses of feudal lords. 彼竊鉤者誅，竊國者為諸侯，諸侯之門，而仁義存焉。

(“Breaking into Trunks” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Zhuangzi was the one who exposed those who would act selfishly and inappropriately in the name of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. Imagine a world where people turn morality into a travesty and blatantly use the moral virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness as instruments for personal gain. What would be more painful than seeing a moral system with the purpose of moral cultivation turn against the very political world within which it was incubated and developed? The *Zhuangzi* demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the momentous socio-political changes that took place during the middle to late Warring States period. Daoists of the time championed the transition from a *de*-ritual system to a *dao*-law system in response to the dismal reality in which the values of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness had become a mere shadow and shamelessly hypocritical. They boldly asserted that consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness are neither intrinsic and inseparable parts of an innate human nature nor the essence of *dao* and *de*. Rather, they are both the cause and the consequence of the degradation of *dao* and *de*. The *Zhuangzi* inverts the popularly deified figure of Emperor Huang (*Huangdi* 黃帝) to illustrate the ruinous failure of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness.¹³

In ancient times the Emperor Huang was the first to use consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness to meddle with and confuse the minds of men. Yao and Shun followed him and laboured to nourish the outward shape of the world, till there was no more down on their thighs, no more hair on their shins. They grieved their five vital organs in the establishment of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness, taxed their blood and breath in the implementations of laws and standards. But still some men would not submit to their rule, and so they had to exile Huan Dou to Mount Chung, drive away the Sanmiao tribes to the region of Sanwei, and banish Gong to the Dark City. This shows that they did not subjugate all under heaven. By the time the kings of the Three Dynasties appeared, the world was in great consternation. Among the people, there were men like the tyrant Jie and Robber Zhi, among the politicians and intellectuals, men like Zeng Shen, Shi Qiu, and the Confucians and Mohists rose up all around. Then joy and anger eyed each other with suspicion; stupidity and wisdom duped each other; good and bad refuted each other; falsehood and truth slandered each other; and the world sank into a decline. There was no more unity to the great-*de*, and each sustains his own nature and allotment of life without moderation or constraint. The world coveted knowledge, and everyone sought to exhaust their search for all there is to know. Then there were axes and saws to shape things; ink and plumb lines to trim them; mallets and gouges to poke holes in them; and the world fell into a great confusion where each tread on another. The crime laid in this meddling with men's minds. 昔者黃帝始以仁義撻人之心，堯、舜於是乎股無胫，脛無毛，以養天下之形，愁其五藏以為仁義，矜其血氣以規法度。然猶有不勝也。堯於是放讎兜於崇山，投三苗於三峽，流共工於幽都，此不勝天下也夫！施及三王而天

下大駭矣。下有桀、跖，上有曾、史，而儒、墨畢起。於是乎喜怒相疑，愚知相欺，善否相非，誕信相譏，而天下衰矣；大德不同，而性命爛漫矣；天下好知，而百姓求竭矣。於是乎斲鋸制焉，繩墨殺焉，椎鑿決焉。天下脊脊大亂，罪在撓人心。

(“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” of the *Zhuangzi*)

The men of old lived their lives in an undifferentiated haziness with a universal simplicity and placid tranquillity. At that time, *yin* and *yang* were harmonious and serene; ghosts and spirits were undisturbed; the four seasons kept to their proper order; the myriad things knew no injury; and living creatures were free from premature or untimely death. Although men had knowledge, they had no use of it. This was called the perfect unity. At this time, no one administered the world and there was unvarying spontaneity. The time came, however, when *de* began to dwindle and decline, and then Suiren and Fuxi first took charge of the world. As a result, there was compliance, but no longer unity. *De* continued to dwindle and decline, and then Shennong and the Yellow Emperor took charge of the world. As a result, there was security but no longer any compliance. *De* continued to dwindle and decline, and then Yao and Shun took charge of the world. They set about in various fashions to order and transform the world and, in doing so, impaired purity and shattered simplicity. *Dao* was given up for the sake of goodness; *de* was imperilled for the sake of conduct. After this, each began to abstain from his original and natural propensities and follow but his own heart and will. Men’s heart, with all its faculties, brought knowledge, but it was insufficient for bringing stability to the world. As such, they appended knowledge with “culture”, and tried to improve things with “breadth”. “Culture” destroyed the natural character; “breadth” drowned the mind. From then on, the people first became confused and disordered. They had no way to revert to their natural and spontaneous propensities or to return once more to the initial state of affairs. 古之人在混芒之中，與一世而得澹漠焉。當是時也，陰陽和靜，鬼神不擾，四時得節，萬物不傷，群生不夭，人雖有知，無所用之，此之謂至一。當是時也，莫之為而常自然。逮德下衰，及燧人、伏羲始為天下，是故順而不一。德又下衰，及神農、黃帝始為天下，是故安而不順。德又下衰，及唐、虞始為天下，興治化之流，澆淳散樸，離道以善，險德以行，然後去性而從於心。心與心識知而不足以定天下，然後附之以文，益之以博。文滅質，博溺心，然後民始惑亂，無以反其性情而復其初。

(“Mending What Was Natural” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In ancient Chinese texts, the “dwindle and decline of *de*” (*deshuai* 德衰) motif is often discussed in the political context. But the aforementioned passage has borrowed the literary formula to convey a special philosophical idea. For *Zhuangzi*, *dao* and *de* are the source and foundation of true value and are more important than consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. If philosophy implies a certain kind of spiritual quest, then the philosophy of *Zhuangzi* is indeed a great example. The world of *dao* portrayed by *Zhuangzi* is a worthy spiritual home that can act as a guiding force within which we can

consider the purpose of living. The truthfulness (*zhen* 真) of *dao* and *de* can rid us of the unnatural bonds and shackles of consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, music, and rituals. It can free us to roam as we please in a world that is no longer constrained by transient and artificial standards and values. If the story of fish forgetting each other in streams and lakes (“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*) expresses the Daoist political ideal by negation, “to float and roam riding on *dao* and *de* 乘道德而浮游” (“The Mountain Tree” in the *Zhuangzi*) and depictions of the world of perfect-*de* 至德之世 (“Horses’ Hoofs”, “Breaking into Trunks”, and “Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*) portray Zhuangzi’s world of *dao* positively; for example,

In an age of perfect-*de*, the worthy are not praised; the talented are not favoured. Rulers are like the high branches of a tree; the people, like deer of the fields. They do what is appropriate, but they do not know that this is appropriateness. They act consummatorily, but they do not know that this is consummatory conduct. They are truehearted but do not know that this is loyalty. They are trustworthy but do not know that this is making good on one’s word. [. . .] Therefore they act without leaving reports or biographical accounts, act without leaving written record of their deeds. 至德之世，不尚賢，不使能；上如標枝，民如野鹿；端正而不知以為義，相愛而不知以為仁；實而不知以為忠，當而不知以為信 是故行而無迹，事而無傳。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Have you never heard about the age of perfect-*de*? [. . .] Then, the people knotted ropes as their only records, relished their food, admired their clothes, enjoyed their own customs, and were content with their houses. Neighbouring countries could see one another in the distance, their dog barks and cock crows were audible to one another, but all their lives the people had no occasion to travel from one to the other. This was the time of perfect order. 子獨不知至德之世乎？ 當是時也，民結繩而用之，甘其食，美其服，樂其俗，安其居，鄰國相望，雞狗之音相聞，民至老死而不相往來。若此之時，則至治已。

(“Breaking into Trunks” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In those days of perfect-*de*, the people lived together with the birds and beasts, and associated side by side with the myriad things. What did they know about the “exemplary person” and the “petty person”? They were not stifled by unnecessary knowledge, and thus their *de* was undivided. They were not compelled by obsessive desire, thus remaining unadorned and uncarved. In living in this way, the people realized their true natural tendencies. 夫至德之世，同與禽獸居，族與萬物並，惡乎知君子小人哉！同乎無知，其德不離；同乎無欲，是謂素樸。素樸而民性得矣。

(“Horses’ Hoofs” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In Nanyue there is a city, and its name is The Land of Vigorous-*de*. Its people are foolish and naïve, few in thoughts of self, scant in desires. They know how

to make but not how to lay away; they give but look for nothing in return. They do not know what accords with “appropriateness”; they do not know what conforms to ritual. Uncouth, uncaring, they move recklessly – and yet each step they take is in accordance with the grand scheme of things. 南越有邑焉，名為建德之國。其民愚而樸，少私而寡欲；知作而不知藏，與而不求其報；不知義之所適，不知禮之所將；猖狂妄行，乃蹈乎大方。

(“Mountain Tree” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Portrayals of the world of perfect-*de* in the *Zhuangzi* expand upon Laozi’s utopian ideal of “little state with a small population 小國寡民” (ch. 80). Correspondingly, the *Zhuangzi* also uses the figures of spirit person (*shenren* 神人), perfect person (*zhiren* 至人), and genuine person (*zhenren* 真人) to portray the ideal personality:

There is a spirit-person living on distant Mountain Guye with skin like ice and snow, gentle and yielding like a young girl. He does not eat the five grains but rather feeds on the wind and dew. He rides upon the air and clouds, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful. [. . .] This man, with this *de* of his, is about to embrace the myriad things and roll them into one. Though the age calls for reform, why should he wear himself out over administering the affairs of the world? There is nothing that can harm this man. A flood may reach the sky without drowning him; a drought may melt the stones and scorch the mountains without scalding him. 藐姑射之山，有神人居焉，肌膚若冰雪，淖約若處子，不食五穀，吸風飲露。乘雲氣，御飛龍，而遊乎四海之外。其神凝，使物不疵癘而年穀熟。 之人也，之德也，將旁礴萬物以為一，世蘄乎亂，孰弊弊焉以天下為事！之人也，物莫之傷，大浸稽天而不溺，大旱金石流、土山焦而不熱。

(“Free and Easy Wandering” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The perfect person is miraculous, beyond understanding! The lakes may burst into flames around him, but they cannot burn him. The rivers may freeze over, but they cannot chill him. Ferocious thunder may crumble the mountains, howling winds may shake the seas, but they cannot frighten him. Such a person rides the clouds and winds, straddles the sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Even life and death have no effect on him, much less the rules of profit and loss! 至人神矣：大澤焚而不能熱，河、漢沍而不能寒，疾雷破山、風振海而不能驚。若然者，乘雲氣，騎日月，而遊乎四海之外。死生無變於己，而況利害之端乎？

(“Indifferent Theories of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

A person of perfect *de* can enter fire without feeling hot, enter water without drowning. Neither heat nor cold can harm him; the birds and animals do not impinge upon him. 至德者，火弗能熱，水弗能溺，寒暑弗能害，禽獸弗能賊。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The perfect person of ancient times used the virtue of consummatory conduct as a path to be borrowed, optimal appropriateness as a lodge to take shelter in. He wandered in the free and easy wastes, ate in the plain and simple fields, and strolled in the garden of no bestowal. Free and easy, he rested without acting purposively; plain and simple, it was not hard for him to live; bestowing nothing, he did not have to hand things out. The men of old called this the wandering of adopting the genuine. 古之至人，假道於仁，託宿於義，以遊逍遙之虛，食於苟簡之田，立於不貸之圃。逍遙，無為也；苟簡，易養也；不貸，無出也。古者謂是采真之遊。

(“The Turnings of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In summary, passages on the world of perfect-*de* and the perfect person or the person of perfect-*de* in the *Zhuangzi* express an ideal: An easy and unfettered political and spiritual state that is completely untroubled by unnatural distortion and unnecessary circumscription. On the one hand, these passages are heart-wringing complaints against the murderous and miserable world of the Warring States period. On the other hand, the *Zhuangzi* also uses its theory of *de* to express its ideal order of political and spiritual harmony. More specifically, Laozi and Zhuangzi’s “supra-moralist theory” purposes to criticise and rise above consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness and the feudal-patriarchal structure within which they are embedded. Its critique of consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, rituals, and music stems from its naturalistic theory of human nature and reveals the path of “communicating with *de* of spiritual illuminations 通於神明之德”. The significance of its contribution is not expressed in the form of “constructive comments” that are to be adopted in some kind of political reform. Instead, it is voiced in the form of an uncompromising, unforgiving, and unwavering critical awareness. Laozi and Zhuangzi spared no effort in condemning all forms of distortion of and alienation from natural human propensities and the unnecessary psychological inhibitions forced upon the heart-mind, as they are fabricated for the sake of the prevailing socio-political structure and its ideology. In this sense, Laozi and Zhuangzi’s unrelenting critique and deconstruction of “cultivation through names”, which is vigorously promoted by Confucians, is indeed of great significance.

Notes

- 1 Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Between De and Rituals – History of Thought in the Pre-Hundred-Schools-of-Thought Period* 德禮之間 – 前諸子時期的思想史 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 2009) and Zheng Kai 鄭開, “The Theory of *Xuande*: Interpreting Laozi’s Political Philosophy and Ethics 玄德論：關於老子政治哲學和倫理學的解讀與闡釋”, *Journal of Shangqiu Normal University* 商丘師範學院學報, Vol. 1 (2013).
- 2 If we do not restrict ourselves to the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* and trace the origin of the term “murky-*de*” (*xuande* 玄德) in a wider examination of historical literature, we will find that Confucians did not write about murky-*de*, just as Daoists are silent on radiant-*de* (*mingde* 明德). “(His) murky-*de* is acknowledged by the ruler, and he was then ordained a position of power. 玄德升聞，乃命以位。” appears in the *Shundian*

- of the *Kongzhuan* 《孔傳·舜典》, but the text is in fact fabricated by Yao Fangxing 姚方興. The first 28 characters of the *Shundian* 《舜典》, including the aforementioned sentence, are particularly suspect. See Shanguo Jiang 蔣善國, *History Review* 尚書綜述 (Shanghai: Shanghai古籍出版社, 1988), 29–30. Similarly, radiant-*de* (*mingde* 明德) seldom appears in Daoist writings. Although both murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) and radiant-*de* (*mingde* 明德) are mentioned in the Mawangdui *Huanglaoboshu* manuscript 《黃老帛書》, this is just an example of the comprehensiveness of the *Huang-Lao* School (黃老學). Is this fact a coincidence? Murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) and radiant-*de* (*mingde* 明德) are visual metaphors. The former is a metaphor for brightness, the latter for mysterious indistinction. The two concepts stand in clear opposition. It is well known that radiant-*de* (*mingde* 明德) is an indispensable expression in the prevailing ideology that follows from the Western Zhou dynasty. It frequently appears in vessel inscriptions, the *Book of Songs* 《詩經》, the *Shangshu* 《尚書》, and other Confucian canons and is often used to expound on political and ethical ideas.
- 3 Judging by manuscripts from Mawangdui archaeological finds, Fu Yi's 傅奕 manuscript, and Wang Bi's 王弼 commentary, *ci* 辭 in the second chapter of the received text ought to have been *shi* 始. See Songru Zhang 張松如, *A Textual Analysis of the Laozi* 老子校讀 (Changchun: Jilin People's Press 吉林人民出版社, 1981), 16.
 - 4 The *Laozi* is characterised by its use of metaphors of specific things to illustrate philosophical concepts. For instance, the original and unaffected natural propensities are analogised with unadorned silk (*su* 素), uncarved wood (*pu* 樸), the newborn (*chizi* 赤子), and the baby (*ying'er* 嬰兒), all of which are synonymous. This simplistic and imaginative literary style is characteristic of the *Laozi*, which was written before philosophy became a discipline.
 - 5 Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 says, "Laozi called it 'murky-*de*' (*xuande* 玄德), 'constant-*de*' (*changde* 常德), 'great-*de*' (*kongde* 孔德), and 'upper-*de*' (*shangde* 上德), in order to distinguish it from what was commonly regarded as *de*". This concise comment is of great insight. See Fuguan Xu 徐復觀, *History of the Theories of Human Nature in Pre-Qin China* 中國人性論史: 先秦篇 (Shanghai: Shanghai SDX Joint Publishing Company 上海三聯書店, 2002), 300.
 - 6 This is further expounded in "Dao of Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*.
 - 7 Kunwu Jiang 姜昆武, *Studies on the Formation of Words in the Book of Songs and the Shang Shu* 《詩》《書》成詞考察 (Jinan: Qilushushe 齊魯書社, 1989), 181.
 - 8 Murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) seems to indicate that all things are joined as one with their identical *de*. For example, in "Breaking into Trunks" in the *Zhuangzi*, it is said that "when we cut away the virtuous practices of Zeng and Shi, restrain the mouths of Yang and Mo, and cast away the virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness will the *de* of the people of the world find its oblivious unity". 削曾、史之行, 鉗楊、墨之口, 攘棄仁義, 而天下之德始玄同矣。" Generally speaking, murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) is different from *de* in general, and even goes beyond it. Murky-*de* "shows its possessor as opposite to others 與物反矣", "joins with the Heaven and earth 與天地合", and "acts non-purposively" (*wuwei* 無為). These are its essential characteristics.
 - 9 Wentong Meng 蒙文通, "A Few Words on Research 治學雜語", in *Meng Wentong Xueji* 蒙文通學記 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 1993), 9–10.
 - 10 Xu Fancheng says that the teaching of Laozi is a supra-moralism, for Laozi's claim that "*dao* is constantly without name 道常無名" is comparable to Heraclitus's comments on God's being "beyond both good and evil". See Fancheng Xu 徐梵澄, "Pondering the Unity of Great Wisdom 玄理參同", in *The Works of Xu Fancheng* 徐梵澄文集, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2006), 147–148.
 - 11 Xiaogan Liu 劉笑敢, *Zhuangzi Philosophy and Its Evolution* 莊子哲學及其演變 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1988), 275–276.

- 12 “Do away with hypocrisy, get rid of deceit 絕偽棄詐” is otherwise read as “do away with purposive-action and get rid of considering the future 絕為棄慮” cf. Ling Li 李零, *Reading the Guodian Chu Bamboo Scripts (Expanded and Revised Edition)* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (增訂本) (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 2002), 15–16.
- 13 The figure of *Huangdi* 黃帝 in the *Zhuangzi* is different from other writings from the period between the Warring States period and the Han dynasty. This fact is particularly thought-provoking.

4 Spontaneously self-so (*ziran*自然)

An analysis from two perspectives

4.1 Analysing from the perspective of spontaneously self-so (*ziran*自然) and *wu*無

Since the Han and Jin dynasties, the received interpretative tradition has typically referred to the concepts of spontaneously self-so (*ziran*自然) and non-purposive action (*wuwei*無為) as the central interpretive key that encapsulates the core of Daoist thought. Nonetheless, existing writings on the subject have so far not been entirely successful at bringing full clarity to the precise meaning of these two terms. Using modern methods of theoretical analysis, the following chapter will explicate the mutually inclusive relationship between the concepts of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action, revealing their intertwining textual sources and their complementary theoretical meanings.

The meaning and theoretical significance of the concept of spontaneously self-so have been a focal point that has received continued academic interest among Daoist scholars.¹ Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 believes that the philosophy of Laozi holds spontaneously self-so to be its core value, which is achieved through the principal method of non-purposive action. These two concepts are given metaphysical justification via *dao* and *de* and are given empirical support by the dialectic of the interdependence and inter-transformation of positives and negatives. This means that in Laozi's philosophy, metaphysics, dialectic, spontaneously self-so, and non-purposive action constitute an organic whole.² Liu's interpretation is somewhat opaque. It seems to attach greater importance to spontaneously self-so than to other aspects of Laozi's thought, including *dao* and *de*. However, this chapter seeks to highlight the Daoist way of thinking, which contemplates "in between" thinking (e.g. in between *you* and *wu* and in between *dao* and things), i.e. the opposite-complementary (*xiangfanxiangcheng* 相反相成) way of reasoning, as a reliable way to approach Daoist philosophy. Many students and scholars of Daoism have pondered the question, Between spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action, which is of greater importance? This is, in fact, similar to the chicken or the egg question and ought to be examined from the perspective of the tension between the two ends of an opposite-complementary relationship. This chapter will focus on the complex relationship between spontaneously self-so and *wu* (including non-purposive action). More specifically, we will take fully into account the various

expressions of *wu*, including objectlessness, namelessness, and non-purposive action, in a systematic analysis via an ontological and epistemological approach and via the state-of-attainment-heart-mind theory (*jingjiexinxinglun* 境界心性論), with the hope of providing an interpretation of the concept of spontaneously self-so that is conducive to a constructive development of comparative philosophy and modern thought.

4.1.1 Objectlessness and spontaneously self-so

If we examine the relationship between *wu* and spontaneously self-so from the ontological perspective, the tension between objectlessness and spontaneously self-so is the most thought-provoking relationship. Why?

First, it is undoubtedly the case that the fundamental meaning of *dao*, the core concept of philosophical Daoism since *Laozi*, is *wu*, e.g. formlessness, imagelessness, namelessness, objectlessness, and non-purposive action. The concept of objectlessness is first used in the *Laozi*. Its precise meaning is that *dao* is different from the “myriad things”. By contrast, spontaneously self-so implies *you* or objective existence. Viewing either from the perspective of the relationship between *dao* and things or the relationship between *you* and *wu*, spontaneously self-so is essentially the most fundamental definition of “things” (or *you*). Further, it needs to be pointed out that regardless of how much philosophical Daoism has emphasised the significance of *wu*, it has never doubted the reality or existence of the external world (including objective reality and social reality in the world of humans). Zhuangzi says in very naturalistic terms:

The *de* (natural way) of heaven gives rise to peaceful conditions. The sun and moon shine, and the four seasons pursue their courses. As with the regular revolution of day and night, clouds move and the rains fall [with an all-benefiting regularity]. 天德而出寧，日月照而四時行，若晝夜之有經，雲行而雨施矣。

(“The *Dao* of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Does heaven turn? Does the earth sit still? Do the sun and moon compete for a place to shine? Who masterminds all of this? Who pulls the strings? Who, resting inactive himself, gives the push that makes it go this way? I wonder, is there some mechanism that works it and won't let it stop? I wonder if it just rolls and turns and can't bring itself to a halt? Do the clouds make the rain, or does the rain make the clouds? Who puffs them up, who showers them down like this? Who, being without much initiative himself, stirs up all this lascivious joy? The winds rise in the north, blowing now west, now east, whirling up to wander on high. Whose breaths and exhalations are they? Who, without an agenda himself, huffs and puffs them about like this? What causes these to be so? 天其運乎? 地其處乎? 日月其爭於所乎? 孰主張是? 孰維綱是? 孰居無事推而行是? 意者其有機緘而不得已邪? 意者其運轉而不能自止邪? 雲者為雨乎? 雨者為雲乎? 孰隆施是? 孰居無

事淫樂而勸是？風起北方，一西一東，有上彷徨，孰噓吸是？孰居無事而披拂是？敢問何故？

(“The Turnings of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Clearly, notions such as the non-existence of external reality and the observable world being shadows of a more permanent existence have no place in philosophical Daoism. Instead, we find notions such as “there is no gap between *dao* and things 道物無際”, “*dao* is present as soon as the eye strikes 目擊而道存”, and “there is no place where *dao* is not present 道無處不在”.

Second, the concept of useless objects (*feiwu* 廢物) is soundly rejected by philosophical Daoism and is not to be found in either the *Laozi* or the *Zhuangzi*. With respect to this notion in particular, philosophical Daoism differs from Plato’s philosophy as well as the teachings of the Bible. From the perspective of spontaneously self-so, there is not a single person that should be deserted, nor is there any object worth discarding. Every kind of thing and person in the infinitely variegated world has its own worth. The *Laozi* says,

Therefore the sage always excels in saving people, and so abandons no one; always excels in saving things, and so abandons nothing. This is called following one’s discernment. 是以聖人常善救人，故無棄人；常善救物，故無棄物。是謂襲明。

(ch. 27 of the *Laozi*)

“Ziran” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·自然》 further explains,

Laozi says that those who are knowledgeable and seek to learn from others are sage-like; those who are brave and seek to learn from others are superior. Riding upon the wisdom of many, there is nothing one cannot achieve; using the strength of many, there is nothing one cannot conquer. Using the strength of many, one has little use of (the famous warrior) Wu Huo. Riding upon the power of many, one has little use of appointing (specific tasks to individual persons in) the world. [. . .] The sage embraces all and uses all. Therefore, there is not a single person that should be deserted; nor is there any object worth discarding. 老子曰：知而好問者聖，勇而好問者勝，乘眾人之智者即無不任也，用眾人之力者即無不勝也，用眾人之力者，烏獲不足恃也，乘眾人之勢者，天下不足用也。 聖人兼而用之，故人無棄人物無棄材。

The notion of the inimitable worth of each person and object is also found in the *Zhuangzi*. “The great use of the useless 無用之大用” receives repeated emphasis in “Free and Easy Wandering” in the *Zhuangzi*, where *Zhuangzi* sees no real distinction between useful resources and useless garbage, as they are labelled by human society. It tells of the “great stink tree” (*dachu* 大樗), which the carpenter describes by saying that “its trunk swells out to a large size, but is not fit for a carpenter to apply his line to it; its smaller branches are knotted

and crooked, so that the disk and square cannot be used on them. 其大本擁腫而不中繩墨，其小枝卷曲而不中規矩。It is great but of no use. 大而無用。” However, Zhuangzi argues precisely for its “great use” (*dayong* 大用). How do people measure the straightness of a tree? Only with lines, disks, and squares. Yet these are standards and measures external to the tree itself. From the perspective of spontaneously self-so, or “seeing things from the perspective of things 以物觀物”, every tree is “straight”. We now tend to believe that things without any use are worthless “garbage” (*feiwu* 廢物), while in fact the concept of garbage has been invented by the human power of discrimination. The natural world never has and never will produce garbage. On the contrary, garbage is a “local specialty” of human society, and its yield increases with the processes of social progress and cultural development. Just as concepts such as good, bad, right, and wrong are not applicable to the world of spontaneously self-so, the concept of garbage is not relevant to it either. When Zhuangzi says that the “odious and rotten transforms into the sacred and wonderful, and the sacred and wonderful transforms into the odious and rotten. 臭腐復化為神奇，神奇復化為臭腐。” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*), he wants to express that nothing in the process of spontaneously self-so transformation is extraneous. Everything has value. In other words, the concept of spontaneously self-so is theoretically significant, for it precludes the possibility of the existence of the “creator of things” (*zaowuzhu* 造物主) and “the creation of things” (*zaowu* 造物) while also firmly repudiating sceptical theories.

Since we have considered the issue of objectlessness and spontaneously self-so via “in between *you* and *wu*” and “in between *dao* and things”, are we to believe that spontaneously self-so is merely an indication of the nature of “things”, while objectlessness describes the essence of *dao*? Wang Zhongjiang’s 王中江 analysis that “*dao* emulates the spontaneously self-so” (*daofaziran* 道法自然), meaning *dao* cannot go beyond or control the spontaneously self-so (ch. 25 of the *Laozi*), helps us make clear whether the concept of spontaneously self-so points towards things or towards *dao*.³ Further analysis also shows that the fundamental theoretical role played by the concept of spontaneously self-so causes much complexity in Laozi’s discussion of the “issue of *you* and *wu*”. The phrase “indeterminate and indistinct” (*huanghu* 恍惚) is a clear indication of this point:

What cannot be seen is called evanescent; what cannot be heard is called rarefied; what cannot be touched is called minute. These three cannot be fathomed and so they are confused and looked upon as one. Its upper part is not dazzling; its lower part is not obscure. Dimly visible, it cannot be named and returns to that which is without substance. This is called the shape that has no shape, the image that is without substance. This is called indistinct and indeterminate. 視之不見，名曰夷；聽之不聞，名曰希；搏之不得，名曰微。此三者不可致詰，故混而為一。其上不皦，其下不昧。繩繩不可名，復歸於無物。是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂惚恍。

(ch. 14 of the *Laozi*)

As a thing, *dao* is indeterminate and indistinct. Indistinct and indeterminate, yet within it is an image; indeterminate and indistinct, yet within it is a thing. Dim and dark, yet within it is an essence. This essence is so genuine and within it is truthfulness. 道之為物，唯恍唯惚。忽兮恍兮，其中有象；恍兮忽兮，其中有物。窈兮冥兮，其中有精；其精甚真，其中有信。

(ch. 21 of the *Laozi*)

Precisely because neither *dao* nor *wu* is a kind of absolute nothingness and is instead described by saying that “within it is an image [...] yet within it is a thing [...] within it is an essence 其中有象 其中有物 其中有信.”, such a complex state in between *you* and *wu* can only be adequately described by the phrase “indeterminate and indistinct”, which is crucially important for our understanding of spontaneously self-so. These two concepts are similar in the sense that they do not oppose either *you* or *wu* but are located in the middle of where these two strands of reasoning meet.

In trying to understand the nature of “things”, early philosophical thought more often than not has relied on formal and other visual properties as the basic methods of our understanding. Things “have forms and have names 有形有名”, as it is reported in the *Zhuangzi*. This indicates a general consensus among thinkers of the time. However, Laozi and Zhuangzi take up the concepts of spontaneously self-so and murky-*de*, taking an alternative, more abstract perspective than appealing to outward form and appearance in attempting to cognise “things”. Spontaneously self-so (that has the meaning of “being so as it is”, “being such because of itself”) does not reference a thing’s outward form and appearance but instead looks to an abstract essence that is reflexive in nature. The concept of spontaneously self-so also has the meaning of an indestructible, undoubtable reality, regardless of its use in Daoist or Confucian contexts.

Whether or not the concept of spontaneously self-so, as it is used in philosophical Daoist contexts, is a noun remains a debatable issue. In fact, compound phrases with the form of “X *ran* 然” are normally selected to describe the state of something or some event. They are not nouns, and yet they are also different from an adverb in modern Chinese; “*ziran* 自然” (spontaneously self-so) is no exception. Relatedly, the Greek word *physis* makes its first appearance in a philosophical context in Heraclitus’s *Fragments* D-K1.⁴ J. Burnet believes that by *physis* Heraclitus refers to “material substance”. This interpretation is obviously relatively extreme and may be the result of Aristotelian influence. G. S. Kirk believes that *physis* in Heraclitus’s *Fragments* already contains the meaning of “growth” and “nature”. In D-K 123, Heraclitus says, “*Physis* has a tendency to conceal itself”, revealing the core meaning of the concept of *physis*, which is the thing that makes things behave as they do, as some kind of order that underlies the working of the sum of things.⁵ Aristotle uses the notion of “material cause” to reinterpret the concept of *physis* and gives it a new meaning. Generally, all nouns have the possibility of referring to real entities, including material entities, which is the norm in early periods in the history of thought. By contrast, if a word is not a noun, with what reason do we justifiably use it to investigate the origin and nature of all things? It is clear that Aristotle follows

this line of thinking, which has influenced the way of reasoning and direction of development in Western philosophy. However, the use of the concept of spontaneously self-so to signify a state and to signify nature has always been retained in Daoist philosophy even though other uses of the term exhibit clear indications of a noun. This shows that the concept of spontaneously self-so in philosophical Daoism since Laozi can never be interpreted as a substance, especially not a material substance. This is a concrete example of a fundamental point of difference between Chinese and Western philosophy – Western philosophical thinking tends towards and depends upon real substances, while philosophical Daoism has always rejected real substances (*dao* has always been non-material). This is deserving of much thought. In addition, Roger Ames takes up an alternate path and understands “*ziran* 自然” to mean spontaneously so, self-so-ing, or self-deriving, while translating *dao* as “way-making”, as a way to emphasise its processual and creative nature. He does not identify the concept of *dao* and spontaneously self-so with any material substance, which is telling of his extraordinary insight.⁶

4.1.2 *Namelessness and spontaneously self-so*

The state of spontaneously self-so is taken to be formless because reference to its form or outward appearance would bring no clarity at all to understanding it. Given the philosophical Daoist principle of form-name correspondence, spontaneously self-so is also nameless. We will follow our discussion in this section by considering relevant epistemological issues.

The reason for the emergence of the concept of spontaneously self-so in philosophical Daoism is profound and deserving of thorough investigation. The ancient Greek word *physis* and the Sanskrit word *tathata* (i.e. thatness or suchness) both contain the meaning of “being so in itself” and “being so as it originally is”. The philosophical Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so is close to these notions, except it is prior to language. This priority is undoubtable in every aspect. “Unadorned” and “uncarved” are concrete expressions for the concept of spontaneously self-so. It is worth noting that the Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so is characteristic not only because of its immunity from external alteration (an aspect that is shared with the ancient Greek *physis*) but also because it is unnameable. Does Laozi not repeatedly emphasise that the “uncarved block” is the “nameless uncarved block 無名之樸” (ch. 37)? Wang Bi 王弼 also says, “Spontaneously self-so is a name for that which has no name and an expression for exhausting the infinite. 自然者，無稱之言，窮極之辭。” (commentary on ch. 25 of the *Laozi*). Furthermore, spontaneously self-so cannot and should not be grasped via “name”, for whatever appears in the world of names, as soon as it is given a name, is no longer that which is spontaneously so as it is. In other words, all that appears in our intellect by way of names is no longer what it is as itself and can no longer be as it spontaneously is or what it spontaneously does. The human understanding should “halt itself before the immeasurable silence between one thing and another”.⁷ That is to say, namelessness and “knowing without knowledge” (*wuzhi* 無知) are keys to understanding the concept of spontaneously self-so.

Compared with “being”, the concept of spontaneously self-so seems to be on a higher level. It is possible for being to be revealed or explicated in language, while this is not possible with spontaneously self-so. We can use names and concepts to refer to “things”, describing their properties and characteristics so that things or laws of things are presented in the intellectual world for our understanding and comprehension. This is widely acknowledged. However, the philosophical Daoist notions of spontaneously self-so and “all things spontaneously as they are themselves” cannot be described, standing in contrast to Aristotle’s philosophy of being that is concerned with the properties and essential properties of things.⁸ In this sense, the Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so has a meaning that goes beyond the concept of being – namely, that it does not accommodate expression in language and cannot be thought of or explicated by concepts or names. Therefore, although the copula verb appears relatively late in ancient Chinese in comparison with other languages of the same period, this does not mean that ancient philosophers were unable to consider relatively profound philosophical issues effectively.

Further analysis shows that the two key concepts of *dao* and *de* are closely related to spontaneously self-so. Laozi’s proposition that “*dao* emulates the spontaneously self-so 道法自然” (ch. 25 of the *Laozi*) and Zhuangzi’s “*de* is that by which the myriad things live and grow 物得以生謂之德” (“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*) both hint at the idea that when we analyse and interpret the relationship between *dao* and the myriad things from the perspective of natural propensities, the concepts of *de* and spontaneously self-so are indispensable.⁹ Wang Bi 王弼 says,

All things have the state of spontaneously self-so as their inherent nature, therefore [a ruler] could rule following this nature and not strive to change it; he could take into account this nature in his rule but he cannot control it. Things have their constant natures. If one were to strive to change or control the constant nature of things, he is bound to fail. 萬物以自然為性，故可因而不可為也，可通而不可執也。物有常性而造為之，故必敗也。

(commentary on ch. 29 of the *Laozi*)

With particular reference to the developmental history of philosophical Daoism, Laozi’s discussion to the effect that “*dao* emulates the spontaneously self-so 道法自然” (ch. 25 of the *Laozi*) as well as “[h]e who knows himself has discernment. 自知者明。” (ch. 33 of the *Laozi*) and “I take no action purposively and the people are transformed of themselves 我無為，而民自化。” (ch. 57 of the *Laozi*), lays the foundation for the Daoist philosophical consideration of the concept of spontaneously self-so. Zhuangzi further discusses the notion of “not dependent upon anything” (*wudai* 無待) as well as “transformation by virtue of oneself alone” (*duhua* 獨化) and “hide the world in the world 藏天下於天下”. Guo Xiang 郭象 further elaborates on the concept of “transformation by virtue of oneself alone” and says that “there is nothing that creates things, and all things are self-created. 上知造物無物，下知有物之自造。” (preface to the commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 《庄子注·序》). These thoughts and theories encompass more than half of the philosophical Daoist theory and concept of spontaneously self-so.

4.1.3 Non-purposive action and spontaneously self-so

The following section focusses on the third aspect of the relationship between *wu* 無 and spontaneously self-so – namely, the relationship between non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為) and spontaneously self-so. This is also perhaps the most complicated and most troublesome issue. Since the Wei and Jin dynasties, people seem to have become used to considering spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action as the fundamental theses of Daoist thought. Nonetheless, what is spontaneously self-so? What is non-purposive action? What is the relationship between these two? These questions have thus far remained unanswered.

There are two issues that need to be clarified. First, the content of the two concepts, spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action, overlaps in some respects. If there is a link between the modern word “nature” and the ancient Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so, perhaps it comes down to the belief that the processes of nature are unrelated to the will of God or human motivations. Throughout human history, the world of nature has precisely been a course taken by itself. Second, in the context of philosophical Daoism, persons, including “I 我”, “rulers 侯王”, “sages 聖人”, and “genuine persons 真人”, exemplify the idea of non-purposive action; while “people 民” and “all peoples 百姓” live and act following the principle of spontaneously self-so. However, this dualistic division in political philosophical terms is not absolute. The ones who embody *dao* (*tidaozhe* 體道者) in the *Zhuangzi* are generally of low or common origin, working ordinary jobs and unnoticed by the writers of history. Hence, it is understandable that the concepts of non-purposive action and spontaneously self-so, as they emerged in ethical and political contexts, are the most attractive and most intriguing. Several passages are referenced to better facilitate our discussion:

- 1 Therefore, the sage, because he does nothing (for the sake of doing it), never ruins anything; and, because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing. In their enterprises the people always ruin them when on the verge of success. Be as careful at the end as at the beginning and there will be no ruined enterprises. Therefore, the sage desires those that are not desired (by others) and does not value goods which are hard to come by; learns the things not learned (by others) and makes good the mistakes of the multitude in order to help all lives to live in spontaneity and to refrain from daring to act. 是以聖人無為故無敗；無執故無失。民之從事，常於幾成而敗之。慎終如始，則無敗事，是以聖人欲不欲，不貴難得之貨；學不學，復衆人之所過，以輔萬物之自然，而不敢為。

(ch. 64 of the *Laozi*)

- 2 In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day; in the pursuit of *dao* one does less every day. One does less and less until one is not doing anything purposively, and when one does nothing purposively there is nothing that is undone. It is always through not meddling that the empire is won. Should you meddle, then you are not equal to the task of winning the empire. 為學日益，為道日損。損之又損，以至於無為。無為而無不為。取天下常以無事，及其有事，不足以取天下。

(ch. 48 of the *Laozi*)

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- 3 Look at the spring, the water of which rises and overflows – it does nothing purposive, but it acts so spontaneously. 夫水之於沟也，無為而才自然矣。
 (“Tianzifang” in the *Zhuangzi*)
- 4 Therefore, the affairs of the world are not to be contrived, but promoted according to their own spontaneous state of being. Nothing can be done to help the changes of myriad things but to grasp the essential and return to it. Therefore, sages cultivate the basis within and do not adorn themselves outwardly with superficialities. They activate their vital spirit and lay to rest their learned opinions. Therefore, they are unaffected and without active purposively they achieve all. They have no rule, yet there is no unruliness. To act non-purposively means not acting before others. To have no rule means not to change what others do of themselves out of their spontaneity. That there is no unruliness means that they act in accordance with the way things affirm one another. 故天下之事不可為也，因其自然而推之，萬物之變不可救也，秉其要而歸之。是以聖人內修其本，而不外飾其末，厲其精神，偃其知見故漠然無為而無不為也，無治而無不治也。所謂無為者，不先物為也；無治者，不易自然也；無不治者，因物之相然也。
 (“Daoyuan” in the *Wenzi*)
- 5 Non-purposive action does not mean that you cannot be induced to come and cannot be pushed away, do not respond when pressed and do not act when moved, keep stopped and do not flow, clench tight and do not let go. It means that private ambitions do not enter public ways, and habitual desires do not block main affairs. It means undertaking projects in accord with reason, establishing works according to resources, fostering the momentum of how things spontaneously are, so deception finds no place. When undertakings are completed there is no damage to oneself, and when success is achieved there is no praise to be had. One uses a boat on water, sandshoes on the beach, skids over mud, snowshoes in the mountains. You make hills on high ground and ponds on low ground. These are not my own intentions and initiatives. Sages are not ashamed of being lowly, but they dislike it when *dao* is not practised. They do not worry whether their own lives will be short, they worry about the hardships of the common people. Therefore, they are always empty and undertake no purposive action, embracing the unadorned and seeing the uncarved, not getting mixed up with things. 所謂無為者，非謂其引之不來，推之不去，迫而不應，感而不動，堅滯而不流，捲握而不散，謂其私志不入公道，嗜欲不挂正術，循理而舉事，因資而立功，推自然之勢，曲故不得容，事成而身不伐，功立而名不有，若夫水用舟，涉用屐，泥用輻，山用樛，夏瀆冬陂，因高為山，因下為池，非吾所為也。聖人不恥身之賤，惡道之不行也，不憂命之短，憂百姓之窮也，故常虛而無為，抱素見樸，不與物雜。
 (“Ziran” in the *Wenzi*)
- 6 The government of perfect persons are unassertive and unobstructive, not displaying anything that induce desire. Mind and spirit are at rest, the

physical body and the essential nature are in tune. In repose they embody *de*, in action they succeed by reason. Following *dao* of spontaneously self-so, they focus on the inevitable. They are serene and act not purposively, and the land is at peace. They are aloof and desireless, and the people are spontaneously simple of themselves. They do not contend in anger, and material goods are sufficient. Those who seek do not attain, those who receive do not refuse. *De* is returned to its origin and no one is inappropriately benefitted. As for the unspoken explanation and the unexpressed *dao*, if you comprehend them, this is called the heaven storehouse. You can take from it without diminishing it, you can draw on it without exhausting it. No one knows whence it is supplied and by what is it sustained. This is called the shimmering light. The shimmering light is what gives sustenance to all things. 夫至人之治，虛無寂寞，不見可欲，心與神處，形與性調，靜而體德，動而理通，循自然之道，緣不得已矣。漠然無為而天下和，淡然無欲而民自樸，不忿爭而財足，求者不得，受者不讓，德反歸焉，而莫之惠。不言之辯，不道之道，若或通焉，謂之天府。取焉而不損，酌焉而不竭，莫知其所求由，謂之搖光，搖光者，資糧萬物者也。

(“Xiade” in the *Wenzi*)

The first passage clearly indicates the theoretical theme that “rulers carry out actions non-purposively, and the common people live spontaneously of themselves. 侯王無為，百姓自然。” In this passage, “help all lives to live in spontaneity of themselves 輔萬物之自然” is followed by “refrain from daring to act. 而不敢為。”, which seems to illustrate a strong correspondence between the two concepts, spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. Following this interpretation, how would it be if we substitute “non-purposive action” in “One does less and less until one is not doing anything purposively. 損之又損，以至於無為。” in passage 2 with “spontaneously self-so”, i.e. “One does less and less until one acts spontaneously of oneself. 損之又損，以至於自然。”? It appears that this is quite acceptable. What I want to convey is that since the time of Laozi, the concepts of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action have been tightly bound up with one another. This is even more clearly so in the *Zhuangzi*. Heshang Gong’s 河上公 commentary on the *Laozi* also identifies *dao* with “*dao* of spontaneity 自然之道”. Correspondingly, passages 3 to 6 provide numerous rich and complex arguments and examples. In passage 3, “Look at the spring, the water of which rises and overflows – it does nothing purposive, but it acts so spontaneously. 夫水之於洑也，無為而才自然矣。”, the two terms are seemingly interchangeable. Their difference is almost negligible.

In addition, the relationship between spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action can be further examined by studying Guo Xiang’s 郭象 theory of “transformation by virtue of oneself alone” (*duhua* 獨化). Clearly, Guo’s concept of transformation by virtue of oneself alone is an extreme form of the concept of spontaneously self-so. Although Guo’s theory is illuminating and suggestive, whether or not his interpretation is a faithful and accurate one is highly dubious. For example, Guo uses the notions of “finding sufficiency in following one’s

nature independently 自足其性” and “appropriating one’s nature independently 自適其性” to explain Zhuangzi’s much-celebrated state of being “free and easy 逍遙” and argues that one need only be as one is (self-sufficient, self-fitting). One can transform by virtue of oneself alone, and this is the state of being free and easy. On one hand, Guo’s interpretation finds textual evidence in the received version of the *Zhuangzi*;¹⁰ on the other hand, we must admit that Guo’s interpretation is fraught with more than a few implausible and forced arguments. Since Guo’s theory of transformation by virtue of oneself alone is an extreme version of spontaneously self-so, it is reasonable to question whether Zhuangzi’s notion can be pushed to such an extreme. I believe that Zhi Dun 支遁 has developed a new interpretation of free and easy that is formulated precisely against Guo Xiang. The principal argumentative force of Zhi Dun’s critique of Guo’s interpretation is also directed against the latter’s understanding of human nature. Basing his theory on concepts such as “transformation by virtue of oneself alone”, “inborn nature and circumstance” (*xingfen* 性分), “self-directed nature” (*zixing* 自性), “finding sufficiency in following one’s nature” (*zuxing* 足性), and “finding what is appropriate for one’s nature” (*shixing* 適性), Guo resolves the contradiction and tension between theorists of spontaneously self-so and the state’s ideological cultivation of names 名教. For Guo, the spiritual state of being free and easy is attained following spontaneously self-so and an individual’s “inborn nature and circumstance”. Therefore, since the “cultivation of names” was inherent to one’s “inborn nature and circumstance” in the Wei and Jin period, it was also inherent to one’s state of spontaneously self-so.¹¹ However, if one cannot differentiate the evil rulers Jie 桀 and Zhou 紂 (representative of bad people) from sage emperors Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 (representative of good people), what is the point of being free and easy? In other words, taking the concept of spontaneously self-so to its extreme necessarily leads to the narrowing or complete radicalisation of the concept of human nature. In that case, what good does his theory of “nature” and “principle” do?

Guo Xiang 郭象 took the concept of spontaneously self-so to the extreme. To be exact, “Guo Xiang’s theory of transformation by virtue of oneself alone exposes the defects and deficiencies of the concept of spontaneously self-so and the theory of natural human nature”.¹² We shall analyse Zhuangzi’s theory of human nature to further reveal its theoretical structure. The concept of “genuine nature” (*zhenxing* 真性) put forward by Zhuangzi is thought-provoking, yet somewhat complicated. As in the case with “genuine knowledge” (*zhenzhi* 真知) and “genuine person” (*zhenren* 真人), the precise meaning of “genuine nature” is “pure nature”. What does it mean exactly?

Here are the horses, with their hooves to tramp over frost and snow and their coats to keep out the wind and cold. Chomping the grass and drinking the waters, prancing and jumping over the terrain – this is what is genuine in horses. 馬，蹄可以踐霜雪，毛可以禦風寒，齧草飲水，翹足而陸。此馬之真性也。

(“Horses’ Hoofs” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The cows and horses have four legs – such is the heavenly [way]. The bridle around the horse’s head and the ring through the cow’s nose – such are the human

[ways]. Hence, it is said, “Do not use the human to destroy the heavenly, do not use the purposive to destroy the given, do not sacrifice what you are born with for the sake of mere names”. Hold on to this carefully, for then you can return to what is genuine in you. 牛馬四足，是謂天；落馬首，穿牛鼻，是謂人。故曰：無以人滅天，無以故滅命，無以得殉名。謹守而勿失，是謂反其真。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The use of “genuine” (*zhen* 真) and “genuine nature” (*zhenxing* 真性) in these two passages indicates that Zhuangzi considers and discusses human nature primarily from the perspective of spontaneously self-so, as in the case of “The cows and horses have four legs 牛馬四足” and “[They prance] and [jump] over the terrain 翹足而陸”. Similarly, Guo Xiang says in his commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, “Living genuinely is within one’s inborn nature and circumstance. 真在性分之內。”, and, “Making whole your state of being genuine is guarding your inborn nature and circumstance. 全其真，守其分也。” That is to say, on the most basic level, Zhuangzi’s theory of human nature is obviously a naturalistic one. However, this picture is complicated by Zhuangzi’s development of a profound and complete theory of heart-mind-nature that expands upon his naturalist theory of human nature. In other words, “Zhuangzi’s theory of human nature does not stop at a one-dimensional naturalistic theory of human nature. Further complex developments open up the aspect of ‘theory of non-purposive heart-mind-nature’”. In addition, Zheng states,

Based on the concept and theory of “spontaneously self-so”, Zhuangzi develops a “naturalistic theory of human nature” and constructs a distinctive theory of heart-mind-nature with the principle of “non-purposive action”. This theory remains nameless. Let us tentatively call it the “theory of non-purposive heart-mind-nature”.¹³

More importantly,

we ought to interpret and comprehend the concept and theory of genuine nature from the oppositional tension between the concepts of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. The theory of genuine nature is the synthesis of Zhuangzi’s naturalistic theory of human nature and his theory of non-purposive heart-mind-nature.¹⁴

Zhuangzi places a lot of emphasis on and is very good at the “in between” (*zhi-jian* 之間) way of philosophical reasoning; for example,

I would probably take a position somewhere between worthiness and worthlessness. 周將處夫材與不材之間。

(“Mountain Tree” in the *Zhuangzi*).

Such is a person of true brightness who can enter into simplicity, who can return to the uncarved state through non-purpose action, give body to his

inborn nature, and embrace his spirit, and in this way wander through the everyday world. 夫明白入素，無為復樸，體性抱神，以遊世俗之間。
 (“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

This inspires us to consider carefully the Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so as being situated in between spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. This will allow us to grasp the true wisdom of Daoist philosophy.

Let us then reconsider Guo Xiang’s 郭象 theory of transformation by virtue of oneself alone. Its success equals its failure. A naturalistic theory of human nature using the concept of spontaneously self-so as its basis is ultimately unworkable because, from a spontaneously self-so point of view, human emotions (e.g. happiness, anger, grief, joy) and desires (e.g. from the desire for food and sex to the virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness) are part and parcel of human nature, and Guo’s understanding of spontaneously self-so leads to “self-developed nature” (*zixing* 自性), “acting of oneself” (*ziwei* 自為), and “independent transformation” of individual human nature. By contrast, Zhuangzi uses the concept of “indefinite attitude” (*wuqing* 無情) to explain that believing in a naturalistic view of human nature does not mean following the stirrings of desire at any given moment. Zhuangzi writes,

What I call indefinite attitude means not allowing likes and dislikes to damage you internally, and instead making it your constant practice to follow the way each thing is spontaneously of itself, without trying to add anything to the process of life. 吾所謂無情者，言人之不以好惡內傷其身，常因自然而不益生也。
 (“Markers of Full Virtuosity” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Upon further analysis, it is apparent that Guo Xiang 郭象 commits the fault of having conflated two different concepts. This is because he analyses and understands non-purposive action from the point of view of spontaneously self-so, which negates the significance of non-purposive action. He says,

Non-purposive action is not the same thing as not doing anything at all. If individuals each undertake their actions of themselves, nature and fate are reconciled. 無為者，非拱默之謂也。直各任其自為，則性命安矣。
 (commentary on “Zaiyou” in the *Zhuangzi*)

When individuals each undertake their actions according to their own abilities, then the principle of heaven comes about spontaneously of itself. It should not be the result of purposive action. If the ruler does the work of the ministers in their stead, then they are no longer the ruler. If ministers take on the function of a ruler, then they are no longer a ministers. Thus, if each oversees their own business, then the positions of those above and below are in their proper places, and the principle of non-purposive action is put in practice perfectly. 各當其能，則天理自然，非有為也。若乃主代臣事，則非主矣；臣秉主用，則非臣矣。故各司其任，則上下鹹得，而無為之理至矣。
 (commentary on “Tiandao” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The state of indifference is reached by allowing your inborn nature to manifest itself without adornment. Find repose in your inborn nature with full disinterestedness, and advance no further. It is of great benefit to follow your nature and let life be generated of itself. It is of little benefit to indulge in the desire to add on to it gratuitously. The result of the latter will not result in the continued production of things, while following the former one is complete. 其任性而無所飾焉則淡矣。漠然靜於性而止。任性自生，公也；心欲益之，私也；容私果不足以生生，而順公乃全也。

(commentary on “Fit for Emperors and Kings” in the *Zhuangzi*)

It is because they accord with the spontaneous actions of all things that they can gallop about endlessly with the myriad things. 因天下之自為，故馳萬物而無窮也。

(commentary on “Fit for Emperors and Kings” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Heaven is another name for [the state of] spontaneously self-so. Those whose purpose is to act do not act [extraneously], and actions of individuals are carried out effectively of themselves. Those whose purpose is knowledge do not seek to know, and knowledge becomes apparent of itself. To know by virtue of oneself is to disregard [purposive] knowledge, for knowledge comes out of not seeking knowledge [purposively]. That actions of individuals are carried out of themselves results from not acting [extraneously], for effective actions come out of not acting [extraneously]. Effective actions are produced by not acting [extraneously], therefore, not acting [extraneously] is the master; knowledge comes out of not seeking knowledge [purposively], therefore, not seeking knowledge [purposively] is the forefather. As such, the genuine person forgets knowledge and arrives at knowing; not seeking to act and arrives at efficacy. Generation comes about spontaneously; attainment is born out of sitting and forgetting. 天者，自然之謂也。夫為為者不能為，而為自為耳；為知者不能知，而知自知耳。自知耳，不知也，不知也則知出於不知矣；自為耳，不為也，不為也則為出於不為矣。為出於不為，故以不為為主；知出於不知，故以不知為宗。是故真人遺知而知，不為而為，自然而生，坐忘而得。

(commentary on “Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*)

To act independently [of external things] through one’s inborn nature, such is called action. This then is genuine action, not purposive action. 以性自動，故稱為耳；此乃真為，非有為也。

(commentary on “Gengsangchu” in the *Zhuangzi*)

It is true that the meanings of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action overlap to a certain degree in the *Zhuangzi*. But Guo Xiang 郭象 is clearly one-sided and intentionally misinterpreting *Zhuangzi* by identifying non-purposive action with spontaneously self-so and acting of oneself (*ziwei* 自為, i.e. following one’s inborn nature) with non-purposive action. The notion of non-purposive action in Laozi and *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy is a special kind of action that is opposed to and directed against purposive action (*youwei* 有為). This is the reason

for the Daoist position (including the Huang-Lao School of Daoism) on “acting non-purposively and all is achieved. 無為而無不為。” Guo is well aware of this and proposes the notion of “genuine action” (*zhenwei* 真為) as a way to further explicate non-purposive action.¹⁵ For example, Guo says,

[C]arry out the actions that one purposes to carry out, that is genuine action. Carrying out one’s genuine actions is non-purposive action. 為其所有為，則真為也；為其真為，則無為矣。

(commentary on “All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Nonetheless, if one considers “action” (*wei* 為) from the perspective of the concept of spontaneously self-so, neither “undertaking actions following one’s inborn nature 帥性而為” nor “acting self-guidedly” (*ziwei* 自為) is suggested by Zhuangzi’s non-purposive action. Similarly, Guo’s theory of “transformation by virtue of oneself alone” differs widely from Zhuangzi’s “transformation of things”. And it ought to be said that Zhuangzi’s thought on transformation of things is more profound. In summary, Daoist philosophers, especially Zhuangzi, attempted to use the principle of non-purposive action to counterbalance the principle of spontaneously self-so, considering a variety of issues through the contrastive and complementary relationship between the two, which is markedly different from the extreme theoretical path of Guo Xiang 郭象. Heshang Gong’s 河上公 interpretation tends to equate *dao* with spontaneously self-so, but that is, after all, the interpretation of only one person. Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 argues that “[t]he philosophy of Laozi takes spontaneously self-so to be its core value that is realized by the principle method of non-purposive action”. Liu believes that spontaneously self-so is more important than non-purposive action in Laozi’s philosophical system, and I beg to differ. But Liu also appreciates the complex relationship between the two concepts and argues that various aspects of Laozi’s philosophy compose an organic whole, which is certainly an excellent insight.¹⁶

Structurally speaking, the Daoist theory of heart-mind-nature is the basis of its ethical theory (including its political philosophy). This structure is also an important factor in viewing the theory of heart-mind-nature as the centre and essential key to Daoist ethics and political philosophy. Spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action of Laozi and Zhuangzi, “emptiness of heart-mind in according with the nature and situations of others 虛無因循” of the Huang-Lao School of Daoism, “taking *wu* to be the fundamental basis 以無為本” and “the cultivation through names originates from the state of spontaneously self-so 名教出於自然” of Wang Bi 王弼, and the “transformation by virtue of oneself alone”, together with “the cultivation through names is equivalent to the state of spontaneously self-so 名教即自然”, of Guo Xiang 郭象 all contain a political philosophical dimension that cannot be ignored. The world of “small countries with a modest population 小國寡民”, in the words of Laozi, is perhaps a kind of spontaneously self-so:

Reduce the size of the population and the state. Ensure that even though the people have the tools of war for a troop or battalion, they will not use them;

and that they will be reluctant to move to distant places because they look on death as no light matter. Even when they have ships and carts, they will have no use for them; and even when they have armour and weapons, they will have no occasion to make a show of them. Bring it about that the people will return to the use of the knotted rope, will find relish in their food and beauty in their clothes, will be content in their abode and happy in the way they live. Though adjoining states are within sight of one another, and the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another, yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another. 小國寡民。使有什伯之器而不用；使民重死而不遠徙。雖有舟輿，無所乘之，雖有甲兵，無所陳之。使民復結繩而用之，甘其食，美其服，安其居，樂其俗。鄰國相望，雞犬之聲相聞，民至老死，不相往來。

(ch. 80 of the *Laozi*)

Regarding this point, Meng Qingnan 孟慶楠 remarks that for Laozi and Zhuangzi, in the state of spontaneity, “political order and power are almost imperceivable”. The Huang-Lao School of Daoism certainly would not find this acceptable.¹⁷ In this sense, the astonishing ideal of “small countries with a modest population” is truly an extraordinary vision. The ideal apolitical state depicted in Chapter 80 of the *Laozi* appears not to be a trivial example, for it manifests precisely the societal consequence of Laozi’s *wu* (non-purposive action) in socio-political-ethical, national, and cultural terms. In other words, Laozi uses non-purposive action to rethink and criticise purposive action, by virtue of which society, ethics, politics, culture, and nationhood are dialectically negated. Laozi’s *wu* (non-purposive action) thus deconstructs values naturally assumed and considered indubitable. What is left after this reflective process of “doing less and less 損之又損” is precisely “small countries with a modest population”. Wang Qingjie 王慶節 provides a novel interpretation of the concept of spontaneously self-so in the *Laozi* in which he suggests that the meaning of the term has two aspects – namely, a “positive meaning” that “accord[s] with all that is conducive to the state of spontaneously self-so” and a “negative meaning” that resists all forces that undermine the conditions favourable to the state of spontaneously self-so. The former generates of itself, grows of itself, matures of itself, withers of itself, and perishes of itself by a kind of self-so-ing; while the latter introduces issues such as other-ing. The negative aspect of spontaneously self-so also finds expression through the concept of non-purposive action.¹⁸ In *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools* 《論六家要旨》, Sima Tan 司馬談 writes, “[The Daoist School] bases their theories on emptiness (of heart-mind) and being at rest, and argue [*sic*] for governance that accords with [the nature and circumstances of the governed]. 以虛無為本，因循為用。” This is an astute and succinct summary of the Huang-Lao School of Daoism. An important text of the Huang-Lao School, the *Guanzi* 《管子》, says, “[A]ccording with others means restraining oneself and basing one’s standards and judgements on the governed. 因也者，捨己而以物為法也。” What I wish to point out in particular is that the notion of “governance that accords with [the nature and circumstances of the governed]” (*yinxun* 因循)

reflects a further development of Laozi and Zhuangzi's idea of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. In fact, "governance that accords with [the nature and circumstances of the governed]" appears precisely at the intersection between spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. We ought to interpret "governance that accords with [the nature and circumstances of the governed]" through the intellectual aspect of the relationship between spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. In this light, "emptiness of heart-mind" (*xuwu* 虛無), as it is referred to in *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools* 《論六家要旨》, partially represents non-purposive action, particularly the part that involves internal spiritual aspects. "Governance that accords with [the nature and circumstances of the governed]" has integrated the objectified (non-purposive, non-subjective) meaning of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action. Wang Bi 王弼 also emphasises the importance of "governance that accords with [the nature and circumstances of the governed]", especially the way of interpreting this expression from the perspective of spontaneously self-so. He says,

Undertake actions that follow the state of spontaneously self-so. Create not and initiate not, and all peoples and affairs come to fruition leaving no traces behind. . . . The way of governance according with [the nature and circumstances of] the governed does not rely on the formal. It is according with the governed in the state of spontaneously self-so, whereby one does not establish and does not implement things. As such one needs neither locks nor keys, neither ropes nor knots, and finds no failures or errors. 順自然而行，不造不始，故物得至而無轍跡也 . . . 因物之數，不假形也。因物自然，不設不施，故不用關鍵、繩約，而不可開解也。

(commentary on ch. 27 of the *Laozi*)

Guo Xiang 郭象, for whom this term has the meaning "unavoidably so", i.e. necessarily so, adds a further development of the concept of spontaneously self-so.¹⁹ This is an essential theoretical foundation for Guo's arguments behind his political philosophy:

The [governance of] the sages accorded with the self-guided actions of the governed, therefore their rule left no trace. The term "sage" is tentatively given to those who themselves leave behind no trace and whose trace is found in those they governed. "Sage" is a name given to the traceless. 夫聖人因物之自行，故無跡。然則所謂聖者，我本無跡，故物得其跡，跡得而強名聖，則聖者乃無跡之名也。

(commentary on "Giving Away a Throne" in the *Zhuangzi*)

The Yellow Emperor [Emperor Huang] himself did not act according to the principles of consummatory conduct and maximal appropriateness. He intermingled himself spontaneously with the people and traces of his consummatory and appropriate deeds became apparent. As these deeds and traces became apparent the heart-mind of the people surrendered themselves spontaneously.

As such, the heart-minds of the people had become constrained because of the traces of the deeds of the Yellow Emperor. 夫黃帝非為仁義也，直與物冥則仁義之跡自見，跡自見則後民之心必自殉之，是亦黃帝之跡使物攬也。

(commentary on “Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The notion of “self-guided action” (*zixing* 自行) in Guo’s commentary follows the principle of spontaneously self-so. The “tracelessness” (*wuji* 無跡) of the sages’ deeds is meant to represent their non-purposive action. All in all, there is a gap between the meanings of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action that is reflective of the fact that the meanings of “existing of oneself” (*zizai* 自在) and “acting of oneself” (*ziwei* 自為), covered by the concept of spontaneously self-so, are not coincident with the theory of non-purposive action; for notions such as “existing of oneself” and “acting of oneself” can serve only to indicate the reality and legitimacy of the real world and provide an internal justification for the bodily desires of individuals, i.e. that our physiological responses to the external world, including emotional responses and sensory desires, are all constitutive of the state of spontaneously self-so. In other words, the notion of spontaneously self-so is an internal principle that justifies these responses. The issue is that the notion of spontaneously self-so indicates only that these desires are legitimate; it does not rule over these desires or direct them towards “indeterminate desires” (*wuyu* 無欲). Insofar as philosophical Daoist theorists rely upon the concept of non-purposive action to theorise on topics such as heart-mind-nature, value, and freedom, indeterminate desire is an essential and indispensable aspect of non-purposive action.

Reviewing the three issues discussed in this chapter, it is not difficult to see that they correspond to the three dimensions of ontology, epistemology, and practical philosophy (including the theory of human nature, ethics, and political philosophy). What is this other than a manifestation of the logical development and theoretical structure of philosophical Daoism?

4.2 Viewing comparatively: Spontaneously self-so and *physis*

The parallel between the philosophical Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so and *physis* in the philosophical texts of ancient Greece is an intriguing one. From a comparative point of view, the fact that spontaneously self-so and *physis* seem to share the same starting point and yet end up in very different places is reflective of the two separate destinies that have shaped the history of Chinese and Western philosophies. It is thus necessary to further the multifaceted investigation of the Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so.

4.2.1 “The discovery of nature”: A philosophical breakthrough

Nature was a major topic of discourse for Greek pre-Socratic philosophers, who are sometimes referred to as the natural philosophers (*physiologoi*). Their works are often titled *On Nature* (*Peri Physeōs*). G. E. R. Lloyd points out that the discovery

of nature represents the first distinction between the natural and the supernatural and thus marks the beginning of both philosophy and science.²⁰ Specifically, the idea of “nature” reflects an intellectual watershed that enabled the natural philosophers to replace mythological thinking and develop a naturalistic conception of the world using natural laws to explain natural phenomena without reference to supernatural forces and magic. In a sense, *physis* represents the first product of philosophical rumination and is the first insight into existence in ancient Greece. For example, Thales believed that *physis* was water, Anaximander thought it was air, and Heraclitus argued it was fire. Briefly put, one could say that the central concept of philosophy in the pre-Socratic period was *physis*. Subsequently, Socrates constructed a new intellectual paradigm that revolved around *aretē* instead of *physis*.

In comparison, a period of philosophical breakthrough also took place in ancient China. Specifically, thought in the late Spring and Autumn period and early Warring States period, of which Laozi and Confucius are representative, had entered the philosophical era. Why is this so? Because the intellectual creativity of both Laozi and Confucius broke away from their contemporary intellectual world, drawing a clear and profound boundary between the pre-philosophical period and the philosophical era. For example, “consummatory behavior”, put forward by Confucius, was no longer the “list of virtues” (*demu* 德目) that had persisted for a long time since the Western Zhou dynasty, and it contained much subtler intellectual content. Also, Confucius was the first to discuss philosophical issues such as “nature and the *dao* of heaven 性與天道”, which is reflective of his unique philosophical mind. In comparison, the philosophical significance of Laozi’s intellectual breakthrough is easier to analyse and grasp. First, the concept of *dao* put forward by Laozi is a revolutionary philosophical concept. Laozi uses the reasoning of *wu* to delineate and explicate *dao*, turning it into a philosophical concept. Second, with the development of the concept of murky-*de*, Laozi creatively transformed pre-philosophical thought into a philosophical form as one of the main criteria for a philosophical breakthrough. Third, Laozi was the first to put forward the concept of spontaneously self-so, as another epoch-making notion, for the *Laozi* almost completely eliminated all traces of the religious conception of some creator god and went beyond primitive magical ways of reasoning. In other words, the dual concepts of *dao* and *de* and the concept of spontaneously self-so, which is integral to the meaning of *dao* and *de*, critically refute the concept of a creator god and establish a new intellectual tradition that understands the universe in a simple, naturalistic way. Generally speaking, *dao* and its related term spontaneously self-so stand for the origin and cause of the birth and death of all things. And, surely, the concept of spontaneously self-so also encompasses the meaning of reality and the real.

However, it is worth noting that neither *physis* nor *ziran*, in their respective contexts in the ancient world, can be equated with “nature”, as it is used in the modern languages of the Western world. “Nature/Natura/Natur”, as it is used in Western languages, has two primary meanings. On the one hand, it means “natural objects” or the “natural world”, as well as natural processes, and stands opposed to the world of humans and their history. On the other hand, it signifies the essential

character of an object or an affair. These two aspects of the word “nature” are noted by J. S. Mill and R. G. Collingwood:

In one sense, [nature] means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man.²¹

[I]n modern European languages the word “nature” is on the whole most often used in a collective sense for the sum total or aggregate of natural things. At the same time, this is not the only sense in which the word is commonly used in modern languages. There is another sense, which we recognize to be its original and, strictly, its proper sense, when it refers not to a collection but to a “principle”, a *principium*, ἀρχή, or source.

[. . .] The word φύσις is used in Greek in both these ways, and there is the same relation between the two senses in Greek as there is between the two senses in English. In our earlier documents of Greek literature, φύσις always bears the sense which we recognize as the original sense of the English word “nature”. It always means something within, or intimately belonging to, a thing, which is the source of its behaviour. This is the only sense it ever bears in the earlier Greek authors, and remains throughout the history of Greek literature its normal sense. But very rarely, and relatively late, it also bears the secondary sense of the sum total or aggregate of natural things, that is, it becomes more or less synonymous with the word κόσμος, “the world”.

[. . .] By the Ionian philosophers, I take it, φύσις was never used in this secondary sense, but always in its primary sense. “Nature”, for them, never meant the world or the things which go to make up the world, but always something inhering in these things which made them behave as they did.²²

It appears that in modern uses, both “nature” in English and *ziran* in Chinese primarily signify the natural world, departing from their ancient uses to a similar extent. It thus raises an intriguing question: How did this change come about? Aristotle compiles a list of six different uses of the word *physis*:

- 1 the genesis of growing things;
- 2 the immanent thing from which a growing thing first begins to grow (e.g. its seed);
- 3 the source from which the primary motion in every natural object is induced in that object as such;
- 4 the primary stuff, shapeless and unchangeable from its own potency, of which any natural object consists or from which it is produced;
- 5 the substance of natural objects;
- 6 the essence of those things which contain in themselves as such a source of motion.

(Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 5.1014b-1015a)

According to Aristotle, *physis* refers to the nature and substance of natural objects, which ultimately explains why things are as they are and grow and transform as they do. These meanings bear important similarities with the Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so, a term that has a complex meaning. Broadly speaking, it has the meanings of “is so because of itself”, “is appropriately so because of itself”, “has the capacity for becoming so because of itself”, and “has become so of itself”²³ as well as “is so as it is”, “is so in its original state”, and “is so inevitably”.²⁴ It is intriguing to note the fact that spontaneously self-so, with its primary meaning of “is so because of itself without reliance on any external cause” and its being an essential property of *dao*, as in the case of “*dao* emulates the spontaneously self-so” (*daofaziran* 道法自然), which means *dao* cannot go beyond the spontaneously self-so, and not being able to control it, harnesses its energy (ch. 25 of the *Laozi*), bears a striking resemblance to the Greek word *physis*, which also has primary meanings of “original nature”, “originative substance”, and “the most primordial existence”.²⁵ In this light, we can further our study of spontaneously self-so with a three-part analysis of its meaning:

- 1 “Is so naturally”, as opposed to customs and conventions, i.e. *nomos*.
- 2 “Is so following its nature”, as exemplified by the contrast between “uncarved simplicity (*pu* 樸)” and “functional instrument (*qi* 器)”.
- 3 “Belonging to the world of nature”, which can be further extended to include the distinction between heaven and human beings.

The key to this problem is that, from a comparative philosophy point of view, *physis*, as it was studied by the Ionian philosophers in ancient Greece, contains several vitally important meanings; for example,

- 1 *Physis* means, in addition to growth and development, the substance that is responsible for that capacity. Theories of *physis* purport to explain the nature of the “primordial substance and element (*archē* and *stoicheion*) of all things” whose definition stands in contrast to products generated subsequently from the combination and transformation of the original substance, i.e. things that constitute the perceivable world.
- 2 *Physis* inherently contains a continuing self-active force that guides and sustains its own motion. Things in the perceivable world owe their capacity for self-directed and unaided motion and change to their material association with the “primordial substance and element of all things”.
- 3 *Physis* refers to all self-active power for motion and change in the world, including that present in humans and all other creatures. In other words, *physis* is the only self-active force in the world. And as such, *physis* is holy.²⁶

The first two points of the above analysis show a clear strategy: Identify the nature and character of the “primordial substance and element of all things”, then explain how its transformations have resulted in the diverse and complex world of myriad things. The third point is slightly more complicated. It seems that the

concept of *physis* contains two opposing directions of thought, simultaneously seeking to secularise and to spiritualise it. As theories of *physis* replace the once ubiquitous theistic understanding of the world, they also become pantheistic. From our analytic perspective, *physis* simultaneously accounts for a thing's substance, essential property, and divine participation. These are somewhat contradictory aspects of Ionian natural philosophy that laid an important foundation for later developments in Western philosophy. In the following paragraphs, we will focus on comparing the pre-Socratic philosophical concept of *physis* and the philosophical Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so.

Chronologically, the earliest extant instance of the term "spontaneously self-so" is found in the *Laozi*. No trace of its inception or early development is found in historical texts prior to the *Laozi*. Undoubtedly, therefore, it can be seen as an intellectual innovation by Laozi. It also occupies a truly significant position in the period of the philosophical breakthrough in ancient China. Just as pre-Socratic thinkers established the quest for the root and nature of all things that was subsequently advanced and deepened by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Hellenistic philosophers, the philosophical history before and after Laozi was also devoted to the pursuit of the root and nature of all things. In this respect, the two traditions are indeed comparable.

The emergence of the concept of spontaneously self-so is apparently unreported. Nonetheless, analysing relevant intellectual and philosophical history will offer us some clues. Whether in ancient Greece or ancient China, the earliest attempts at understanding the world through analysis are conducted via the perceptible properties of form and colour, for they are recognised as the most basic and most prevalent characters or properties shared by all objects. How then do we explain the emergence of Daoist philosophical concepts such as *de*, which is the precursor of the concepts of natural propensities, "original natural propensities" (*benxing* 本性), and spontaneously self-so? After all, these concepts, whose reference is the essential properties of the myriad things, are highly abstracted from the many perceptible characters of material objects and are not sensible via our usual sense organs. We have now come to understand that the *Laozi* underwent a long process of canonisation through which it incorporated various ways of reasoning, including by way of shape and colour as well as spontaneously self-so. These various strands of reasoning have intertwined with one another, but it is reasonable to believe that the concept of spontaneously self-so represents a theoretical innovation that sought to find a different approach to understanding objects in general, rather than using just shape and colour. Simply put, the reflexive nature of the concept of spontaneously self-so precludes the concept of the creator god that was pervasive in early intellectual history. (This is particularly evident in the *Laozi*.) It is unprecedented in its seeking to account for the transformations of the world on the part of things themselves. It also rejects the possibility of treating any particular concrete thing as the origin of all things, for the state of spontaneously self-so describes the condition of all things existing as they do and is not something that can be objectified. In this sense, the Daoist concept of spontaneously self-so is clearly indicative of the fact that philosophical Daoism is not essentialism or

nihilism, for spontaneously self-so affirms the reality of all things in the universe from the most foundational aspect of its theory.

4.2.1 *Destinies of “nature”: The parting of the ways of Chinese and Western philosophy*

The Chinese term *ziran* 自然, in the context of modern Chinese philosophy, is an imported phrase that takes the meaning of the Western word “nature” and is different from the use of the term in ancient China and the notion of *physis* in pre-Socratic era philosophy. The truly meaningful and challenging question is, Why has the concept of spontaneously self-so persisted for so long in the context of Chinese philosophy (especially Daoist philosophy)? Also, how was the *physis* of early Greek philosophy transformed into an objectified, external “nature” (i.e. natural objects and the natural world)? The scientific tradition and scientific reasoning have played their parts in this transformation, but I am asking how, since the philosophical tradition has been consistent with the scientific tradition since the pre-Socratic period, the meaning of *physis* changed from “original nature” to “essence”. How did *physis*, which has the profound meaning of “inherent active force”, later give way to the notion of *eidos* and subsequently “God”? The following section will provide some brief thoughts on this historical-philosophical problem.

The meaning of *physis* in ancient Greek intellectual sources is rich and diverse. The use of the term in Homer already implicitly had the meaning of original nature, whereas the first use of the term in a philosophical text is found in the fragments of Heraclitus. Plato and Aristotle also both narrowed the meaning of *physis*.²⁷ Aristotle’s analysis of the concept of *physis* in the previously quoted *Metaphysics*, 5.1014b-1015a, indicates that during Aristotle’s time, the term mainly referred to a thing’s original nature, essence, or origin, i.e. the internal reason for how things have come to be as they are. It reflects the way ancient Greek philosophers understood and grasped the origin of all things and the reason why the world exists. However, in pursuing topics such as the reason for existence as well as the essence and nature of all things, Western philosophers have overwritten and subverted the profound meaning that is inherent to *physis*. Simply put, when *physis* is identified with nature and essence, it is inevitable that it is replaced by Parmenides’s “unchanging existence” and Plato’s *eidos*, leading to its ultimately becoming an objectified entity, i.e. natural things and the natural world. By contrast, while philosophers since ancient Greece have continued to ponder the causal links between the motions of things, they have continued to turn their backs on the intellectual tradition of *physis* and have gradually considered God to be the internal spiritual active power inherent to all things. Both Plato and Neoplatonists have contributed crucially to this development.

Empedocles believed that the three elements water, fire, and earth were *physis*, while specific natural objects (such as mountains, rivers, earth, flowers, birds, fish, and insects) were not *physis*.²⁸ When Plato and Aristotle refer to the concept of *physis*, they are a little vaguer and more ambiguous than the philosophers of

the pre-Socratic period. I really wish I could lift Plato from the other world and ask him whether his *eidōs* is another name for *physis*. For the convenience of our analysis, let us first consider Aristotle's opinion. The *Metaphysics* contains a focussed discussion of *physis*. He first states, "Of things that exist, some exist by nature, some from other causes". This statement is then followed by an analysis of things "existing by nature", with the intention of identifying the latter with "existing by material, form, and purpose". One particular passage in this part of the *Metaphysics* is confusing:

What nature is, then, and the meaning of the terms "by nature" and "according to nature", has been stated. That nature exists, it would be absurd to try to prove; for it is obvious that there are many things of this kind, and to prove what is obvious by what is not is the mark of a man who is unable to distinguish what is self-evident from what is not.²⁹

On the surface, Aristotle seems to acknowledge that the concept of *physis* contains the meaning of the ultimate and highest principle. However, judging by the context of this passage, he intends to challenge and eliminate the significance and function of the concept of *physis* in philosophy from a number of different angles. For example, while Aristotle clearly states, "No artificial product has in itself the source of its own production",³⁰ he clearly uses a way of reasoning that belongs to "artificial product[s]" to replace the intellectual significance of *physis* from the perspectives of substance, form, and purpose (replacing the need for "source of motion" that is integral to the concept of *physis*). He believes that "natural things" (*physisieu ontā*) are to be distinguished from "artificial products" (*poioumena*):

Of things that exist, some exist by nature, some from other causes. "By nature", the animals and their parts exist, and the plants and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air, water) – for we say that these and the like exist "by nature". All the things mentioned present a feature in which they differ from things which are not constituted by nature.³¹

Clearly, natural things are different from artificial products. *Physis*, which is the nature of natural things, manifests itself as a self-guiding, internal principle within natural things, for the meaning of *physis* is production, growth, and coming to be.³² More importantly, Aristotle further points out that the difference between natural things and artificial products lies in their different principles (causes): A thing that exists by nature has *physis* as its principle, while an artificial product has *technē* as its counterpart. The fundamental difference between *physis* and *technē* is such that the former is an internal principle integral to the natural thing itself, while the latter is a principle external to the artificial product. The overall trend in Western philosophy from ancient Greece is to treat natural objects as a kind of artificial product (i.e. natural things are no more than self-produced products), which suspiciously conflates production with the concept of nature! Therefore, nature is also treated as a kind of cosmogenic *technē* (God is a craftsman of this kind). Therefore, one

can see that the concept of *physis* in Aristotle's works is already in danger. Natural things being treated as artificial products marks the beginning of the externalisation of natural things. In fact, Aristotle's thought in this regard follows the same vein as Plato, who also treats *physis* as a created thing, diminishing the implications of "creating and transforming of themselves" and "being as it is of itself", which are integral to the original meaning of *physis*. The notion of cosmogenesis is contradictory to and incoherent with the concept of *physis*. However, in Plato's view, the natural world (mountains, rivers, earth, and all living creatures) is not independent but is the creation of the gods. The world is not only created by the gods but is also ruled by principles given by the gods. Therefore, to call the world "nature" is fundamentally a misuse of this term. Plato's argument is given through a dialogue between an Athenian and Clinias in the *Laws*:

Athenian: Then opinion and reflection and thought and art and law will be prior to things hard and soft and heavy and light; and further, the works and actions that are great and primary will be those of art, while those that are natural, and nature itself which they wrongly call by this name – will be secondary, and will derive their origin from art and reason.

Clinias: How are they wrong?

Athenian: By "nature" they intend to indicate production of things primary; but if soul shall be shown to have been produced first (not fire or air), but soul first and foremost, it would most truly be described as a superlatively "natural" existence. Such is the state of the case, provided that one can prove that soul is older than body, but not otherwise.

(Plato, *Laws*, 10.892B-C)³³

Plato's philosophy evidences a powerful theological tendency. In a certain sense, God and soul are the ultimate ends of his philosophising. That is to say, the previously quoted dialogue is intended to argue for Plato's core argument; namely, "[Nature] is among the first of things, and before all bodies, and is the chief author of their changes and transpositions".³⁴ Wu Guosheng 吳國盛 points out,

The emergence of the transcendent world of forms and its being the origin of the perceptible world deny the role of the perceptible world as the "natural" (original nature) world. True "nature" is not the perceptible world, but the rational world. Therefore, since Plato, the concept of "nature" has been challenged and reformed. "Nature" is not within this "living", changing perceptible world, but is in an eternal, unchanging world beyond. The term "nature" loses its meaning as the primary and original existence, but becomes a name for a part of what exists.³⁵

On Plato's intellectual development, Aristotle writes,

In his youth Plato first became acquainted with Cratylus and the Heraclitean doctrines – that the whole sensible world is always in a state of flux, and that

there is no scientific knowledge of it – and in after years he still held these opinions. And when Socrates, disregarding the physical universe and confining his study to moral questions, sought in this sphere for the universal and was the first to concentrate upon definition, Plato followed him and assumed that the problem of definition is concerned not with any sensible thing but with entities of another kind; for the reason that there can be no general definition of sensible things which are always changing. These entities he called “Ideas”, and held that all sensible things are named after them sensible and in virtue of their relation to them; for the plurality of things which bear the same name as the Forms exist by participation in them.

(Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.987a-b)

Following Socrates’s form of inquiry “What is X?”, Socrates and Plato worked to seek a universal definition of what X is instead of what X is like. Briefly put, when philosophers attempt to define X, not only should they conceive of X, but they ought also to explain the nature of X, i.e. X’s being, reality, or essence.³⁶ Philosophising along these lines inevitably leads to the dissolution and replacement of the meaning and significance of the early *physis*. In sum, we can say that Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle jointly began the intellectual process that decommissioned the notion of *physis*. Heidegger writes critically,

In a quite essential sense, meta-physics is “physics”, i.e., knowledge of *physis* (*epistēmē physichē*).³⁷

Rather, this barely adequately expressed assertion that *ousia* is *physis tis* is an echo of the great beginning of Greek philosophy, the first beginning of Western philosophy. In this beginning being was thought as *physis*, such that the *physis* that Aristotle conceptualized can be only a late derivative of original *physis*. And a much weaker, much harder-to-hear echo of the original *physis* that was projected as the being of beings, is still left for us when we speak of the “nature” of things, the nature of the “state”, and the “nature” of the human being, by which we do not mean the natural “foundations” (thought of as physical, chemical, or biological) but rather the pure and simple being and essence of those beings.³⁸

Let us leave aside whether or not Heidegger’s interpretation is correct or reasonable for the moment. Importantly, he is insightful with respect to the concept of *physis* and the difference between *physis* and nature. We can even say that the philosophical development since Socrates has gradually come to form a new paradigm that marks a departure from the preceding intellectual tradition. In the interpretive tradition and intellectual narrative that includes Plato, Empedocles, Aristotle, Neoplatonism, and Christian theology, the concept of nature has suffered important and significant change and degradation in which philosophical essentialism, Christian religious notions, and scientific thinking have played the largest role. One can say that mainstream Western thought replaced “by nature” with “by purpose”, a process whereby the original concept of nature from the pre-Socratic

period sank and the concept of a creator god and humans as God's creation resurfaced. Ideas in the Christian tradition such as "in the beginning there was the word" and "the word became flesh" are utterly different from the notion of *physis* in early Greek philosophy, and they render the latter redundant. It is a fundamental Christian belief that God created the world for humans and that God himself created humans, whose superiority is the central part of God's divine plan. The notion of a self-guiding and self-inhering nature of things thus becomes unnecessary.

In summary, the ancient Greek concept of *physis* gradually became a passive, objective, soulless notion that turned into the origin of the modern concept of an objective "nature". In a parallel way, the ancient Greek *physis* ceased to be an independent concept and became an auxiliary notion to that of God. Philosophy also became auxiliary to theology. Is this a fortunate or unfortunate course of events? It has been the destiny of Western philosophy. Poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge and philosophers such as Spinoza and Heidegger have attempted to revitalise the notion of "nature" in its original sense. Their thoughts echo those of philosophical Daoism (including the concept of spontaneously self-so) and can be seen as powerful revisions to Plato and Aristotle's refutation of the early concept of *physis*.³⁹

The obvious discrepancy between Chinese and Western philosophy prompts us to ask the following question: Can one objectify the Daoist notion of spontaneously self-so? Can we find any trace of a theological tendency in Daoist thought? These questions are worthy of consideration. It is worth noting that "nature", in the modern sense of the term, is the opposite of "divine agency" and is closer in meaning to the notion of spontaneously self-so in ancient Chinese philosophy, for this nature is rightly seen as "the inevitable product of the expulsion of God from the natural order".⁴⁰ In this light, I believe we can further our discussion with regard to two aspects. First, we can investigate further the difference between *dao* and *wu* on the one hand and *logos*, *eidōs*, and being on the other. Laozi says repeatedly that "*dao* gives them life yet claims no possession; it benefits them yet exacts no gratitude; it nurtures their growth yet exercises no authority. 生而不有，為而不恃，長而不幸。" (ch. 2, 10, 51 of the *Laozi*), and uses this as a portrayal of the notion of murky-*de* to explain the "relationship between *dao* and things". Such a relationship is very different from that between *eidōs* and phenomenal objects in Plato's thought or that between *ousia* and concrete objects in Aristotle's. Second, the concept of spontaneously self-so in Chinese philosophy as a whole does not contain, explicitly or implicitly, the meaning of "purpose" and is also entirely unrelated to causality and causal relationships. "Revolution of Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi* starts out by asking, "Do the heavens turn? Does the earth sit still? 天其運乎? 地其處乎? ", and the list of questions concludes with, "What is their cause? 敢問何故? " Such an end to this stream of questioning is indeed rich in its connotations. In his commentary, Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 says,

The ground for the fact that they are so is not any cause. If one were to assume that there is a cause to account of all such phenomena, one must recognise a certain thing to be master and adjudicator of all things beyond this

phenomenal world. What could it possibly be? [. . .] The state of all things as they spontaneously are of themselves has no cause and does not require any. 所以然者，非有故也。謂其有故，豈天地日月風雲之外，別有一物司其主宰，當是何物也？則自然者本無故而然。

At one point in the chapter “Knowledge Wanders North”, Zhuangzi states, “The bright is brought forth from the murky; the definite from the formless; the pure spirit-mind from *dao*. 夫昭昭生於冥冥，有倫生於無形，精神生於道。” Wang also comments, “There is nothing that accounts for the state of all things as they spontaneously are of themselves. 自然者之無所以然。”⁴¹ Wang echoes Zhuangzi’s mind perfectly.

Notes

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- 2 Xiaogan Liu 劉笑敢, “A New Interpretation of Laozi’s *Ziran* and *Wuwei* 老子之自然與無為概念新詮”, *Social Sciences in China* 中國社會科學, No. 6 (1996).
- 3 Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, “The *Ziran* of the Relationship between *Dao* and Things – On the Meaning of ‘*Daofaziran*’ 道與事物的自然 – 老子‘道法自然’實義考論”, *Philosophical Researches* 哲學研究, Vol. 8 (2010): 37–47.
- 4 Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On ‘*De*’ in the Philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi: New Thoughts on Several Issues 試論老莊哲學中的‘德’：幾個問題的新思考”, *Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences)* 湖南大學學報（社科版）, No. 4 (2016): 59–66.
- 5 G. S. Kirk, Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 43.
- 6 Roger Ames, David Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).
- 7 Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉, *Chinese Poetics* 中國詩學 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 2009), 203.
- 8 Aristotle, *Categories*, Shuchun Fang (*trans.*) (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1986), 11–15.
- 9 Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, “The *Ziran* of the Relationship between *Dao* and Things – On the Meaning of ‘*Daofaziran*’ 道與事物的自然 – 老子‘道法自然’實義考論”, *Philosophical Researches* 哲學研究, No. 8 (2010): 37–47. Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, “The Theory of Virtue and Human Nature 德性論與人情論”, in *Conceptual History in Daoist Theories* 道家學說的觀念史研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 2015), 270–290.
- 10 Baoxuan Wang 王寶琰, “Guo Xiang’s *Commentary on the Zhuangzi* and Possible Influences from Xiang Xiu’s *Commentary* 郭象莊註的改編及其與向註的混合”, *History of Chinese Philosophy* 中國哲學史, No. 2 (1993): 69–76.
- 11 Jing Chen 陳靜, “*Xingfen: Ziran* that Follows *Mingjiao*, On Guo Xiang’s Misinterpretation of the *Zhuangzi* 性分：符合名教的自然 – 論郭象對莊子的誤讀”, *Classic and Interpretation* 經典與解釋, No. 2 (2003): 239–258.
- 12 Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Lectures on Zhuangzi Philosophy* 莊子哲學講記 (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press 廣西人民出版社, 2016), 186, 188, 191.
- 13 Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Lectures on Zhuangzi Philosophy* 莊子哲學講記 (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press 廣西人民出版社, 2016), 188.

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- 15 Linhe Han 韓林合, *Roaming Externally to Obscure Internally* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016), 223–235.
- 16 Xiaogan Liu 劉笑敢, “A New Interpretation of Laozi's *Ziran* and *Wuwei* 老子之自然與無為概念新詮”, *Social Sciences in China* 中國社會科學, No. 6 (1996): 136–149.
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- 20 G. E. R. Lloyd, *Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 8.
- 21 J. S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2009), 68.
- 22 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 43–4.
- 23 Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, *Daoist Xingershangxue* 道家形而上學 (Shanghai: Shanghaiwenhuachubanshe 上海文化出版社, 2001), 193–194.
- 24 Xiaogan Liu 劉笑敢, “Three Meanings of Laozi's Concept of *Ziran* 老子自然觀念的三種含義”, *Philosophical Trends* 哲學動態, No. 6 (1996).
- 25 Guosheng Wu 吳國盛, “The Discovery of *Ziran* 自然的發現”, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 北京大學學報 (哲學社會科學版), No. 2 (2008).
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- 27 Diels-Kreanz, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, K. Freeman (trans.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), 22. (DK22B1).
- 28 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a1–a5.
- 29 Aristotle, *Physics*, II.1, 192b8–194b15.
- 30 Aristotle *Physics*, II.1, 192b28.
- 31 Aristotle *Physics*, II.1, 192b8–192b13.
- 32 Guosheng Wu 吳國盛, “The Discovery of *Ziran* 自然的發現”, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 北京大學學報 (哲學社會科學版), No. 2 (2008).
- 33 Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 10 & 11, R. G. Bury (trans.). (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1968).
- 34 Plato, *Laws*, 10.892B.
- 35 Guosheng Wu 吳國盛, “The Discovery of *Ziran* 自然的發現”, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 北京大學學報 (哲學社會科學版), No. 2 (2008).
- 36 G. C. W. Taylor (ed.), *Routledge History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Feng Jun 馮俊 (trans.) (Beijing: China Renmin University Press 中國人民大學出版社, 2017), 408.
- 37 Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, William McNeil (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 185.
- 38 P. Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, William McNeil (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 229.
- 39 Spinoza believed that God is nature, which is curious. Cf. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Xizeng Wen 溫錫增 (trans.) (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1963), 218. Wu Zengding 吳增定 points out that Spinoza rejects Aristotelian classical rationality and its order of being. See Zengding Wu 吳增定, *Spinoza's Rational Enlightenment* 斯賓諾莎的理性啟蒙 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press 上海人民出版社, 2012), 196–197. K. Schipper once said to me that Spinoza had access to textual materials

transmitted by early missionaries who had travelled to the East and was perhaps influenced by Chinese thought.

- 40 Martin J. Powers, "Symbiosis of 'Ziran' and 'Ziyou' in Chinese Philosophy and Art 中國哲學與藝術中“自然”與“自由”的共生”, *Journal of Nanjing University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 《南京大學學報》(哲學社會科學版), Vol. 51, No. 2 (2014).
- 41 Fuzhi Wang 王夫之, *Laozi Yan, Zhuangzi Tong, Zhuangzi Jie* 老子衍·莊子通·莊子解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 2009), 196–197, 262.

5 What is Daoist metaphysics?

Since our aim is to seek a better explanation of what Daoist metaphysics is, we must be cautious before we make any assumptions about what metaphysics means. In other words, in what sense do we ask the question, What is meant by “Daoist metaphysics”?¹ The following chapter will further our discussion with a detailed and comparative analysis of the essential characteristics of Daoist and Western metaphysics.

5.1

First and most importantly, the meaning of *dao* and *de*, which is at the core of philosophical Daoism, is consistent with “the study of the beyond form” (*xingershangxue* 形而上學) in the ancient Chinese sense, as it is told in the “Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change* 《易經·系辭》: “That which goes beyond form is termed *dao*. 形而上者謂之道。” This is because philosophical Daoism is a philosophical system that goes beyond *you* (having form and name) and focusses on *wu* (formless and nameless). Also, *dao*, *de*, and *wu*’s related concept cluster, including namelessness, non-purposive action, spontaneously self-so, and “natural propensity and the allotment of one’s life” (*xingming* 性命), definitely fall into the category of metaphysical concepts. Why is this so? Because the concepts of *dao*, (murky-)*de*, and so on have the idea of *wu* at their core, and they receive full interpretation only through the concept of *wu*. *Wu* includes the various aspects of formlessness, namelessness, and non-purposive action. Among these, namelessness and non-purposive action are the most significant. From a philosophical point of view, the theory of *dao* and theory of *de* in Daoist texts are metaphysical theories in the ancient Chinese sense, that is, the “study of what is beyond form”. In fact, there is no other theory that befits the name. The aforementioned idea of a concept cluster refers to a number of mutually distinct and inherently related concepts. The presence of concept cluster in Daoist metaphysics is a sign of theoretical maturity and systematization.

We have discussed in detail the concept of *dao*, whose fundamental character is conveyed by formlessness, imagelessness, objectlessness, namelessness, non-purposive action, non-obsessive desire, and “without an intransigent heart-mind” (*wuxin* 無心). Laozi, Zhuangzi, and their disciples also repeatedly emphasise that “[*d*]ao is constantly without name 道常無名” (ch. 32 of the *Laozi*), “[*d*]ao is dimly

visible and has no name 道隱無名” (ch. 41 of the *Laozi*), “[d]ao corresponds to no name 道不當名” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*), and “[g]reat-dao has no name” (“Dadao I” in the *Yinwenzi* 《尹文子·大道上》). These give us ample and convincing evidence of the formlessness and namelessness of *dao* in philosophical Daoism. Our present problem is how are we to demonstrate theoretically that *de* (including spontaneously self-so) is also a metaphysical concept. In other words, how are we to interpret and understand *de* from the perspective of *wu*?

It would be natural to begin by considering the meaning of *de* in the relationship between *dao* and *de*. However, it appears that the *Laozi* does not provide us with a clear account of this relationship. This fact, in itself, is worthy of consideration. Perhaps Laozi and Zhuangzi did not care to draw a clear and definite line between *dao* and *de*. We do find examples in the *Laozi* where these two terms are used interchangeably. It is said in “Xinshu I” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·心術上》 that “there is no gap between *dao* and *de*, and therefore users of these terms do not differentiate them. 道之與德無間,故言之者不別也。” Most contemporary scholars believe that the primary meaning of *de* is “those that are obtained from *dao*” or “what is bestowed by *dao*”. However, this interpretation is without strict textual evidence. The Warring States period commentary explaining that “the meaning of *de* is to have been obtained [from *dao*] 德者, 得也” is in fact imprecise and unreliable.²

If we consider the problem from another perspective, it is not difficult to note that since the time of Laozi, it is more customary than otherwise for Daoist thinkers to indicate what *de* is not, rather than what it is; for example:

It gives them life yet claims no possession; it benefits them yet exacts no gratitude; it is the steward yet exercises no authority. Such is called the murky-*de*. 生之、畜之, 生而不有, 為而不恃, 長而不宰, 是謂玄德。

(ch. 10 of the *Laozi*, cf. ch. 51)

Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs. The sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs. 天地不仁, 以萬物為芻狗; 聖人不仁, 以百姓為芻狗。

(ch. 5 of the *Laozi*)

The highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de*. 上德不德, 是以有德。

(ch. 38 of the *Laozi*)

Extensive-*de* seems insufficient; vigorous-*de* seems indolent. 廣德若不足; 建德若偷 (渝)。

(ch. 41 of the *Laozi*)

Since I am not entirely shameless in the face of *dao* and *de*, I venture neither to engage in the lofty deeds of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness nor in *de* based practice of perversity and excess. 余愧乎道德, 是以上不敢為仁義之操, 而下不敢為淫僻之行也。

(“Webbed Toes” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Can this way of thinking be understood as a method of negation? It hints at the character of *dao* and *de* not by stating what or how it is but by noting what it is not. More importantly, the notion of murky-*de* is in fact a concrete manifestation of the principle of non-purposive action. That is to say, *wu* is clearly a feature of *de*. The *Laozi* also implies that *de* is nameless. For example, why does *Laozi* repeatedly speak of the “nameless uncarved block” (*wumingzhipu* 無名之樸)? The “uncarved block” (*pu* 樸) is itself nameless, whereas the “vessels” (*qi* 器), as in the statement “when the uncarved block is carved up it becomes vessels 樸散則為器”, are never without names. In other words, the uncarved block goes beyond form, and the vessels have form. The “Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change* 《周易·系辭》 also states, “Those things that have form are called vessels. 形而下者謂之器。” We know that the notions of the uncarved block and *de* (namely, constant-*de* and murky-*de*) are internally related. They both point towards “nature”. Consequently, it is reasonable to believe that *de* (mainly murky-*de*) is nameless. On this, *Zhuangzi* has made two clear statements. The first one is “*de* is without form 德不形” (“This Human World” in the *Zhuangzi*). In clear terms, it states that *de* has no palpable form and is essentially formless. The second is that “*de* is severely undermined by getting a name for it 德蕩乎名” (“This Human World” in the *Zhuangzi*) or “*de* brims over by giving it a name 德溢乎名” (“External Things” in the *Zhuangzi*). This clearly indicates the unnameable nature of *de* and is the reason why *de* and “name” are repeatedly contrasted in the parallel sentence structure of the *Zhuangzi*. The “Jielao” in the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子·解老》 says,

It is generally the case with *de* that it accomplishes without purposive actions, achieves without obsessive desires, finds comfort without reflection, and becomes secure without considering the application of things. 凡德者，以無為集，以無欲成；以不思安，以不用固。

This is a clear example of using the reasoning of *wu* and the method of negation to elucidate the meaning of *de*. *Guanzi* offers his interpretation in the same vein when he says,

To have had its beginning without cause, such is *dao*; to have its end without limit, such is *de*. 始乎無端者，道也；卒乎無窮者，德也。
(“Youguan” and “Bingfa” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·幼官》 《管子·兵法》)

Commentators in history have found no agreement on whether *de* is *you* or *wu*. Although these various views have not always been clear, this issue deserves our present attention. Relevant passages by Yan Zun 嚴遵, Tao Hongjing 陶弘景, and Meng Anpai 孟安排 are included as follows:

Dao and *de* have no form and yet they reign over all, for they nurture a heart-mind that is not a fixed heart-mind. 道德無形而王萬天者，無心之心存也。
(Yan Zun 嚴遵, *Daodezhigui* 《道德指歸》)

So, it is known that, with the emptiness of the grand-emptiness, there is nothing that *dao* does not bestow; and that, with the *wu* of the perfect-*wu*, there is nothing that *de* does not grant. *Dao* accomplishes actively without purposive actions and judges all without being first among others; *de* establishes without palpable establishment and realizes the mature development of the form of all things without having busied itself. 是故知道以太虛之虛無所不稟，知德以至無之無無所不授；道以無為之為品於萬方而無首，德以無設之設遂萬物之形而無事。

(Yan Zun 嚴遵, *Daodezhigui* 《道德指歸》)

Things can be divided in kind between heaven and earth, but *dao* and *de* have no form. Classifiable things have their limits, but those without form have no finitude and end. 夫天地有類而道德無形。有類之徒，莫不有數；無形之物，無有窮極。

(Yan Zun 嚴遵, *Daodezhigui* 《道德指歸》)

Dao and *de* are empty and indefinite; spiritual illuminations are silent and indifferent. 道德虛無，神明寂泊。

(Yan Zun 嚴遵, *Daodezhigui* 《道德指歸》)

Dao and *de* are without form; it would be of no benefit to know them. 道德無形，知之無益。

(Tao Hongjing 陶弘景, *Zhenmingshou* in the *Zhengao* 《甄命授·真誥》)

The meaning of *dao* has *wu* as its mainstay, it cures all with the disease of *you*; the meaning of *de* has *you* as its mainstay, it gives order to a world confused by *wu*. 道義主無，治物有病；德義主有，治世無惑。

(Meng Anpai 孟安排, *Daodeyi* in the *Daojiaoyishu* 《道德義·道教義樞》)

Yan Zun's and Tao Hongjing's views are relatively clear. They both consider *dao* and *de* to be empty and *wu* in their function in the world. Meng Anpai's *Daodeyi* 《道德義》 theorises that the concepts and theory of *dao* and *de* are purposed and directed towards *you*, but he does not make clear whether *de* is itself *you* or *wu*. Wu Cheng 吳澄 believes that *dao* is an objectless entity (*wuwu* 無物), whereas *de* is "in between *you* and *wu* 有無之間", for it "seemingly has a name but is unnameable 雖若有名而不可名". "Things" (*wu* 物), as Wu Cheng says, refer to "phenomena that have form 形而下之器" and can be clearly distinguished. In essence, *dao* and *de* belong to a category of entities that are without form and without name, whereas entities that are so-called "within [the realm of things with] form 形而下" are those that have form and name.³

Now, let us briefly discuss spontaneously self-so, an important concept in the *dao* and *de* concept cluster, and consider why it is indeed a metaphysical concept. The primary meaning of the term "spontaneously self-so" is "things being or developing as such because of themselves". The reason behind its emergence in philosophical Daoism is profound. The ancient Greek term *physis* (often given the English translation "nature" and Chinese translation *ziran* 自然) and the Sanskrit

term *tathata* (commonly translated in English as “thatness” or “suchness” and in Chinese as “original nothingness” *benwu* 本無 and, later, “truth as it is” *zhenru* 真如) also have the meaning of “things being so as they are”, or as they are originally, and so share certain similarities with the Daoist term “spontaneously self-so”. In the *Laozi*, the states of being “unadorned” and “uncarved” are concrete manifestations of the concept of spontaneously self-so, as the former refers to cloth not yet dyed and the latter to wood uncut. However, it is worth noting that Laozi and Zhuangzi’s concept of spontaneously self-so is special in comparison to its Western counterparts, for not only does it imply an inherent inalterability by artificial influence (a meaning that is shared with the ancient Greek term *physis*), but it is also fundamentally nameless. Does Laozi not repeatedly emphasise that the “uncarved block” is ultimately the “unnamed uncarved block” (*wumingzhipu* 無名之樸)? Furthermore, spontaneously self-so cannot and should not be grasped via “name”. Whatever appears in the world of names is no longer “as itself is” (*ziran* 自然), for as soon as a name is given artificially to a thing that had been as it had been, its “self-so-ness” (*ziran* 自然) is torn apart and broken into pieces and is no longer spontaneously self-so, in the sense of being as itself originally is. In other words, whatever appears in the world of thought via names is no longer the same thing as it is and definitely is not that which is spontaneously self-so. Human knowledge and intellect ought to cease before the infinite quietude between the myriad things. Therefore, the concepts of namelessness and “knowing without knowledge” are two important bases for understanding the concept of spontaneously self-so. Is this not extraordinary? Further analysis shows that *dao* and *de* are also related to the concept of spontaneously self-so. Laozi’s proposition that “*dao* emulates the spontaneously self-so” (*daofaziran* 道法自然), meaning *dao* cannot go beyond or control the spontaneously self-so (ch. 25 of the *Laozi*), and Zhuangzi’s “*de* is that by which the myriad things live and grow 物得以生謂之德” (“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*) both hint at the idea that when we analyse and interpret the relationship between *dao* and the myriad things from the perspective of “natural propensities” (*xing* 性), the concepts of *de* and spontaneously self-so are indispensable.⁴ The ultimate source of the myriad things is *dao*, but *dao* does not bestow upon all things their shapes. Equally, as with “natural propensities” or the “nature of natural propensities” (*xingzhixing* 性之性) that is universally present in all things, nothing is bestowed or ordained by *de*. The relationship between *de* and the myriad things is merely such that the former is the abstract principle behind the “self-acquiring” (*zide* 自得) of natural propensities on the latter’s part. Perhaps this could account for the inevitability of the emergence of spontaneously self-so in Laozi and Zhuangzi’s philosophy. In this sense, the relationship between *daode* and the myriad things is certainly not one of participation, in the Aristotelian sense.⁵ It is instead a metaphysical relationship that is the product of philosophical thinking using “natural propensities” and the closely associated “heart-mind” (*xin* 心) as a starting point.⁶ In summary, from the perspective of *dao* or *wu*, spontaneously self-so receives an adequate interpretation only through the concepts of namelessness, knowing without knowledge, and non-purposive action. Seen from the perspective of *de* or natural propensities, spontaneously self-so forms the basis for

understanding Laozi's idea of "unadorned" and "uncarved" as well as Zhuangzi's idea of "genuine natural propensities" (*zhenxing* 真性). In other words, the concept of spontaneously self-so is an integral part of the meaning of *dao* and *de*.

It may now be observed that *dao*, *de*, and their cluster of concepts, including *wu*, spontaneously self-so, unadorned, uncarved, natural propensities, and allotment of one's life (*ming*), are metaphysical (i.e. "beyond form" *xingershang*) concepts. This also reflects the fact that the core thesis of philosophical Daoism is the study of the beyond form (*xingershangxue*). All metaphysical concepts share the implication of going beyond form; for example, "that by which it is so" (*suoyiran* 所以然), "that by which it accomplishes" (*suoyiji* 所以迹), "that by which things turn into things" (*wuwuzhe* 物物者), "that owing to which" (*suoyou* 所由), *de*, allotment of one's life, and natural propensities (including "truth" *zhen* 真, uncarved, and "infancy" *ying'er* 嬰兒) are all concepts that reach beyond formal circumscription, for they are concepts that are not delimited by form or defined by words. Admittedly, this conclusion is reached via a philosophical approach that belongs to the Chinese philosophical tradition. Nonetheless, since the founding of Chinese philosophy is the product of a wholesale academic transformation over the past century, and considering the relatively modern word *xingershangxue* 形而上學 (the conventional Chinese translation of the Western term "metaphysics") absorbed various important meanings from the Western word "metaphysics", it is necessary to consider similarities and differences between the "study of the beyond form" of philosophical Daoism and Western metaphysics.

5.2 *Xingershangxue* 形而上學 and metaphysics

We owe the elegant and ingenious translation of *xingershangxue* 形而上學 to the Japanese academic Inoue Tetsujirō 井上 哲次郎.⁷ His shrewd choice of words from ancient materials is now the conventional Chinese translation of "metaphysics".⁸ This section will examine the similarities and differences between the two terms as well as the philological implications of "metaphysics" in its original context in ancient Greek in order to consider the applicability of "metaphysics", in the Western sense, in interpreting philosophical Daoism. Clearly, my objective here is not to freely manipulate and interpret the concepts of *xingershangxue* 形而上學 and Western metaphysics to single out Daoist metaphysics as a superior thesis. Rather, I wish to extract the philosophical significance of the ancient maxim "That which goes beyond form is called *dao* 形而上者謂之道" ("Xici" commentary on the *Book of Change*) and the Western term "metaphysics" and use it to probe the essential characteristics of philosophical Daoism.

The *Metaphysics* was originally an untitled work attributed to Aristotle. Its title is derived from its bibliographical position immediately following the book *Physics* in a manuscript edited by Andronikos of Rhodos dated to the 1st century BCE, as the prefix "meta-" has the meaning "after". Since *Metaphysics* is an independent philosophical work separate from the *Physics*, its subject matter is different from that concerning phenomena of the physical world and the laws of nature. It goes beyond the world of observable occurrences and questions being qua being.

It should be noted that the philosophical approach applied in the pursuit of an ultimate and fundamental truth in the *Metaphysics* was inherited from that of pre-Socratic thinkers, or, in Aristotle's words, the natural philosophers. In other words, although the word "metaphysics" has its origin in the works of Aristotle, the idea and spirit of metaphysics can be traced to the pre-Socratic era. An inchoate form of this approach is found in Heraclitus's concept of *logos* and is further developed in Parmenides's "path of truth". Certainly, the emergence and development of metaphysics is inseparable from prior developments in physics (natural philosophy). In fact, neither Plato's conception of *eidos* nor Aristotle's conception of *ousia* is exempt from influences from the physical way of thinking. Aristotle's treatment of the problem of participation gives us a good example.

The significance of the concept *logos* cannot be overstated. Parallels can be drawn between *logos* and the philosophical Daoist *dao*.⁹ The first sentence in the Gospel of St. John in the New Testament reads, "*En archē ho logos*", or "*In principio erat Verbum*", which, in older translations into Chinese, is "In the very beginning there was *dao* 太初有道". In these texts, *logos* finds its Latin equivalent in *verbum* and its Chinese equivalent in *dao*. The pre-understanding at work in the Chinese translation is intriguing and evocative indeed, for, in my opinion, *logos* should be the more suitable Chinese equivalent of *li* 理 (principled understanding), while *li* and *dao* bear different meanings in philosophical Daoism.¹⁰ My question here is, Is it possible to trace back in intellectual history and compare pre-Qin philosophical Daoism with ancient Greek philosophy and make constructive progress by bridging the two philosophies that established two axial cultures?

The word *logos*, as it was used in the 5th century BCE, has meanings that must be referred to by various words in modern English. These include "discourse", "narration", "thought", "cause", "reason", "justification", "measure", "standard", "analysis", and "definition". But its most fundamental and important meanings are "discourse" and "(principled) narrative".¹¹ As carefully reasoned and crafted prose, *logos* is contrasted with *mythos*. The latter implies mythological narration and poetic fiction. While Homer's epics are *mythos*, Herodotus's *The Histories* is *logos*. While the worldview brought forth from chaos in myths corresponds to *mythos*, the Milesian account of nature (i.e. *peri physeōs*, or physics) corresponds to *logos*. In Heraclitus, "there is a profound connexion between the colloquial meaning (discourse) of '*logos*' and its technical meaning".¹² In other words, argumentative narrative, discourse and thought, and reason as well as principles and laws of nature are closely connected. Although Heraclitus's writings are entitled *On Nature (Peri Physeōs)*, his *logos* was not the primordial substance (*archē*) pursued by other natural philosophers, for Heraclitus's theoretical object is not part of the natural world. What is particularly important is that later Greek philosophy "turned from the study of the external natural world to the study of the content of thought, and again to the study of the true and false forms of linguistic expression itself".¹³ *Logos* is the articulation of rational thought and the representation of things as they are: Cosmic principles are represented by verbally articulated principles. Following Heraclitus, Parmenides of Elea proposed two ideas based on *logos* reasoning. He writes:

It is necessary that saying and thinking actually are.
 For being exists, and nothing does not exist.
 Χρήτὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἔδν ἔμμεναι·
 ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι, μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν·

(Parmenides, *Frag.* 6)

In this particular fragment, “are” and “being” (both being the same word *ein*) are the origin of the important concept of being, which later takes up an indispensable place in Western philosophy. The various forms of the verb “to be” mean “to effect or to actuate” and effectively function as the foundation of the word “is” and the noun “being”.¹⁴ The double meaning of “to be” implies that “that which is” is precisely “that which can be represented in language” or “that which is cognizable”. Parmenides’s theory of being (*to on*) was later absorbed by Plato, for whom *eidos* stands for objective being as well as that which is cognizable.¹⁵ Aristotle’s discussion of being qua being follows Heraclitus’s and Parmenides’s intellectual footsteps and analyses *ousia* in terms of a theory of predication.¹⁶ For Aristotle, *ousia*, a word closely connected to the verb “to be”, means “essence”.¹⁷ In the *Categories*, primary substances (*protai ousiai*) are defined as “those which are neither said of nor in any subject”. This definition lays down two requirements for *ousia*: A logical (grammatical) requirement, that *ousia* cannot be a predicate of other subjects, and a metaphysical requirement, that *ousia* cannot be manifested in (or dependent upon) other existing things. The fact that language and conceptual analysis are essential in the Western philosophical tradition has its roots in predicative logic, where the nature and essence of “what is” (being) are denoted by the linking verb “is” (to be). This explains why Heidegger went on to state that “language is the home of being”.

5.3

We have briefly compared the ancient Greek notion of metaphysics with the philosophical Daoist study of “the beyond form”, which serves as a foundation for further investigation of the characteristics of philosophical Daoist theory. This section will analyse a few thought-provoking problems and continue to reveal essential features of Daoist *xingershangxue*.

5.3.1

Both *logos* and *dao* carry the meaning “discourse”. Insofar as they both signify immaterial entities, they pertain to thoughts that go beyond limits circumscribed by the study of material objects, i.e. physics. Nonetheless, in spite of its partial similarities to *logos*, *dao* is fundamentally unnameable. “*Dao* is dimly visible and has no name 道隱無名” (ch. 41 of the *Laozi*) clearly indicates the namelessness of *dao*, whereas *logos* sets a cornerstone in the tradition of identifying thought (i.e. language) with being. This is to say that even if we consider *dao* to be comparable to *logos* (and the later *eidos* and *ousia*), in the sense that they account for the ultimate

reality of the world, it is clear that they developed and unfolded in distinctly different intellectual directions. Indeed, *dao* can never be subsumed under an analytical structure that is centred upon language. One may consider *dao* to be a conceptual equivalent of “that which is”, but it certainly cannot be interpreted and explained by means of the verb “to be”, which is an inherent and indispensable aspect of *logos*.

Close inspection of these philosophical discussions reveals that they inevitably invoke the fundamental philosophical problem of the relationship between existence (that which is) and truth, which each philosophical school has its own characteristic way of theorising about. From a comparative point of view, the *Chandogya Upanishad* of ancient India provides an important point of reference. Let us look at this line from the *Rgveda*:

Then, there was neither existence (is) nor non-existence (is-not).
नासंदासीननो सदासीत्तदानीं

(*Rgveda* 10, 129, 1)

The *Rgveda* is the oldest surviving document in India, mostly consisting of odes and songs to the deities of the Aryan people. This particular line shows that “a certain indescribable state of primordial origin is ‘forcibly put into words’” (*qiangyanzhi* 強言之, cf. ch. 15 and 25 of the *Laozi*). Clearly, the author of the *Rgveda* has a clear idea of the distinction between “is” and “is-not,” “existence” and “ceasing to be”. It is precisely for this reason that the author makes an arduous effort to go beyond that distinction to bring to his audience a portrayal of the state of the world before its very creation. The object of such a portrayal is itself beyond words. But since writing is the intended medium, his words are ultimately a step short of the intended effect, and the inexpressible is left unexpressed. This reflects a predicament faced by the ancient Indo-European peoples, whose languages have carried within themselves ambiguous meanings for the word “is”.¹⁸

The sixth prapathaka of the *Chandogya Upanishad* contains the notion “that by which we hear what cannot be heard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived, by which we know what cannot be known”. Its second *khavda* says,

“In the beginning” my dear, “there was that only which is, one only, without a second. Others say, in the beginning there was that only which is not, one only, without a second; and from that which is not, that which is was born. “But how could it be thus, my dear?” the father continued. “How could that which is, be born of that which is not? No, my dear, only that which is, was in the beginning, one only, without a second”.

तेषां खल्वेषां भूतानां त्रीण्येव बीजानि
भवन्त्याण्डजं जीवजमुदभज्जिमतिं
सेयं देवतैक्षत हन्ताहमामिसुतसिरो देवता अनेन
जीवेनात्मनानुप्रवशिय नामरूपे व्याकरवाणीति

(*Chandogya Upanishad*, 6, 2, 1–2)

Notably, both the *Chandogya Upanishad* and the *Fragments of Parmenides* involve three deep-seated problems that stem from “is” and “is-not”; namely, the correlation between “is” and “that which exists”, the correlation between “is” and “that which is true”, and that the correlation between what is thought and what is. Based on the identification of Brahman (the ultimate reality) with Atman (self, soul), the *Chandogya Upanishad* declares that “names correspond to all that there is, and language is greater than names, the mind is greater than language, and the will is greater than the mind”. This is where the *Chandogya Upanishad* differs from Parmenides. Nevertheless, the word representing “ultimate existence and truth (also good and beauty)”, सत् (*sat*) in Sanskrit, is also the present participle of the root of the verb “to be”. The implication is that “truth”, from its etymological origin, represents “that which is” or simply “is-ness”. The identification of being and truth methodically advanced by Parmenides is common knowledge to ancient Indian thinkers.¹⁹ This is a point where both the ancient Greek and Indian traditions differ from Daoism.

5.3.2

The idea of “being” or “that which is” in ancient Greek philosophy is importantly different from the Daoist idea of “things” (*wu* 物), for unlike the latter, “being” refers not to a palpable object in the external world and can only be “seen” with the mind’s eye. The question is, What can we discern from a comparison between *dao* and “being”? What are the similarities and differences? The study of being relies on the rational faculty of the intellect, but *dao* is not graspable via rationality. *Dao* is accessible only through an intuitive sensibility (*zhijuexing* 知覺性), which is often expressed by Daoist thinkers via terms such as “illuminations of the spirit-like mind” (*shenming* 神明). In comparison, the ancient Greek tradition takes the path of knowing entities “beyond form” with the rational powers of the mind, whereas the philosophers of *dao* reject the use of conceptual, deductive, and judgmental thinking and undertake a path to *dao* that requires a sensitivity to internal experience, declaring that “nothing compares to the illumination of the obvious” (*moruoyiming* 莫若以明). In this sense, ancient Greek philosophy, broadly speaking, orients itself towards the study of knowledge, whereas philosophical Daoism is oriented towards the study of heart-mind and natural propensities (*xinxinglun* 心性論). Ancient Greek thinkers endeavoured to replace *mythos* with *logos*, while Daoist thinkers did the reverse. This is the principal point of contrast between the two traditions.

5.3.3

From a comparative perspective, the concept of *dao* is in part similar to *logos*, Plato’s *eidōs*, and Aristotle’s *ousia*. The “study of *dao*” (*daolun* 道論) is also similar to Aristotle’s study of being qua being, i.e. metaphysics. This is because these entities are not perceivable via our senses. They are beyond physical form and are the foundation and root of all things. “Being”, which does not appear in physical

time and space, is different from an external object in existence. The way that *dao* differs from *logos* is such that it is unnameable (beyond the world of language) and unrationalisable. In this sense, *dao* is entirely un-object-like, utterly lacking in any aspect that belongs to the category of things. The history of philosophy shows that concepts and names that have a place in language also have the tendency to embody aspects of real, existing things. Perhaps this could also explain why Aristotle's *ousia* incorporates aspects of external objects. A. N. Whitehead writes, "The excessive trust in linguistic phrases has been the well-known reason vitiating so much of the philosophy and physics among the Greeks and among the mediaeval thinkers who continued the Greek traditions".²⁰ By contrast, the Daoist espousal of namelessness guards against the problematic intellectual inclination to find truth only in existing objects and to seek knowledge only in the world of language. In this regard, the paradigmatic profundity of Daoist philosophy is not to be overlooked.

5.3.4

It is to be recognized that there are concepts in ancient Greek philosophy that allude to our sensibilities in a straightforward manner. Plato's notion of *eidos* is etymologically connected to the verb "to see"²¹ and has the meaning "a complete thing that is seen", that is, the form (*morphe*) of a thing.²² From a philosophical Daoist point of view, form and name are inseparable aspects of a thing. In this regard, Plato's theory of forms is ultimately a physical theory, for it is inseparable from rational thinking and its principles, unlike *dao*, which is inaccessible via name and rational thought process.

5.3.5

Ancient Greek discussion of ultimate being has the tendency to distil an essence from particulars and accidents. Consequently, ancient Greek thinkers often treat being as an essence that is abstract from concrete objects, affairs, and phenomena. Plato's *eidos* and Aristotle's *ousia* both demonstrate this kind of essentialism in different degrees. This way of thinking stands in stark contrast with the Daoist maxim "There is no gap or border between *dao* and all things 道物無際".²³

5.3.6

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is intended as a separate pathway away from the study of natural philosophy, or physics. In this regard, Aristotle resonates in spirit with Daoist philosophy.²⁴ However, the discipline of ontology, which later became synonymous with metaphysics, has no comparable parallel in philosophical Daoism.²⁵ If we were to view the relationship between ancient Greek natural philosophy and ontology as being analogous to the relationship between the study of things and the study of *dao*, then one may note that ontology is a natural and logical extension of physics since it retains theoretical characteristics that have their origins in natural

philosophy.²⁶ By contrast, however, the Daoist study of *dao* transcends the world of physical objects and goes beyond form. It consciously severs all ties with the study of things, and, from a Chinese paradigmatic perspective, is more metaphysical (going beyond form) than its Greek counterpart.

5.4

The previous analysis and discussion show that the Chinese philosophical tradition, including philosophical Daoism, has no equivalent for metaphysics and ontology as they are understood by ancient Greek thinkers – namely, the philosophical tradition that relies on logic and language to study being through analysing “to be” and “that which is”. Nonetheless, even though the use of the verb “to be”, so ubiquitous in Western languages and in modern Chinese, is evidently absent in ancient Chinese texts, this does not mean that ancient Chinese thinkers did not invest their efforts in trying to answer important philosophical questions, including metaphysical ones in the Western sense.²⁷ In fact, despite differences in language, Daoist thinkers not only studied the natural philosophical (physical) problem concerning “that which is”, but they also studied, with great seriousness and profundity, and in a distinctive manner, the metaphysical (going beyond form) problem concerning “that which is but is not any *thing*”. By contrast, philosophical Daoism developed and, in a markedly different way, thought about and discussed the same problems that were studied in the Western metaphysical tradition; however, it seems that linguistic influence on thought has its advantages and disadvantages. Since Daoist thinkers, with tremendous awareness, avoided identifying “that which is” (*dao*) with “that which exists (as a thing)” (*wu* 物), they devoted ever greater resolve to understanding the nature of “that which is, but is not any *thing*”.²⁸ From the previous analysis, philosophical Daoism not only includes physics (natural philosophy) in the ancient Greek sense but has also advanced, in an idiosyncratic manner, its own study of “the beyond form” and ethics (the pursuit of a spontaneous and unfettered state of self-originating thoughts and actions, *ziyou* 自由). Does this not resonate strongly with the anti-metaphysical intellectual movement in Western philosophy over the past 200 years? As Ye Xiushan 葉秀山 points out succinctly, “‘*Dao*’ of the *Laozi* is an indicative sign that points towards that which ‘is’ yet ‘is not any thing’, and thus contains ‘nothing’, and must therefore be said of as ‘*wu*’, ‘vacuous’, ‘empty’, ‘at rest’”.²⁹ As such, the core philosophical Daoist thesis, the study of *dao*, is a comparable parallel to ancient Greek metaphysics. The Daoist *dao* is perhaps more radical in its pursuit of the metaphysical than the ancient Greek thinkers who questioned being (*to on*, *eidōs*, *logos*) on the basis of language and logic, in the sense that the Daoists had more clearly demarcated the territories of physics (whose subject matter is physical things and natural phenomena) and metaphysics (whose subject matter is *dao*). In comparison, Plato’s metaphysical conundrums of separation and participation are signs that his theory of forms had not separated itself from the physical way of thinking.³⁰ This means that we need not be overly modest in our discussion of Daoist philosophy, for we have the means necessary to provide counterpoints to Western scholars who, based on merely partial understanding, declare that ancient Chinese philosophical

theories had no metaphysical ideas.³¹ Instead, we should directly reference the ancient maxim “That which goes beyond form is called *dao* 形而上者謂之道” (“Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*) and apply the name *xingershangxue* 形而上學 to define the philosophical study of *wu* or, more specifically, that which is nameless and formless. Doing so means not only that the philosophical theories of Daoism belong to the discipline of metaphysics but also that *xingershangxue* 形而上學 constitutes the essential theoretical characteristic of philosophical Daoism. This is why I have chosen to use the expression “the study of the beyond form” to describe, characterise, and summarise Daoist philosophy. With the previous analysis, it is clear that the metaphysics of ancient Greece is different from *xingershangxue* 形而上學 in the Chinese tradition. The latter is ultimately more abstract. This is duly noted by Inoue Tetsujirō, who supplemented *xingershangxue* 形而上學 with two alternative translations: “[P]hilosophy pure and proper” (*chunzhengzhexue* 純正哲學) and “supra-physics” (*chaowulixue* 超物理學).³²

In summary, our consideration of the nature of philosophical Daoism references both the ancient maxim “That which goes beyond form is called *dao* 形而上者謂之道” (“Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*) and the study of metaphysics, i.e. theories of being qua being in ancient Greece. There are aspects of Daoist philosophy that are similar to the metaphysics of the ancient Greeks, but it also departs from the study of physical objects more radically, as *dao* is not delimited by form or defined by words. This is the most important interpretive key for understanding philosophical Daoism.

Finally, the principal subject matter of this book, the metaphysics of philosophical Daoism, can be briefly summed up as follows. The pluralistic and complex theoretical structure of Daoism can be summarised with an elucidation of *wu* and its related concepts. Concepts stemming from *wu* include:

- 1 Objectlessness, formlessness, and imagelessness, which are concerned with aspects related to physical theories (i.e. natural philosophy). It is characteristic of Daoist thought that *dao* and its qualities are grasped through a delicate unraveling of the contrastive relationship between *you* and *wu*.
- 2 Knowing without knowledge and namelessness, which are concerned with epistemological problems. These concepts provide a sharp criticism of the conventional veneration of knowledge and doctrinal values while also highlighting a special kind of wisdom (e.g. “illuminations of the spirit-like mind”) beyond our rational capabilities.
- 3 Namelessness and non-purposive action, which are essential qualities of murky-*de* and the cornerstones of Daoist ethics and political philosophy;
- 4 Non-purposive action and “without an intransigent heart-mind”, which transcend the conceptual world and help set a philosophical framework for a theory of spiritual state of attainment, which begins with a theory of heart-mind and practical wisdom.³³

From formlessness to “without an intransigent heart-mind”, such an advancement from cognitive to spiritual philosophy demonstrates how the Daoist

philosophical paradigms operate. To conclude, the Daoist study of “the beyond form” comprises the study of physics (natural philosophy), epistemology, ethics (including political philosophy), and ultimately a transcendent theory of spiritual state of attainment (*jingjiexingershangxue* 境界形而上學) based on the study of heart-mind and natural propensities. Among these subjects, the studies of heart-mind and natural propensities, practical wisdom, spiritual philosophy, and the characteristic theory of state of attainment are idiosyncratic Daoist disciplines. They form an important point of reference in contrast to the Western discipline of metaphysics.³⁴

Notes

- 1 Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 has written extensively and brilliantly on the definition, features, value, and significance of Daoist metaphysics. See Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, *Daoist Xingershangxue* 道家形而上學 (Shanghai: Shanghaiwenhuachubanshe 上海文化出版社, 2001), 1–28.
- 2 Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On ‘De’ in the Philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi: New Thoughts on Several Issues 試論老莊哲學中的‘德’：幾個問題的新思考”, *Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences)* 湖南大學學報 (社科版), Vol. 4 (2016): 59–66.
- 3 Cunren Liu 柳存仁, *Hefengtang Anthology* 和風堂文集 (Shanghai: Shanghaiujichubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1991), 263–264.
- 4 Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, “The *Ziran* of the Relationship between *Dao* and Things – On the Meaning of ‘*Daofaziran*’” 道與事物的自然 – 老子‘道法自然’實義考論”, *Philosophical Researches* 哲學研究, No. 8 (2010). Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, “The Theory of Virtue and Human Nature 德性論與人情論”, in *Conceptual History in Daoist Theories* 道家學說的觀念史研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 2015), 270–290.
- 5 It should be stressed that the relationships between *dao* and *de*, *dao* and *wu* 無, and *de* and *wu* 無 are not to be understood as one of partaking, in an Aristotelian sense. The interpretation of *de* as individuals “acquiring” (*de* 得) from *de* is to be set aside. Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Between De and Rituals – History of Thought in the pre-Hundred-Schools-of-Thought Period* 德禮之間 – 前諸子時期的思想史 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 2009), 57–61.
- 6 Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On ‘De’ in the Philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi: New Thoughts on Several Issues 試論老莊哲學中的‘德’：幾個問題的新思考”, *Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences)* 湖南大學學報 (社科版), No. 4. (2016).
- 7 Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎, *Philosophical Vocabulary* 哲學字彙 (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Third Division 東京大學三學部, 1881), 54.
- 8 Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, *Daoist Xingershangxue* 道家形而上學 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe 上海文化出版社, 2001), 7–8.
- 9 Fuya Xie 謝扶雅, “*Dao* and *Logos* 道與邏各斯”, *Lingnan Journal of Chinese Studies* 嶺南學報, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1929): 1–55.
- 10 Daoism clearly excludes knowledge and intention as being outside the essence of *dao* and thus differs from the Western philosophical approach. Xu Fancheng points out that knowledge and intention are both *logos*. That is to say, *logos*, in the Western philosophical tradition, commonly includes the two aspects of knowledge and intention. Cf. Fancheng Xu 徐梵澄, “Pondering the Unity of Great Wisdom 玄理參同”, in *The Works of Xu Fancheng* 徐梵澄文集, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2006), 170.
- 11 Xiang Lü 呂祥, *Epistemological Problem and its Predicament in Greek Philosophy* 希臘哲學中的知識問題及其困境 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1992), 21–26.

- 12 Xiang Lü 呂祥, *Epistemological Problem and its Predicament in Greek Philosophy* 希臘哲學中的知識問題及其困境 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1992), 21.
- 13 Xiang Lü 呂祥, *Epistemological Problem and its Predicament in Greek Philosophy* 希臘哲學中的知識問題及其困境 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1992), 24.
- 14 Taiqing Wang 王太慶, “How Do We Understand ‘Is’ in the West?” 我們怎麼認識西方人的‘是’?, *Xueren* 學人, Vol. 4 (1993).
- 15 *Logos* in Plato’s *Timaeus* 28A refers to the rational capacity of the human mind and is contrasted with *muthos*; namely, it is by virtue of *logos* that *nous* is able to approach *eidos* and to understand *onta*. Zhongmei Chen 陳中梅, *On Plato’s Poetic and Artistic Ideas* 柏拉圖詩學和藝術思想研究 (Beijing: The Commercial Press 商務印書館, 1999), 39.
- 16 Wang Taiqing 王太慶 also says, “This strand of philosophy which investigates ‘on’ is called ‘*ontologia*’, it uses ‘*onta* (being)’ for its name and we translated it with ‘*bentilun* 本體論’”. Taiqing Wang 王太慶, “How Do We Understand ‘Is’ in the West?” 我們怎麼認識西方人的‘是’?, *Xueren* 學人, Vol. 4 (1993).
- 17 Lü Xiang 呂祥 says that “the concept of *ousia* shows up frequently in Plato’s dialogues, but its meaning is hard to express. Generally speaking, *ousia* is what one means when he or she says ‘something is’. It is usually translated into English as ‘substance’. However, a more accurate translation would be *essentia*, which was rendered by early Latin authors (Seneca and Cicero), so it is more appropriately translated into Chinese with ‘*benzhi* 本質’ (which is what Chen Kang 陳康 did) rather than ‘*shiti* 實體’ or ‘*benti* 本體’”. Xiang Lü 呂祥, *Epistemological Problem and its Predicament in Greek Philosophy* 希臘哲學中的知識問題及其困境 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1992), 106.
- 18 Gang Bai 白鋼, “Ex Oriente Lux – on Oriental Elements in the Greek Spirit Ex Oriente lux 光從東方來 – 論希臘精神中的東方元素”, *Investigations in the History of Thought* 思想研究史, Vol. 6 (2009): 76.
- 19 For a more detailed discussion, see Gang Bai 白鋼, “Ex Oriente Lux – on Oriental Elements in the Greek Spirit Ex Oriente lux 光從東方來 – 論希臘精神中的東方元素”, *Investigations in the History of Thought* 思想研究史, Vol. 6 (2009): 76–77.
- 20 A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 2010), 17.
- 21 Scholars generally recognise that non-substantiality is an essential trait of *dao*. Kejian Huang 黃克劍 says, “Laozi’s pursuit of ‘*dao*’ has led him to metaphysics. It is not a metaphysics of substance but of value. It seems to involve every existing thing; yet it concerns the ultimate state-of-attainment which remains ever higher as we endeavour to reach it”. Kejian Huang 黃克劍, *From “Allotment” to “Dao” – Ten Lectures on Pre-Qin Philosophers* 由“命”而“道” – 先秦諸子十講 (Beijing: China Renmin University Press 中國人民大學出版社, 2010), 292.
- 22 Plato’s theory of forms is conventionally translated into Chinese as “theory of images” (*xianglun* 相論). Scholars have argued that *eidos* is better translated as “form” (*xing* 形) or “true form” (*zhenxing* 真形), for Plato’s forms are not an entirely abstract (objectless) entity. Zhongmei Chen 陳中梅, *The Study of Plato’s Poetic and Artistic Ideas* 柏拉圖詩學和藝術思想研究 (Beijing: The Commercial Press 商務印書館, 1999), 41, 69.
- 23 This idea will receive a more thorough discussion in the next chapter.
- 24 Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 asserts in his *Writings on Weijin Study of Xuan* 《魏晉玄學論稿》 that it was by Wang Bi’s 王弼 idea that “[w]u is the ultimate root-source 以無為本” that essentially transformed Han dynasty cosmology and developed it into an ontology (*bentilun* 本體論). This is an original and important insight, but it still remains to be seen in what sense Wang Bi’s *wu* 無 could be regarded as a root-substance (*benti* 本體). We will not expand upon this topic here.
- 25 The term “ontology” had its first appearance in the 16th to 17th century in the writings of Rudolphus Goelenius (1547–1628). Goelenius, as well as Wolff in the 18th century,

- considered “ontology” a synonym of “metaphysics”. Xinchang Ning 寧新昌, “The Metaphysics of Theories of State of Attainment from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist Perspectives 儒釋道視閩中的境界形而上學”, *Academic Research* 學術研究, Vol. 11 (2011).
- 26 Actually, parts of Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics* are the same; for example, Scrolls A and B of *Physics* discuss the questions of motion of substance and generation. This discussion is related to the content of Scroll A of *Metaphysics*. It can be said that *Metaphysics* strongly presents the characteristics of “post-physics.”
 - 27 From a comprehensive perspective, the linguistic and philosophical research on the copula *shi* 是 (to be) is both interesting and meaningful. For detailed research on this topic, refer to Li Wang 王力, “Prepositions in Chinese Grammar 中國文法中的繫詞”, in *Longhongbingdiaozhai Collection* 龍蟲並雕齋文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 2015), 237–297. A.C. Graham, “The Relation of Chinese Thought to the Chinese Language 中國思想與漢語的關係”, in *Disputers of the Dao* 論道者, Zhang Haiyan (trans.) (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社), 444–489. Yuzhi Shi, Ne Li 石毓智, 李訥, “The Formation Mechanism of the Word ‘Is’ 判斷詞‘是’產生的機制”, in *The Development Process of Chinese Grammar* 漢語語法化的歷程 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 2001), 12–32. However, I must point out that the Daoist metaphysical concept of “the *Dao*” or *non-being* does not have any connexion to the verb “to be”, which is commonly seen in Western literature and philosophical contexts. In other words, Daoist philosophers opened a new style or method of their own and developed a philosophical mode of thinking that has special characteristics. This also illustrates clearly that the brand of Western philosophy that came out of ancient Greek philosophy is *not* unique and unparalleled.
 - 28 Xiushan Ye 葉秀山, “Exchange on the ‘*Xingershang*’ Problem between East and West 中西關於‘形而上’問題方面的溝通”, *Chang and You* 場與有, Vol. 1 (1994).
 - 29 Xiushan Ye 葉秀山, “Exchange on the ‘*Xingershang*’ Problem between East and West 中西關於‘形而上’問題方面的溝通”, *Chang and You* 場與有, Vol. 1 (1994).
 - 30 This point is particularly poignant with reference to Leibniz’s theory of monads, which has eliminated all traces of the physical mindset.
 - 31 For example, Joseph Needham says, “Nothing in China corresponds to Berkeley and Bradley and nothing really corresponds to Plato, for it is only a *jeu d’esprit*, I think, to call Chuang Chou the Plato of China. In his literary manifestation this may pass, but the metaphysical ideas are just not there. [. . .] We have already said a word or two about the moral austerity of ancient or classical Confucianism, which was essentially a system of ethics and not in any way a metaphysic. The Confucian ideal was a state of social justice in so far as this could be conceived of within the framework of the feudalism of Confucius’s own time (sixth century BCE).” Joseph Needham, *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 62, 72.
 - 32 Zhongjiang Wang 王中江, *Daoist Xingershangxue* 道家形而上學 (Shanghai: Shanghaiwenhuachubanshe 上海文化出版社, 2001), 7–8.
 - 33 Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Lectures on Zhuangzi Philosophy* 莊子哲學講記 (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press 廣西人民出版社, 2016), 1–2.
 - 34 Lately, more scholars have devoted their energies to the study of heart-mind and natural propensities (*xinxinglun* 心性論), metaphysics, and the theory of state of attainment (*jingjie* 境界) under the Daoist tradition; for example Delin Ma 馬德鄰, *A Study on the Metaphysical Thoughts of Laozi* 老子形上思想研究 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe 學林出版社, 2003). Delin Ma 馬德鄰, “The *Laozi* and the Metaphysical Context in Early Chinese Philosophy ‘老子’和早期中國哲學的形上語境”, *Academic Monthly* 學術月刊, Vol. 7 (2003). Bo Wang 王博, “The Discovery and Establishment of *Wu*: Daoist Metaphysics 無的發現與確立: 道家的形而上學”, in *The Thought of Laozi and the Way to Survival for Mankind* 老子思想與人類生存之道 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2011), 3–11. Zheng Kai 鄭開, “Daoist Theory

of Heart-mind and Natural Propensities 道家心性論研究”, *Philosophical Research* 哲學研究, Vol. 8 (2003). Zheng Kai 鄭開, “Daoist Theory of Heart-mind and Natural Propensities and Its Modern Significance 道家心性論及其現代意義”, *Daoist Culture Study* 道家文化研究, Vol. 22 (2007). Anxian Luo, 羅安憲, *Empty and At Rest and Spontaneous Unfettered Wandering – Daoist Theory of Heart-mind and Natural Propensities* 虛靜與逍遙 – 道家心性論研究 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House 人民出版社, 2005). Anxian Luo, 羅安憲, “The Third Formulation of the Chinese Study of Heart-mind and Natural Propensities: Daoist Theory of Heart-mind and Natural Propensities 中國心性論第三種形態: 道家心性論”, *The Journal of Humanities* 人文雜誌, Vol. 1 (2006). Xinchang Ning 寧新昌, “The Metaphysics of Theories of State of Attainment from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist Perspectives 儒釋道視閥中的境界形而上學”, *Academic Research* 學術研究, Vol. 11. (2011). Xinchang Ning 寧新昌, “On Mou Zongsan’s Metaphysics of Theories of State of Attainment 試論牟宗三的境界形而上學”, *Journal of Foshan University (Natural Science Edition)* 佛山科學技術學院學報, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2011). Shiyong Zhang 張世英, “On Heidegger’s Metaphysics and Tao Yuanming’s Poetry 海德格爾的形而上學 – 兼析陶淵明的詩”, *Journal of Literature, History & Philosophy* 文史哲, Vol. 2 (1991). Shiyong Zhang 張世英, “How to Become a ‘Complete Person’ and an ‘Aesthetic Person’ 怎樣才能成為一個‘完全的人’‘審美的人’”, *Jianghai Academic Journal* 江海學刊, Vol. 1 (2012).

Part 2

From physics to metaphysics

Our main purpose in Part 2 is to accomplish two objectives. One is to further our understanding of Daoist metaphysics; the other is to trace the theoretical development from physics (natural philosophy) to metaphysics. I believe that a clear paradigmatic line is drawn between the natural philosophy of the pre-Socratic philosophers and the metaphysics-ontology of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Similarly, the physical “theories of things” (*wulun* 物論), including theories of *yinyang* and the five elements, Hui Shi’s 惠施 thoughts on universal truths, and all kinds of cosmological theories, are fundamentally distinct from the metaphysical “theory of *dao*” (*daolun* 道論), for it is a “study of ‘the beyond form’”. In this way, the relationship between theories of things and the theory of *dao* in philosophical Daoism parallels that between natural philosophy and metaphysics in ancient Greek philosophy. These theoretical advancements indicate a valid and promising direction for our inquiry and analysis.

Physics, which is also known as natural philosophy, has its origin in Aristotle’s *Physics*. Philosophical writings before Socrates titled *On Nature* (*Peri Physeōs*) were mostly works on physics in this sense. The principal subject of physics is *physis*. It investigates the essence and principle of motion, the *archē* of the universe, and how the world had come to be. In this regard, it is similar to “studies on the principle of the myriad things 論萬物之理” in the Daoist tradition that examine the “root-origin” (*benyuan* 本原) from which all things come to be and the “principle-order” (*lixu* 理序) that governs the birth, destruction, and transformation of all things. In fact, thoughts on physics and natural philosophy received rich and profound discussion prior to the Hundred-Schools-of-Thought period. Thoughts and theories such as *yinyang*, the five elements, and the six *qi* are essentially physical theories. Subsequent thinkers in the Warring States period merely added on to this long-established tradition of physical thoughts. Moreover, the notion of *dao* grew out of this important foundation, except it made the leap to a metaphysical theory. In other words, the Daoist philosophical theory of *dao* (i.e. “the meaning of *dao* and *de*”, in the words of Han dynasty thinkers) parallels the metaphysical philosophical tradition from Heraclitus to Aristotle in ancient Greece, just as Daoist “theories of things” (*wulun* 物論) parallel pre-Socratic natural philosophy. Similarly, just as ancient Greek philosophy grew out of and eventually departed from physics, Daoist philosophy also broke away from physics (natural philosophy) and established its own metaphysical theory.

Moreover, taking the interpretive approach of “from physics to metaphysics” helps to reveal essential philosophical characteristics of Daoist metaphysics. This interpretive strategy is, of course, hypothetical, as it superimposes itself upon ancient texts that are not themselves expressed in like fashion and structure. But it does not mean our interpretive hypothesis is unfounded. Also, in comparison with other “conventional” interpretive paradigms and theoretical divisions in the domain of modern philosophy, such as cosmology, ontology, and epistemology, our approach corresponds to the theoretical characteristics of philosophical Daoism with greater appropriateness and accuracy. In the words of Chen Lai 陳來, an essential objective for the study of Chinese philosophy in the modern era is to interpret ancient thought and “rephrase it in view of a Western philosophical terminology”. This objective cannot be successfully accomplished without due consideration of the intricately unique aspects of the Chinese philosophical tradition (or, in the case of this book, the Daoist philosophical tradition). It is with this thought in mind that we turn once again to the beginnings of Daoist and ancient Greek philosophy during the Axial Age and, upon gaining a fuller view of the thought and philosophical developments of the two traditions, reaffirm and commence using the concept of metaphysics to delineate key theoretical characteristics of philosophical Daoism.

To this end, let us begin by examining Daoist physics and study how Daoist thinkers went beyond physics into the realm of metaphysics.

6 Daoist physics

The notion of physics we use in the present context is the same as that in Aristotle's *Physics*. It refers to the study of *physis* in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, especially in the pre-Socratic period. It is generally believed that natural philosophers in the pre-Socratic period, including Parmenides, Zeno of Elea, and Anaxagoras, wrote works that are titled, or have been given the title, *On Nature* (*Peri Physeōs*). Natural philosophers debated about the identity, essential property, and principle of motion of *physis*. They did so with the method *logos*, including the use of conceptual analysis and deductive reasoning. They searched for the primary principle (*archē*) of all things and sought to explain the causal relations among objects in the world. This philosophical tradition lacked no disciples, as it received continued philosophical discussion beginning with Socrates. In Aristotle's education of his students, lessons in physics were given before metaphysics was introduced because, for Aristotle, physics (natural philosophy) was "second philosophy", while metaphysics was "first philosophy".¹ Even with the transformations brought about by modern scientific revolutions, natural philosophy has remained an important theoretical basis for modern physics. Great physicists, including Newton and Einstein, have shown a keen interest in discussing topics and problems concerning this subject. As such, we may observe that ancient Greek physics and metaphysics are two contrasting philosophical divisions. This is relatively clearly noted by Aristotle. Nonetheless, we must admit that for the early Daoist philosophers, the line between physics and metaphysics was not always clearly drawn. Daoist physics (natural philosophy) was often interwoven with Daoist metaphysics. Sometimes they were discussed as if there were no difference between the two. Therefore, although Daoist physics and pre-Socratic natural philosophy are similar in terms of their status and theoretical function, there are also important differences. Daoists are seemingly more interested in knowing more about natural phenomena and the natural order than Confucian thinkers. But even so, Daoist theories of nature do not pretend to some ultimate knowledge. They are auxiliary to the metaphysical theory of *dao*. In a sense, Daoist physics is not entirely constructive; it is merely a short transitional phase. From the perspective of theoretical development, it seems to cover the process of extension from physics to metaphysics that is found in ancient Greece. In this chapter, we will examine three aspects of Daoist physics: its stand on epistemology and knowledge, its view of and challenge to causality and deductive

reasoning, and its rejection of the atomistic worldview, before we consider philosophical Daoism's dismissal of physics.

6.1 The principle of all things: Physics in the epistemological context

“Principle” (*li* 理) is not discussed in the *Laozi*. Although Hanfeizi uses “principle” to explain and comment on the *Laozi*, it is but his own interpretation.² In the *Zhuangzi*, the “principle of things” refers to the natural order that governs natural phenomena and seasonal change. It is variously called “the principle of all things” (*wanwuzhili* 萬物之理) or “the principle of heaven and earth” (*tian dizhili* 天地之理):

Dao has no end or beginning, while all things come to be and perish. [...] The years cannot be held on to; time cannot be stopped. Waxing and waning, filling and emptying, each end is succeeded by a new beginning. It is thus that we describe the way by which all is appropriately so as they are, and discuss the principle of all things. 道無終始，物有死生。 年不可舉，時不可止；消息盈虛，終則有始。是所以語大義之方，論萬物之理也。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Heaven and earth possess vast beauties, but they do not speak of them. The four seasons have their observable regularities, but they do not discuss them. Each of the myriad things have their complete principles but they do not explain them. 天地有大美而不言，四時有明法而不議，萬物有成理而不說。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Evidently, “principle” is the principle of all things, including that which underlies the coming to be, destruction, and transformation of all things and the temporal order (orderly seasonal changes). It is in this sense that Zhuangzi says, “[E]ach of the myriad things have their various principles 萬物殊理” (“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*). The principle of the myriad things is the natural pattern that is present in the workings of heaven. However, Zhuangzi also says, “[T]he coming to be of things forms a principle that is called form 物成生理謂之形” (“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*), which means principle is dependent upon things (“form” *xing* 形). In other words, it is but the pattern and principle of material things and cannot be the essence or truth of *dao*. This distinction is very important.

Since all things in the universe are but a continuous stream of transformation, an inquiry into the causes of the beginning and end of all things must be made. In Zhuangzi's words, it is the “reason for the end and the beginning 終始之故”. On the surface, at least, such a question is within the scope of natural philosophy. Our question is, how does the natural philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* discuss and explain physics (natural order) and causality? Let us look at the first part of this question.

The distinction between *dao* and things is an Archimedean point for the Daoist theory of knowledge. The essence of the Daoist theory of knowledge is the intuitive

understanding of the truth of *dao* and the practice of it, whereas knowledge of the natural order is less important in comparison. Accordingly, especially with reference to the elaborate argument made at the beginning of “Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*, we can summarise the essential tenets of the Daoist theory of knowledge. Since *dao* and things are different, the ways of understanding and grasping them are also fundamentally different. Let us briefly put aside the fact that Daoism by and large puts great emphasis on the way of grasping the truth of *dao* and first investigate the theoretical assumptions in Daoist physics. There are two layers of truth pertaining to things in the Daoist worldview: Our sense perception informs us of the form and colour of an object, and we use the conceptual, deductive, and judgemental powers of our intellect to grasp the physics (the essence of a thing and its principle of motion) of a thing. However, these faculties of the intellect are incapable of grasping *dao* itself, which is the reason behind the Daoist doctrine of “renounce sageness and discard wisdom 絕聖棄智” (ch. 19 of the *Laozi*). More specifically, all things in the universe are things with form, and all principles of things are nameable principles. Since “that which turns things into things is itself not a thing 物物者非物”, *dao*, which cannot be seen or heard, cannot be comprehended via form and name like ordinary things. The most basic characteristic of *dao* is its formlessness and namelessness. Therefore, the way to grasp *dao* is “to find the centre of the turning ring 得其環中”, neither limited by form or name nor bound by a conceptual way of thinking based on forms and names (e.g. “something does it” *huoshi* 或使 and “no one does it” *mowei* 莫為). From this we can surmise that form and name are Daoist terms used in arguments (especially by Laozi and Zhuangzi) in making the distinction between *dao* and things. In fact, the Daoist theory of form and name also plays the important and meaningful role of establishing the mode of argumentation for the truth of *dao* and the principle of things. That is to say, the relationship between *dao* and things is located within the context and theoretical scope of Daoist epistemology. For example, the *Yinwenzi* says,

The great *dao* has no form, whereas all vessels with forms have corresponding names. Names are that which rectify form. Form is upright owing to name; therefore, name must not be amiss. [. . .] Name is that by which forms are named. Form is that which correspond to name. 大道無形，稱器有名。名也者，正形者也。形正由名，則名不可差。 . . . 名者，名形者也；形者，應名者也。

(“Dadao shang” in the *Yinwenzi* 《尹文子·大道上》)

This passage confirms that things with form and colour are nameable. They can be described and grasped through names and words, where form and name correspond to one another. Furthermore, names and words imply a way of thinking and understanding that is implicit in (or corresponds to) the use of language, by means of which we are able to recognise and distinguish various objects and affairs and apprehend their essential principles. In this sense, it belongs to a conceptual way of thinking or a way of cognising (understanding). Undoubtedly, conceptual reasoning

and intellectual operations are the “wisdom and artful contrivance” (*zhiquiao* 智巧) – including analysis, inference, conceptual and deductive thinking, and judgement – that is heavily discredited by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Broadly speaking, they also include value systems (such as consummatory conduct, *ren* 仁, and optimal appropriateness, *yi* 義) and social institutions (such as ritual and music) that are founded upon wisdom and artful contrivance. The *Yinwenzi* emphasises “name” (*ming* 名) and “separation” (*fen* 分) and argues that names and words originated from the distinguishing of the form and colour of things (such as black and white, square and circular, sweet and bitter, the *shang* 商 note and the *zhi* 徵 note). These forms and colours are the principles that are attached to the “form of things” (*wuxing* 物形). Therefore, when and only when conceptual reasoning and intellection are used to grasp and understand the principle and characteristics of things, the principles are recognised and grasped. Therefore, the principle behind the coming to be and destruction of all things, i.e. physics, is understood and grasped via conceptual reasoning and intellection. Only by placing the problem of physics in the context of epistemology can we deepen our understanding of Daoist physics (natural philosophy).

Let us first examine a particular example. At the end of “Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*, there is a conversation between Know Little (*shaozhi* 少知) and Vast Unbiased Harmony (*dagongtiao* 大公調):

Know Little said, “Within the four directions and the six realms, how does the arising of the myriad things come about?”

Vast Unbiased Harmony said, “*Yin* and *yang* shine on each other, injure one another, heal one another. The four seasons replace one another, give birth to one another, slaughter one another. Bridged between them there arise all sorts of desires and aversions, rejections and attractions. The joining of male and female, like paired halves, becomes a regular presence in their midst. Safety and danger replace each other, disaster and prosperity give birth to each other, leisure and haste grind against each other, aggregation and dispersal complete each other. This is the realm of which names and objects can be recorded, of which even the subtlest can be registered. The mutual ordering of beings as they follow in succession, the bridge-like circulation of beings as they move each other around, reverting when they reach exhaustion, beginning again when they come to an end – this is what belongs to the realm of things, what words can exhaust, what understanding can reach. It gets to the limit of the realm of things and no further. Those who see *dao* don’t follow after them when they perish nor trace them back to whence they arise. This is where speculation comes to an end”. 少知曰：「四方之內，六合之裏，萬物之所生惡起？」太公調曰：「陰陽相照、相蓋、相治，四時相代、相生、相殺，欲惡去就於是橋起，雌雄片合於是庸有。安危相易，禍福相生，緩急相摩，聚散以成。此名實之可紀，精微之可志也。隨序之相理，橋運之相使，窮則反，終則始。此物之所有，言之所盡，知之所至，極物而已。觀道之人，不隨其所廢，不原其所起，此議之所止。」

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In this passage, Know Little seeks to know the beginning and origin of all things in the universe. Vast Unbiased Harmony seems to speak fervently on the seemingly irrelevant topic of “name and fact” (*mingshi* 名實). The first half of his answer to Know Little’s question explains that the coming to be and destruction, end and beginning of all things, as well as the waxing and waning of prosperity and deficit, are problems given in and created by our intellection. In other words, conceptual reasoning and intellection (that pertains to name and fact) is responsible for not merely understanding but also the creation of the physics “within the four directions and six realms. 四方之內，六合之裏。” “Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi* says,

In the very beginning, there was nothing; no being, no name. Out of it arose one; there was one, but it had yet to have form. Things getting hold of it and coming to life is what is called *de*. Before things had form, that they had their allotments and were not cut off from one another is what is called the propensity of circumstances. Out of the flow and flux, that things were born, and as they grew, they developed distinctive shapes is what is called form. 泰初有無，無有無名，一之所起，有一而未形。物得以生，謂之德；未形者有分，且然無間，謂之命；留動而生物，物成生理，謂之形。

According to this view, physics (the principle of all things) arose after things took on forms. Viewed in conjunction with the passage from the “Zeyang” chapter, we can surmise that Zhuangzi incorporated all transformations of things into a universal process of “self-repeating succession of seasonal changes”. The order of “reverting when they reach exhaustion, beginning again when they come to an end 窮則反，終則始” is applicable insofar as one is concerned with the realm of things. This is why Zhuangzi says that “the limit of what understanding can reach is the limit of the realm of things and no further 知之所至，極物而已”，which means that conceptual reasoning and intellection go no further than the realm of things and physics. In sum, the phenomenal world is the physical world of *you* 有 (having name and having substance) that can be described, grasped, and understood by concepts and intellection. In the end, Vast Unbiased Harmony proposes a way of seeing *dao* and outrightly rejects the cognitivism of Know Little and his way of framing questions. Since Vast Unbiased Harmony’s way of seeing *dao* no longer searches for the answer to the problem of the end and beginning of all things in the infinite transformative process of the universe (“not following after them when they perish nor tracing them back to whence they arise 不隨其所廢，不原其所起”), he abandons the cognitivist way of thinking (“speculation comes to an end 此議之所止”) and fundamentally rejects (deconstructs) the question of “how does the arising of the myriad things come about? 萬物之所生惡起?” that Know Little proposes. On this, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 comments,

Focus your mind-spirit above all things and alone reflect on the centre of the ring. Perceive that all conditions are mysteriously impenetrable, and the four coming-to-be are insubstantial. Then what reason is there to be attached to that which turns things into things and to go after the causes behind the destruction

and origin of things? Words and speech are those that sever *dao*. Therefore, speculation comes to an end. 凝神物表，寂照環中，體萬境皆玄，四生非有，豈復留情物物而推逐廢起之所由乎！言語道斷，議論休止者也。

Nonetheless, Know Little remains unpersuaded and asks the following:

Between Jizhen's theory that "no one does it" and Jiezi's theory that "something causes it", which is true to the facts and which is a merely partial apprehension of how it all fits together? 季真之莫為，接子之或使，二家之議，孰正於其情？孰偏於其理？

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The dichotomy of “no one does it” and “something causes it” is a pseudo-question formulated by our intellection. In the pursuit of “the principle of heaven and earth and the true condition of the myriad things”, people are prone to falling into the erroneous trap of intellection either by assuming that there is an all-governing hand (natural order) behind the transforming phenomena of the myriad things or by assuming that there is nothing behind the myriad things (also negating the existence of that which is formless) and thereby negating a formless mode of existence that is beyond form. Are “no one does it” and “something causes it” examples of “the cunning of reason” or are they traps that spring from conceptual reasoning? Let us consider Vast Unbiased Harmony's reply:

We can go on splitting and analysing things further, until “the minutest reaches the point where there are no more divisions possible, the vastness reaches the point where it cannot be encompassed”. But even so, the theories that “something causes it” or “nothing does it” do not yet get out of the realm of things and thus in the end they fall into error. “Something causes it” implies something substantial; “nothing does it” implies a total void. Having name and substance characterizes (the world of) things; not having name and not having substance escapes (the world of) things. One can speak and think about the latter, but the more one talks the further off one gets. 斯而析之，精至於無倫，大至於不可圍，或之使，莫之為，未免於物，而終以為過。或使則實，莫為則虛。有名有實，是物之居；無名無實，在物之虛。可言可意，言而愈疏。

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The essence of this passage is pointing out that both “no one does it” and “something causes it” “don't get out of the realm of things 未免於物” and “occupy but one corner of the realm of things 在物一曲”, and therefore they “fall into error in the end 終以為過”. In fact, “no one does it” and “something causes it” are the commonest mistakes of intellection. In the this passage, Vast Unbiased Harmony sees the substantiality of “something causes it” and the vacuity of “nothing does it” as pseudo-problems of name and substance (problems formulated by conceptual reasoning). Whether it “has name and substance” or is “without name or

substance”, the problem arises as it is given in expressible and cognisable terms. The discussion here involves the relationship between speech and thought, and we could benefit from referencing a passage from “Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*, which is also on the topic of “the minutest reaches the point where there are no more divisions possible, the vastness reaches the point where it cannot be encompassed 精至於無倫，大至於不可圍”:

Both the minute and the coarse are limited to the (realm of things with) definite form. What has no form can be distinguished by no quantities; what cannot be encompassed can be exhausted by no quantities. What can be discussed in words are the coarser aspects of things. What can be considered in the mind are the minute aspects of things. But what words cannot describe and thought cannot reach cannot be determined as either minute or coarse. 夫精粗者，期於有形者也；無形者，數之所不能分也；不可圍者，數之所不能窮也。可以言論者，物之粗也；可以意致者，物之精也；言之所不能論，意之所不能察致者，不期精粗焉。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Simply put, *dao*, which is beyond the realm of things with definite form or, in other words, “knowledge” of that which has no form or substance, cannot be known or grasped through intellectual analysis. Our perceptual and intellectual powers are limited to objects in the realm of things, for intellection and its operations can only be applied to the world of things and are inapplicable to the world of *dao* (the realm of “the beyond form”). From this perspective, both “something causes it” and “no one does it” arise from the intellectual mode of thinking. This also reveals the limitations of intellection as well as deductive thinking, which seeks after the causes behind the destruction and beginning of all things.³ Vast Unbiased Harmony continues:

These theories that “something causes it” or “nothing does it” are merely crutches for your doubt to lean on. I gaze at its root, and its antecedents go back without end; I seek its furthest developments, and their coming stretches on without stop. Having no end and no stop – these are but the “infinitudes” of language and thus share the same principle with that of the realm of things. “Something causes it” and “no one does it” are at the very root of language. They begin as things begin, and end at things’ end. *Dao* cannot be considered an existent thing, nor can it be considered a non-existent thing. The name “*dao*” is what we avail ourselves of so as to walk it. “Something causes it” or “nothing does it” each occupy but one corner of the realm of things. What do they have to do with the vast directions of the world? 或之使，莫之為，疑之所假。吾觀之本，其往無窮；吾求之末，其來無止。無窮、無止，言之無也，與物同理；或使、莫為，言之本也，與物終始。道不可有，有不可無。道之為名，所假而行。或使莫為，在物一曲，夫胡為於大方？

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 borrows the Madhyamaka concept of not-two, or not *you* and not *wu*, to formulate the following interpretation: “*Dao* cannot be considered an existent thing, nor can it be considered a non-existent thing. 道不可有，有不可無。” It is a clever interpretation. Guo Xiang 郭象, being a keen advocate of the notion of spontaneously self-so, naturally favours Jizhen’s theory of “nothing causes it”.⁴ The latter denies the existence of anything that governs the phenomenal world and could be seen as of the *wu* view; by contrast, “something does it” can be seen as of the *you* view. Each of these views sees only one side of the problem, which is the result of being entrenched behind the distinction of *you* and *wu* – a dichotomy guided by conceptual reasoning and intellection that results in a pseudo-problem.

In summary, the scope of applicability of intellection is limited only to things. A thing’s quality and its principle of motion correspond to the perceptual and intellectual faculties of the mind. The fundamental limitation of intellection is that it attempts to understand physics via the observable qualities of things and does not see the formless *dao* beyond the realm of things with form. Moreover, Zhuangzi makes explicit the deep-seated paradoxes inherent to intellection and reveals the limitations of perceptual thinking and intellection (e.g. the apparent dichotomies of *you* and *wu*, end and beginning, “nothing causes it” and “something does it”). For example, attempting to seek the cause of the origin of all things is meaningless because this pursuit is itself an inherent yet mistaken path belonging to conceptual reasoning and intellection. Through the previous discussion in the epistemological context, we can see, on the one hand, that physics in Zhuangzi’s philosophy does not completely conform to the aims and standards of *logos* in ancient Greek natural philosophy; on the other hand, it is not entirely the “all-encompassing natural order by which all things exist, develop, and transform” that we customarily use to interpret ancient philosophy. It is at most merely the principle of things and is ultimately distinct from *dao*. Only *dao* is comparable to *logos* in ancient Greece.

6.2 Beginnings and ends are without cause: Challenging causal problems

From the point of view of the *Zhuangzi*, physics (natural order) designed and formulated by conceptual reasoning and intellection is not necessarily reliable. At the very least, it is not the ultimate truth that Daoist thinkers seek. As such, what is the significance of causality (*gu* 故), which is the backbone of the notion of the natural order? In fact, negating causal principles in the realm of things is one of the main purports of the *Zhuangzi*’s natural philosophy. Over the past century, academics who study Chinese philosophy and have been deeply influenced by Western philosophical terminologies and language usually believe that the *dao* of Daoism is the principle of all things, i.e. the most basic and universal order and the most fundamental origin and source by which all things grow and develop. This understanding is not as clear as it can be. Although this interpretation is not completely mistaken, it is, at best, imprecise.

What kinds of knowledge are achieved via perception and intellection? Generally, Daoist thinkers believe that perception and intellection grasp only the

knowledge of things, including the physical order, mostly equivalent to Aristotle's understanding of physics. Nonetheless, even though the natural philosophies of both the Daoists and ancient Greeks seek to account for the source and origin of all things in the universe, they are ultimately different. As per the *Zhuangzi*, the root-source of all things is not a minute and basic elementary substance, nor is it an abstract formal order that conceals itself behind all material things. Is what is called the "minute" (*jing* 精) the source-origin and elementary substance of all things?⁵ Are *dao* and "principle" at work behind the realm of things? Let us consider two passages from the *Zhuangzi* to seek our answer. The first passage is the opening paragraph of "The Turnings of Heaven" chapter:

Does heaven turn? Does the earth sit still? Do sun and moon compete for a place to shine? Who masterminds all this? Who pulls the strings? Who, resting inactive himself, gives the push that makes it go this way? I wonder, is there some mechanism that works it and won't let it stop? I wonder if it just rolls and turns and can't bring itself to a halt? Do the clouds make the rain, or does the rain make the clouds? Who puffs them up, who showers them down like this? Who, being without much initiative himself, stirs up all this lascivious joy? The winds rise in the north, blowing now west, now east, whirling up to wander on high. Whose breaths and exhalations are they? Who, without an agenda himself, huffs and puffs them about like this? What causes these to be so? 天其運乎? 地其處乎? 日月其爭於所乎? 孰主張是? 孰維綱是? 孰居無事推而行是? 意者其有機緘而不得已邪? 意者其運轉而不能自止邪? 雲者為雨乎? 雨者為雲乎? 孰隆施是? 孰居無事淫樂而勸是? 風起北方, 一西一東, 有上彷徨, 孰噓吸是? 孰居無事而披拂是? 敢問何故?

("The Turnings of Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*)

The questions that are raised and the thoughts and emotions they evoke are worth pondering, especially the fact that these questions culminate at last upon the question, "What causes these to be so? 敢問何故?" The mention of "cause" (*gu* 故) is of special interest here. Cause implies a causal relation between affairs. It seems the word can also be extended to signify the causal order of all things, i.e. causality. "Cause" appears frequently in the Mohist texts. It refers to the cause or reason behind a thing or an affair. However, in reading *Zhuangzi*'s discussion of it, he seems to deeply question this kind of cause. When *Zhuangzi* discusses things (*wu* 物), he says,

[The world of] things is such that there is no end to its magnitude; no stop to its temporal duration; no constancy to its divisions; its beginning and end has no cause. 夫物, 量無窮, 時無止, 分無常, 終始無故。

("Autumn Floods" in the *Zhuangzi*)

Since Laozi, the Daoist School considers *dao* to be the root-source of all things but also emphasises the notion of spontaneously self-so. It does not believe that *dao* rules over or governs the myriad things. On the contrary, it tends to believe that the myriad things come to be and transform owing to causes inherent to

themselves. The active force that drives the myriad things is also within the individuals themselves, not external to them. The *Zhuangzi* hesitantly indicates that “it seems there is some great controller behind it all. 若有真宰” (“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*) and expresses an ambivalent attitude towards the existence of an all-governing entity behind the myriad things. The *Zhuangzi*’s persistent suspicion and harsh critique of “something causes it” and “no one does it” also seek to strengthen this intellectual tendency. It can be said that Zhuangzi’s profound scepticism over “something causes it”, i.e. the existence of an all-governing ruler behind the myriad things, directly led him to reject causality (*gu* 故). From the point of view of *dao*, all things are as they are because of themselves; there was never any cause to begin with. It ought to be observed that the thought of the *Zhuangzi* is both profound and self-contradictory. It places itself in the tension between two parallel intellectual tendencies: On the one hand, *dao* is the ultimate cause or principle behind all things, formless and unperceivable; on the other hand, *dao* is not the ultimate cause of all things, and there is no causality to start with in the beginning. Zhuangzi’s thought contains these two different intellectual tendencies. Guo Xiang 郭象 extracts the latter tendency and expands upon the notion of spontaneously self-so. For this, he is worthy of being said to have “grasped the principles of Zhuangzi in an extraordinary fashion 特會莊生之理” (Lu Deming 陸德明, *Jingdianshiwen* 《經典釋文》).

What is the reason behind Zhuangzi’s scepticism regarding cause and his tendency, to a certain extent, to deny its existence altogether? Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 sharp words provide an acute answer: “That which is self-so is such and becomes such without cause. 自然本無故而然。” That is to say, there is not “one thing that governs as the ruler of [all things] 一物司其主宰” in nature.⁶ To Western thinkers who are used to the quest for the origin and essence of the universe, such a notion would certainly strike them as quite odd. From Zhuangzi’s point of view, “cause”, “something causes it”, and “reason for it being so” are problematics formulated by intellection, corresponding to knowledge of things in accordance with the intellectual mode of thinking. In a certain sense, Zhuangzi’s essential statement is “an emphasis on the fact that rationality (or more properly, intellection) attains knowledge within the bounds of the realm of phenomena, and thus refuses to admit to the existence of that which is behind phenomena and determines phenomena”.⁷ As such, Zhuangzi’s scepticism and rejection of cause are in essence scepticism and rejection of the intellectual mode of thinking, including its way of questioning and its contents. With this, Zhuangzi strives to go beyond the world of things and to approach *dao*. Or, in other words, he seeks to sweep away knowledge by intellection in order to embark upon knowledge of the metaphysical (beyond form) kind. This is the vital key to the problem.

Philosophy always asks why. In this sense, philosophical questions are often those that are at the bottom when one seeks to get to the bottom of things. Such a bottom is often seen as the cause behind phenomena or the “reason why” over and above all things in the universe. However, Zhuangzi disagrees. He denies that *dao* is in any way governing the order of things in the world, and he is highly sceptical of a reason behind the universe. One of Zhuangzi’s favourite lines is “How do you

know that to be so? 奚以之其然也? ” From Zhuangzi’s point of view, seeking a reason for the world as it is is utterly pointless because things with form are brought forth from that which is formless: “The myriad things [. . .] succeed one another in different bodily forms 萬物 以形相禪” (“Imputed Words” in the *Zhuangzi*). All is but a process that is constituted by individual spontaneous self-transformations. There is nothing to indicate that there is an invisible hand behind it all. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* is dotted with phrases such as “one does not know how it is so 不知其然也”, “one does not know how such has come to be 不知其所有”, and “one does not know why it is so 不知其所以然”. The unknowability of things-in-themselves in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy is similarly directed against the limitations of intellection. Zhuangzi and Kant are millennia and thousands of miles apart, yet how similar are their thoughts?

The second passage that I wish to direct our attention to is extracted from the “Equalizing Assessments of Things” chapter:

There is a moment of beginning [of all things in the universe]. There is a time when the first beginning had not yet come to be. There is a time when there was not yet the time when the first beginning had not yet come to be. There is existence. There is nonexistence. There is a time when neither existence nor nonexistence had come to be. There is a time when there was not yet a time, when neither existence nor nonexistence had come to be. All of a sudden, there is [this division] between existence and nonexistence. Still, how does one attempt to learn whether the result of this [division between] existence and nonexistence is substantial or empty? 有始也者，有未始有始也者，有未始有夫未始有始也者。有有也者，有無也者，有未始有無也者，有未始有夫未始有無也者。俄而有無矣，而未知有無之果孰有孰無也？

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Previous interpreters have debated the exact meaning of this passage and have invariably been confused by the surface meaning of the words. Argumentation in philosophical Daoism typically uses the literary tactic of “expressing truth in seemingly paradoxical language 正言若反”. Considering the tone of this passage, we can surmise that Zhuangzi is not arguing in the direction of the affirmative, but of the negative. This view is supported by the fact that if we see it as arguing in the affirmative, it concludes with a self-contradiction that vitiates the logic of Zhuangzi’s thought. In other words, Zhuangzi intends to show that the intellectual quest for the origin of all things inevitably results in an infinite regress from which there is no escape. The *Zhuangzi* firmly rejects the limitations imposed by blind misuse of the intellectual mode of questioning that includes “deduction” (*tui* 推). Deduction is proudly practised by the Warring States period thinker Zou Yan 鄒衍 and is also revered by Confucians, who argue for the method of “know that which is far away by studying that which is near 以近知遠”. They often pride themselves on being “excellent at deduction 善推”. However, in Zhuangzi’s view, such methods of intellection ought to be criticised and discarded. The distinction and dichotomy of *you* and *wu* (including “having a beginning 有始” and “not having a beginning 無始”)

are also products of intellection and are principles of categorisation and understanding that correspond to the intellectual mode of thinking. Such a mode of thinking is consistently opposed by Daoist thinkers. In Zhuangzi's view, questioning by means of intellection invariably leads to infinite regress. And what is the meaning of this kind of questioning that leads one no further towards the answer, but only in a vicious circle? Questioning thus sets one on a stray path that is guided by an "ignorance of the utmost beginning 不知太初". Seen from this perspective, the *Huainanzi's* 《淮南子》 interpretative extension of the earlier passage from "Equalizing Assessments of Things" in the *Zhuangzi* is peculiar, for it explains the latter's argument of the unknowable and undeducible nature of the beginning of the universe in terms of various stages in the primordial development of the universe. It states:

There was a time before there was not yet a beginning. (At that time,) heaven engulfed harmony, which had yet to fall; earth embraced *qi*, which had yet to rise. Empty, silent, and at rest, *wu* and *you* were about the same. *Qi* then flowed unobstructed in that which obscures obscurity. [. . .] There was a time before there was not yet *you* and *wu*. (At that time,) heaven and earth were not yet divided, *yin* and *yang* were not yet separated. Division and separation were mixed. The four seasons were not yet differentiated. The myriad things had yet to come to be. Enormously peaceful and tranquil, silent and limpid, the form (of the world) was not to be seen. It was as if light had shined upon the slit between *you* and *wu*, and then took leave and had gone away. 有未始有夫未始有有始者，天含和而未降，地懷氣而未揚，虛無寂寞，蕭條霄霏，無有仿佛，氣遂而大通冥冥者也 有未始有夫未始有有無者，天地未剖，陰陽未判，四時未分，萬物未生，汪然平靜，寂然清澄，莫見其形，若光耀之間於無有，退而自失也。

(“Chuzhenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·俶真訓》)

In succeeding passages, the *Huainanzi* explains the meaning of “there was a beginning 有始者”, “there was not yet a beginning 有未始有有始者”, “there was a time before there was not yet a beginning 有未始有夫未始有有始者”, “there was *you* 有有者”, and “there was *wu* 有无者”. Based on this structure, there is reason to believe that there are words that were lost in the repeated transcription of the text. The first two sentences should read:

There is “beginning”. There is “not yet a beginning”. There is (a time when there is) not yet “beginning or not yet a beginning”. There is (a time) before “there is (a time when there is) not yet ‘beginning or not yet a beginning’”. 有“始”也者，有“未始”也者，有未始有“始、未始”也者，有未始夫未始有“有未始有‘始、未始’”也者。

As such, this revised passage has a full formal correspondence with the sentences that follow: “There is ‘*you*’. There is ‘*wu*’. There is (a time when there is) ‘not yet *you* or *wu*’. There is (a time) before ‘there is (a time when there is) ‘not yet *you* or *wu*’”. “Chuzhenxun” in the *Huainanzi* explains the *Zhuangzi's* argument of

the unknowable and undeducible nature of the beginning of the universe in terms of various stages in the primordial development of the universe. For example, it explains that “there was a time before there was not yet a beginning 有未始有夫未始有有始者”, referring to a state of primordial development when “heaven engulfed harmony that had yet to fall 天含和而未降” and “*qi* then flowed unobstructed in that which obscures obscurity 氣遂而大通冥冥者也”; and “there was a time before there was not yet *you* and *wu*” is a state of being when

heaven and earth were not yet divided, *yin* and *yang* were not yet separated. Division and separation were mixed. The four seasons were not yet differentiated. The myriad things had yet to come to be. (The world was) enormously peaceful and tranquil, silent and limpid. 天地未剖，陰陽未判，四時未分，萬物未生，汪然平靜，寂然清澄。

It ought to be said that the *Huainanzi*'s interpretation deviated from the thought of Zhuangzi. It is inaccurate and can easily lead to misunderstanding. In sum, if we are to consider the matter “from the perspective of *dao* 以道觀之”, according to philosophical Daoism, *you* and *wu* cannot be severed, separated, and viewed as two unrelated objects. This also shows that the intellectual mode of understanding is inadequate to the quest for an understanding of the origin of the universe. Zhuangzi argues:

The ancients (were aware that they) had knowledge that reaches a certain point. Why seek to know all? Some held that before the beginning there were things. This was perfect and complete. Nothing could be added to this thought. Lesser were those who held that there had always been things, and before the beginning there were divisions. Still lesser were those who held that there had always been divisions, and before the beginning there were rights and wrongs. 古之人，其知有所至矣。惡乎至？有以為未始有物者，至矣盡矣，不可以加矣。其次以為有物矣，而未始有封也。其次以為有封焉，而未始有是非也。

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The tone of this passage is sarcastic. In Zhuangzi's view, *dao* “has never had divisions 未始有封”. What does it mean for *dao* not to have divisions? First, it means that *dao* is all-embracing and omnipresent. Second, *dao* is indivisible; that is to say, it cannot be approached via any kind of distinction, including *you* and *wu*, end and beginning.

Problematics such as *you* and *wu*, end and beginning (i.e. the intellectual mode of understanding) cannot provide a basis for seeking the ultimate origin of the universe. This is the essential notion of Daoist physics (natural philosophy). It continues its resonance and echoes in the *Liezi* 《列子》:

Yin Tang asks Xia Ge, “Were there things in the primordial beginning?” Xia Ge says, “If in the primordial beginning there was nothing, how come there

are things today? If someone in the future should say that now there is nothing, is that acceptable to you?" 殷湯問於夏革曰：“古初有物乎？夏革曰：“古初无物，今惡得物？後之人將謂今之无物可乎？”

(“Tangwen” in the *Liezi* 《列子·湯問》)⁸

Was there any thing in existence at the beginning of the world in antiquity? In other words, what is the origin of the myriad things in the universe? Obviously, this is a question typical of natural philosophy. To answer this question, one has to trace back the temporal order and begin one’s consideration from the starting point when the universe first comes to be. Therefore, this question can also be converted to a question of past and present. Laozi says, “[H]old fast to the *dao* of antiquity in order to keep in control the realm of today. 執古之道，以御今之有。” (ch. 14 of the *Laozi*). However, Zhuangzi’s view differs from Laozi’s and is perhaps more profound. Notably, using information from the present moment to argue for what must be the case in the past and using information from a limited scale and scope to deduce beliefs about things at large are methods formulated by the intellectual mode of thinking. If Yin Tang 殷湯 continues his inquiry in this manner, Xia Ge will be unable to give an answer. Sure enough, following the passage quoted earlier, Yin Tang continues his inquiry: “In that case, is there no successive order to the coming to be of things? 然則物無先後乎？” Clearly, Yin Tang has come up with his inquiry based on the theoretical adherence to the notion “*dao* has no end or beginning; while all things perish and come to be 道無終始，物有死生”. As Yin Tang has pointed out, since things have existed in the past and they exist at present, does this, then, imply the existence of so-called physics (reality of temporal succession)? What is the principle of perishing and coming to be of things in time? Let us look at Xia Ge’s answer:

Xia Ge says, “In the beginning, the perishing and coming to be of things had no definite order and limit. (A thing’s) coming to be may also be its end; its end may also be its coming to be. How is one to learn its order? However, beyond the realm of things and prior to events in time, I do not know. 夏革曰：“物之終始，初無極已。始或為終，終或為始，惡知其紀？然自物之外，自事之先，朕所不知也。”

The transformation, perishing, and coming to be of things cannot be summed up with a definite order or limit. After all, in Zhang Zhan’s 張湛 words, “the perishing and coming to be (of things) follow one another such that the two are inseparable. 終始相循，竟不可分。” Therefore, when Xia Ge 夏革 answers the question of whether or not there is successive order in the coming to be of things, he gets to the negative answer of “How is one to learn its order? 惡知其紀？” He suspends the entire physical order (*ji* 紀) categorically. This seems to be an ambivalent attitude, but it seems to deny that ultimate meaning can be found in the physical order. This is because Zhuangzi considers problems regarding existence “beyond the realm of things 物之外” and “prior to events in time 事之先” to be questions beyond the realm of language, which are “silent and empty in

nothingness 靡然都無”。That is to say, they cannot be grasped via intellection, i.e. so-called wisdom (*zhi* 智), including conceptual thinking, deduction, and judgement based on categorisation. Zhang Zhan says in his comment to the title “Tangwen” in the *Liezi* 《列子·湯問》,

The greatest limitation imposed upon knowledge by wisdom is the things that it does not know. It treats what is perceived as universally true and in so doing inhibits [one’s understanding of] the realm of things. Therefore, [in this passage,] the great sage asks the questions and the one who gets to the bottom of the principle of the world answers. 夫智之所限知，莫若其所不知，而世齊所見以限物，是以大聖發問，窮理者對也。

Xia Ge 夏革 answers Yin Tang’s 殷湯 question with “I do not know 不知”, which is typical of the Daoist way of thinking. In the following passages, Xia Ge consistently answers “I do not know 不知” to brush away various questions from Yin Tang.⁹ Zhang Zhan comments on these characteristic answers, saying, “It is not that he does not know; it is rather that such matters are not known by wisdom. 非不知也，不可以智知也。” He also says,

If one places faith in the scope of knowledge that is attained by his heart-wisdom and does not know of the limits of his knowledge, then he has only a superficial intelligence. Trusting completely what one perceives through his ears and eyes and not knowing there are limits to eyesight and hearing is typical of a common person. However, a person of attainment dissolves what his heart-wisdom obstructs and achieves in no ordinary manner the subtle principle beyond wisdom. He abandons the limits of eyesight and hearing, and attains exceptional form far beyond the realm of things. 故信其心智所知及而不知所知之有極者，膚識也。誠其耳目所聞見而不知視聽之有限者，俗士也。至於達人，融心智之所滯，玄悟智外之妙理，豁視聽之所闕，遠得物外之奇形。

The “subtle principle 妙理” in his terms is no “principle of things 物理”. It is the “principle of *dao* 道理” beyond the realm of things with form.

Zhuangzi argues for “getting rid of knowledge and causality, and following the principle of heaven 去知與故，循天之理” (“Constrained in Will” in the *Zhuangzi*). “Knowledge” (*zhi* 知) here refers to the various methods of intellection, including conceptual thinking and technical ingenuities that stem from intellection. “Cause” (*gu* 故) refers to causality and causal relationships that are ultimately linked to the origin of all things. Since cause comes from the power of the understanding of intellection, the methods of intellection (e.g. conceptual thinking) and the causal order are in fact the outward form and inward essence of the same thing. Since Zhuangzi criticises the methods of intellection, he certainly also criticises physical causality that is formulated by the methods of intellection. In Zhuangzi’s view, physics holds a status that is lower than *dao*. Insisting upon studying physical questions leads invariably to being stranded at the outward limits

of things, whereby the principle of things would obscure the truth of *dao*. It is for this reason that he has relentlessly censured Hui Shi 惠施.

6.3 Only *dao* lacks predictable traits: Rejecting rational argumentative methods

In our experience of the world, large objects are made of smaller objects, and future events can be anticipated or inferred from the past. The former notion undergoes theoretical abstraction and gives form to the atomistic mode of thinking, i.e. a mode of thinking that explains the “greatest” (*zhida* 至大) with the “minutest” (*zhixiao* 至小). The latter notion also undergoes a process of theoretical distillation to become an instrument of rational thought. For example, Zou Yan 鄒衍 incorporates it (“deduction” *tui* 推) and the theory of five elements (*wuxing* 五行) to formulate his theory of “end and beginning of five virtues” (*wudezhongshi* 五德終始), which explains both natural phenomena and historical developments in the human world. Philosophical Daoism, using its conventional methods of reflective critique, challenges such experience and its theories.

Physics (natural philosophy) in ancient Greece is a product of the rationalisation of its earlier cosmogonic myths (from chaos to cosmos). Natural philosophers investigate the origin of the myriad things and attempt to understand the world via philosophical means. This has resulted in a division between philosophy and mythology. Subsequently, ancient Greek physics transformed itself from a study of the primary principle (*archē*) to a study of causality. This more or less shows that there is a kinship between the way of thinking that investigates the primary principle (*archē*) and the rational way of thinking that studies causality. This is to say, atomism and the causal order are mutually inclusive. Philosophical Daoism finds this notion extremely suspicious.

The key to the problem is that since *dao* is different from things, physical phenomena are different from the truth of *dao*. Therefore, physics, which investigates the physical order of things, is different from metaphysics, which seeks to grasp the truth of *dao*. The *Huainanzi* says, “[A]ll things have predictable traits, only *dao* lacks predictable traits 凡物有朕，唯道無朕” (“Bingluexun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·兵略訓》). This points out an essential difference between the two. Chapter 38 of the *Laozi* disagrees with foreknowledge (*qianshi* 前識). The *Hanfeizi* explains that foreknowledge is “conjecture without reason and with an undisciplined mind 無緣而妄意度也”. However, we cannot exclude the implication of prediction that is included in foreknowledge. Considering from the perspective of the comparative history of ideas, the sorcerer (*wu* 巫) and the diviner (*bu* 卜) usually go hand in hand. This fact has implications. It can be said that even modern science has shadows of sorcery in its “prediction of that which has yet to take form”. In this light, is philosophical Daoism not special and advanced?

If we must compare pre-Qin philosophical Daoism with ancient Greek atomism, theories of *qi* (including theories of five elements and *yinyang* that have incorporated *qi*-related thought) are perhaps closest to typical atomism. However, *qi*-related thought

in philosophical Daoism consists of more complicated ideas.¹⁰ These implications go beyond the bounds covered by ancient Greek atomism. I chose not to expand upon the theoretical characteristics of *qi*-related atomism here. My question is, How does philosophical Daoism challenge atomistic theories and deductive judgement; namely, the rational argumentative methods of knowing the large from the minute, knowing the faraway from the nearby, and knowing the past from knowing the present?

Certainly, upon discussing the so-called root-source (*bengen* 本根), the *Zhuangzi* has said that

its spiritual illumination is refined to the minutest, allowing them to transform along with other things in countless ways. [. . .] Even something as vast as the six directions never gets beyond it; even something as small as a hair in autumn depends on it to take form as a physical body. 神明至精，與彼百化 六合為巨，未離其內；秋豪為小，待之成體。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

This passage appears to argue that the minutest (*zhijing* 至精) constitutes and is internal to the myriad things and transforms as they do and as such is called the root-source. However, this does not show that physics in the *Zhuangzi* agrees with the atomistic way of thinking and cannot be used to prove that the *Zhuangzi* includes atomistic thought. In fact, similar to “*dao* has no end or beginning; while all things perish and come to be 道無終始，物有死生”，we can also say that “things have various sizes of great and small; *dao* has no magnitude of minute and coarse. 物有大小，道無精粗。” In other words, divisions in magnitude, large, small, coarse, or minute, are not applicable to *dao* (“the minutest” *zhijing* 至精). In sum, things are entities found in time and space, while *dao* is beyond the temporal and spatial order. From this, it is not difficult to understand why Daoist thinkers (or those influenced by Daoist thought) state repeatedly:

The minutest has no form, and the largest cannot be encompassed. 至精無形，至大不可圍。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The minute (is further divided until it) reaches the point where there are no more divisions possible, the vastness (is further expanded until it) reaches the point where it cannot be encompassed. 精至於無倫，大至於不可圍。

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

What has no form can be distinguished by no quantities; what cannot be encompassed can be exhausted by no quantities. 無形者，數之所不能分也；不可圍者，數之所不能窮也。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

It is large such that there is nothing outside it; it is minute such that there is nothing inside it. 大之無外，小之無內。

(“Zhouhe” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·宙合》)

Dao . . . its largeness has nothing outside it; its minuteness has nothing within.
道 其大無外,其小無內。

(“Xinshu I” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·心術上》)

The spirited *qi* is located in the heart-mind . . . its small (aspect) has no inside; its large (aspect) has no outside. 靈氣在心 其細無內, 其大無外。

(“Neiye” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·內業》)

One can receive *dao* but not convey it. Its minute (aspect) has no inside, its large (aspect) has no bounds. 道可受兮不可傳, 其小無內兮, 其大無垠。

(“Yuanyou” in the *Chuci* 《楚辭·遠遊》)

Deep and extensive, its exterior is not to be found; dividing the minute and dissecting the miniscule, its interior is not to be found. 深閎廣大不可為外, 折毫剖芒不可為內。

(“Chuzhenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·俶真訓》)

“[T]he minutest has no inside, the largest has no outside” is an oft-repeated expression used to describe the non-spatiality of *dao*. Some commentators are unaware of this and compare the previous passages with Hui Shi’s 惠施 notion of great singularity (*dayi* 大一) and minute singularity (*xiaoyi* 小一), which is referenced in “All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*:

[T]he largest is such that nothing is on its outside, and it is called the great singularity; the minutest is such that nothing is on its inside, and it is called the minute singularity. 至大無外, 謂之大一; 至小無內, 謂之小一。

These two propositions are in fact very different from each other. Hui Shi’s minute singularity can be seen as a certain kind of mechanistic atomism that is representative of rational thinking (e.g. deduction). The following passage indicates Zhuangzi’s rejection of any view that adheres to distinguishing things in terms of large and minute:

From within things or without [. . .] where is the standard that can divide the great from the minute? [. . .] From the point of view of their differences, if we consider something big because it is bigger than something else, nothing is not big. If we consider it small because it is smaller than something else, nothing is not small. When you can understand the sense in which heaven and earth are just like a grain of rice and the tip of a hair is just like a mountain range, you have grasped the principle of their differences. 若物之外, 若物之內 惡至而倪小大? 以差觀之, 因其所大而大之, 則萬物莫不大; 因其所小而小之, 則萬物莫不小。知天地之為稊米也, 知豪末之為丘山也, 則差數等矣。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

After all, size is a relative property. This is also what Laozi intends to convey in Chapter 2 of the *Laozi*. The *Zhuangzi* is clearer in its argument for the relativity of things and the absoluteness of *dao*:

From this point of view, how can we know that the tip of a hair can define the ultimate measure of smallness, or heaven and earth the fullest expanse of vastness? 由此觀之，又何以知毫末之足以定至細之倪，又何以知天地之足以窮至大之域？

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In this way, *dao* sheds itself of all properties that belong to things (e.g. size, coming to be and perishing).

Let us consider another example. Among the “twenty-one episodes of the debaters” recorded in “All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*, there is a proposition that says, “If you remove half of a foot-long stick each day, it will not be depleted even after ten thousand generations. 一尺之捶，日取其半，萬世不竭。” “Zhongni” in the *Liezi* 《列子·仲尼》 also references a similar proposition, which, according to research, belongs to Gongsun Long 公孫龍, a follower of the School of Names. In his commentary on “All Under Heaven”, Guo Xiang 郭象 writes,

Before, when I had not read the *Zhuangzi*, I once listened to scholars who debated the meaning of “foot-long stick” and “linked hoops”. They claimed these were the words of Zhuangzi. Because of this, I considered Zhuangzi to be one of the debaters. When I myself examined this essay, I learned of its critique of the various schools and scholars. In this passage, it says that this way of thinking is erroneous and contradictory, and these words are wide of their mark. Then, I became aware of the injury done to facts and truth when blindly trusting the words of others. 昔吾未覽《莊子》，嘗聞論者爭夫尺捶連環之意，而皆云莊生之言，遂以莊生為辯者之流。按此篇較評諸子，至於此章，則曰其道舛駁，其言也不中，乃知道聽途說之傷實也。

In fact, in Zhuangzi’s eyes, thinkers like Gongsun Long 公孫龍 are “frogs trapped in abandoned wells”, and their thoughts are not worthy of consideration. The two propositions just quoted clearly contradict common sense and experience. They are also inconsistent with the Daoist doctrine of “things that have corresponding properties such as size, coming to be and perishing”. In this sense, they are negative examples. If one were to remove half of a foot-long stick each day, and it was still not depleted even after ten thousand generations, then this stick would be spatially infinite. It would thus transcend the very nature of a thing and obscure the fundamental boundary between *dao* and things. This is the error committed by thinkers like Gongsun Long.

The Daoist opposition to the atomistic mode of thinking includes its application and extension in human rationality, which is typified by the Simeng School’s argument by analogy: “The metal bell proclaims the commencement of the music, and the ringing stone proclaims its close 金聲玉振”.¹¹ The *Zhongyong* 《中庸》, which is assumed to be the work of Zisi 子思, says,

The way of the exemplary person is both broad and hidden. The dullest of ordinary people can know something of it, and yet even the sages in trying to penetrate to its furthest limits do not know it all. The most unworthy of

the common people are able to travel a distance along it, yet even the sages in trying to penetrate to its furthest limits are not able to travel all of it. As grand as the world is, people are still never completely satisfied. Thus, were exemplary persons to discourse on the profundity of their way, there is nothing in the empire that could take its weight; were they to discourse on its subtlety, there is nothing in the empire that could further refine it. It is said in the *Book of Songs*, “The hawks soar to the limits of the heavens; the fishes plunge to the further depths”. This gives expression to its height and its depth. The way of exemplary persons has at its start the simple lives of ordinary people, and at its furthest limit sheds light upon the entire world. 君子之道費而隱。夫婦之愚，可以與知焉，及其至也，雖聖人亦有所不知焉；夫婦之不肖，可以能行焉，及其至也，雖聖人亦有所不能焉。天地之大也，人猶有所憾，故君子語大，天下莫能載焉；語小，天下莫能破焉。《詩》云：‘鳶飛戾天，魚躍于淵。’言其上下察也。君子之道，造端乎夫婦，及其至也，察乎天地。

This passage also suggests a rational method that uses what is near to deduce what is far and small things and affairs to deduce things and affairs at large. Atomistic thinking is the basis of such methods. Zhu Xi 朱熹 states that “its largest has nothing outside it; its minutest has nothing within 其大無外，其小無內” in his commentary on this passage, and it seems that he did not say so out of some momentary whim. His patient and detailed explanation of deduction illustrates the kind of rational method in which one deduces what is far from what is near and universal principles from within oneself.¹²

We can see that atomistic thinking and logical deduction are inseparable. In ancient China, they also entailed rational judgements whereby one knew what was far from what was near, argued for what should be done at present from facts of the past, and understood future developments of affairs from minute clues. We know that the Mohist School advocates deduction.¹³ Similarly, Confucians often make arguments based on notions found in the *Book of Change*, including “grasping the minute clues 知幾” and “find things for consideration near at hand in one’s own person, and at a distance in things in general 近取諸身，遠取諸物”. They also pride themselves on being good at deduction. Without deduction, thinkers of the Yinyang School, such as Zou Yan 鄒衍, could hardly form a coherent theoretic frame for their theory of five virtues and end and beginning. Hui Shi 惠施 and Gongsun Long 公孫龍 of the School of Names have among their ten propositions “thoughts ranging through things of all kinds 歷物之意” and “tens of thousands of bizarre arguments 詭辭數萬”, which are based on this method of deduction. The essays in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》 also highly recommend the method of deduction.¹⁴

Remnants of deductive thinking are also found in the *Laozi*. Chapter 14 says, “[H]old fast to the *dao* of antiquity in order to keep in control the realm of today. 執古之道，以御今之有。”, whether it is “knowing the past by facts of the present 以今知古” or “using facts of the past to discuss the present situation 以古論今”. These are all examples of deduction. Zhuangzi is more advanced on this matter.

He considers temporality and spatiality to be properties exclusive to things and not *dao*. On the one hand, Zhuangzi directs his criticism at Hui Shi:

Seeking to exhaust the vastest of space with its minutest component, this is why people have been bewildered and frustrated with no satisfaction. 以其至小，求窮其至大之域，是故迷亂而不能自得也。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

On the other hand, Zhuangzi clarifies several obscurities in the *Laozi*. He does so with a fictional conversation between Confucius and his disciple:

Ran Qiu asked Confucius,

“Can the state before there was heaven and earth be known?”

Confucius said,

“Yes. The past is like the present”.

Ran Qiu had no more questions and withdrew, but he returned the next day and said,

“Yesterday I asked you if the state before there was heaven and earth could be known, and you said it could, that the past was like the present. At the time this was crystal clear, but now it makes no sense to me anymore. May I ask what this means?”

Confucius said,

“Your clarity yesterday came from your spirit’s initial reception. Your present confusion is because you are now seeking it with something other than your spirit, is it not? No past, no present; no beginning, no end: before you have descendants, you have descendants. Do you get it?”

Ran Qiu could not answer.

Confucius continued,

“It is enough that you cannot answer! It is not life and death that produces death, and it is not death that brings an end to life. For do life and death depend on something else? Both are parts of the same body, which confers on them their unity. If there is something before heaven and earth, could it be any specifiable being? That which turns things into things is itself not a thing. For as the first thing emerges, the thing before all things is not to be. It seems that it (i.e. that which turns things into things) produces things. It seems that it produces things without itself being anything. The sage’s selfless love for all people is rooted in this”.

冉求問於仲尼曰： “未有天地可知邪?”
 仲尼曰： “可。古猶今也。”
 冉求失問而退，明日復見，曰： “昔者吾問‘未有天地可知乎’，夫子曰：‘可。古猶今也。’昔者吾昭然，今日吾昧然，敢問何謂也?”
 仲尼曰： “昔之昭然也，神者先受之；今之昧然也，且又為不神者求邪？無古無今，無始無終。未有子孫而有子孫，可乎？”
 冉求未對。仲尼曰： “已矣，未應矣！不以生生死，不以死死生。死生有待邪？皆有所一體。有先天地生者物邪？物物者非物。物出不得先物也，猶其有物也。猶其有物也，無已。聖人之愛人也終無已者，亦乃取於是者也。”
 (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Minuteness and coarseness (spatial), end and beginning, past and present (temporal) are properties that are applicable to things and only to things. They are not applicable to *dao* and cannot help one better understand *dao*. The *Zhuangzi* is very clear on this point. It says,

Both the minute and the coarse are limited to the realm of things with definite form. What has no form can be distinguished by no quantities; what cannot be encompassed can be exhausted by no quantities. What can be discussed in words are the coarser aspects of things. What can be considered in the mind are the minute aspects of things. But what words cannot describe and thought cannot reach cannot be determined as either minute or coarse. 夫精粗者，期於有形者也；無形者，數之所不能分也；不可圍者，數之所不能窮也。可以言論者，物之粗也；可以意致者，物之精也；言之所不能論，意之所不能察致者，不期精粗焉。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

“Quantities” (*shu* 數) refers to rational analysis based on properties such as size, minuteness, and coarseness. This kind of rational analysis goes hand in hand with the argumentative use of language. As such, since the minutest is formless, it goes beyond the realm of things and thus cannot be treated with paradigms and methods belonging to physics (natural philosophy).

We have so far analysed and explained several problems in Daoist natural philosophy. Our discussion shows that Daoist (especially *Zhuangzi*'s) physics is a negative natural philosophy, for its physics is not the ultimate truth. From a philosophical perspective, its physics is insufficient, inadequate, and cannot be coherent and independent. *Zhuangzi*'s profound scepticism about causality and causal relationships challenges certain aspects of the concept of natural order. The atomistic approach and judgement based on rationality (deduction) are no longer reliable.

The overall Daoist (especially Zhuangzi's) theoretical structure of going beyond the realm of things (including physics) to reach over to *dao* (the truth of *dao*) is becoming clear. The preceding review of Zhuangzi's physics (natural philosophy) is intended to reveal an aspect of Zhuangzi's physics and to deepen our understanding of the characteristics of Daoist thought. Zhuangzi's physics (natural philosophy) could potentially serve as a valuable resource for reconsidering the outlook of nature that has spanned from the *logos* of ancient Greece to the mechanistic theories of modernity. Viewing the current trend in which the modern sciences are driving a redirection in Western traditional natural philosophy, my present judgement is not a light-hearted exaggeration.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Humean problem (i.e. inductive reasoning and belief in causality cannot be perfectly justified by the power of rationality) remains a thorny and difficult issue. Zhuangzi's deep-seated scepticism about a causal chain between events (the cause of end and beginning) is an incisive point in our consideration of the complex and paradoxical relationship between causality and *logistica*.

Studying Daoist physics is meaningful because it is a characteristic theory of natural philosophy. However, if we consider it from within the Daoist philosophical framework, Daoist physics is situated on the periphery of the Daoist theory of *dao* (metaphysics). In other words, the principal purport of philosophical Daoism lies in its metaphysics. Our present discussion of Daoist physics serves the purpose of laying the groundwork for the explication of its metaphysics.

Notes

- 1 Aristotle, *Physics* 物理學 (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1982), 42.
- 2 While principles can be given in words, *dao* cannot.
- 3 Guzhi Jin 金谷治, "The Thought of Zou Yan 邹衍的思想", *Luotuo Congkan* 駱駝叢刊, Vol. 15 (2000).
- 4 He says that "Jizhen's words are right. 季真之言當也。" (commentary on "Zeyang" in the *Zhuangzi*).
- 5 Note that the root-source in the *Zhuangzi* is not entirely equivalent to the primordial origin of all things. This is because Zhuangzi believes that "[t]here is no cause to the end and the beginning 終始無故", that it is impossible to ascertain the origin of things, and that "[t]he myriad things [...] succeed one another in different bodily forms 萬物 以形相禪", and it is impossible and unnecessary to study such a question.
- 6 Fuzhi Wang 王夫之, *Zhuangzi Jie* 莊子解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1964), 123.
- 7 Yiming Cui 崔宜明, *Living and Wisdom* 生存與智慧 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press 上海人民出版社, 1996), 57.
- 8 Translation of the *Liezi* in this book depends heavily on the English translation by Thomas Cleary, with minor editing by the translators. Thomas Cleary, *The Book of Master Lie* (Kindle, 2009).
- 9 Problems such as "Is there a limit to the extremities of the universe? 上下四方有極盡乎?" and "Is there anything beyond the four seas? 四海之外奚有?" are relevant examples.
- 10 Cf Cunshan Li 李存山, *Investigative Studies on Theory of Qi in China and Its Origin* 中國氣論探源與發微 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1990) and Yishan Cui 崔宜山, *Yuanqi Theories in Ancient China* 中國古代元氣學說 (Changsha: Hubei People's Press 湖北人民出版社, 1986).

- 11 The *Five Conducts* 《五行》, presumably belonging to the Simeng School, still retains traces of this kind of deductive reasoning.
- 12 Zhu Xi comments on chapter 13 of the *Zhongyong* that “[h]aving the heart-mind to do one’s utmost is loyalty (*zhong*), to think sympathetically of others is sympathy (*shu*). 盡己之心為忠，推己及人為恕。”
- 13 Youding Shen 沈有鼎, *Logic in the Mojing* 墨經的邏輯學 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1980), 54, 67.
- 14 Several chapters of the *Huainanzi*, including “Qisuxun” 《齊俗訓》 and “Shuoshanxun” 《說山訓》, reference the line in the *Book of Change* “He treads on the hoarfrost; the strong ice will come [by and by]. 履霜，堅冰至。” to argue for the rational deductive method of reasoning.
- 15 Hideki Yukawa 湯川秀樹, *Creativity and Intuition* 創造力和直覺 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press 復旦大學出版社, 1987), 46–56.

7 *Dao* and things

First, we must emphasise that the fundamental point in the relationship between *dao* and things is such that *dao* is not a thing (*wu* 物)¹ or the totality of things. *Dao* is, however, the root-source and basis of things. This seemingly paradoxical relationship between *dao* and things reflects an inherent tension within the framework of Daoist philosophy.

The relationship of *dao* and things pervades almost the entirety of philosophical Daoism. It involves a variety of complex subjects, including that of the uncarved block (*pu* 樸) and the vessel with definite form (*qi* 器), *qi* 氣 and transformation (*hua* 化). Laozi says, “When the uncarved block is carved it becomes vessels 樸散則為器” (ch. 28), and, “*Dao* is constantly without name. [It is] an uncarved block. 道常無名, 樸。” (ch. 32). The “Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change* says, “Those things that have form are called vessels 形而下者謂之器”. In the following sections, we will discuss three main problems: *Dao* and things, *you* and *wu*, and the inseparability of *dao* and things.

Daoist physics is chiefly concerned with physics of the phenomenal world; namely, the order by which things come to be, transform, and perish in time and space. Its essential purport is centred around *dao*. However, *dao* and things are fundamentally different. Things are in the realm of *you*, and *dao* is *wu*. *Wu* in this sense implies not only thinglessness (*wuwu* 無物) but also that we cannot rely on reasoning about the physical to comprehend *dao* (i.e. “knowing without knowledge, or *wu*-knowledge” *wuzhi* 無知). In the following section, we step up from the threshold of Daoist physics and enter its metaphysics. While *you* (the myriad things) is the principal topic in physics, *wu* (*dao*) is its counterpart in metaphysics. The reason things and physics occupy an important position in Daoist philosophy is precisely because they are the counterparts of *dao* and the theory of *dao* (metaphysics). Let us begin with a discussion of *you* and *wu*.

7.1 *Dao* and things

Let us commence our discussion of the relationship of *dao* and things from a peculiar angle; namely, the contrast in thought between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi 惠施. The *Zhuangzi* records several important debates between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi. Zhuangzi’s criticism of Hui Shi has also become a very important case study in the

history of philosophy. In Zhuangzi's view, although Hui Shi is a knowledgeable scholar, his mind has become entrenched in and circumscribed by the theory of things and has thus become unable to entertain the truth of the theory of *dao* and consequently the truth of *dao*.

Hui Shi is perhaps a natural philosopher (physicist) in the true sense of the word. Looking at surviving fragments and records from the *Zhuangzi* (e.g. "All Under Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*), Hui Shi's principal theories are concerned with things. We can see that he is a physicist (natural philosopher) who focusses solely on things. The *Zhuangzi*, by contrast, criticises his indulgence in the realm of things from the perspective of "dao beyond the realm of things". In a certain sense, "Zhuangzi is excellent at discussing 'dao', while Hui Shi specialises in discussing 'things'".² In fact, Hui Shi's "thoughts ranging through things of all kinds 歷物之意" illustrate the discussion of the principle of the myriad things by examining various kinds of things in the world. He says,

The largest unit has nothing outside it. I call it the "great singularity". The minutest unit has nothing within it. I call it the "minute singularity". What has no thickness cannot be piled up, and yet it extends for a thousand miles. Heaven is as low as earth, and the mountain as level as the lake. Just as the sun slants as soon as it reaches high noon, all beings start dying as soon as they are born. Within a great sameness there can be further subdivisions of sameness and difference. These are called "small sameness" and "small difference". But all things are ultimately the same and also ultimately different. This is called "great sameness" and "great difference". The south is both bounded and boundless, so one can go to Yue today and arrive yesterday. Linked hoops can be unhooked. I know the centre of the world: it is north of the state of Yan and south of the state of Yue. Love all things without exception, for heaven and earth are one body. 至大無外，謂之大一；至小無內，謂之小一。無厚不可積也，其大千里。天與地卑，山與澤平。日方中方睨，物方生方死。大同而與小同異，此之謂小同異；萬物畢同畢異，此之謂大同異。南方無窮而有窮，今日適越而昔來。連環可解也。我知天下之中央，燕之北，越之南是也。汜愛萬物，天地一體也。

("All Under Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*)

Clearly, the principal subject of "thoughts ranging through things of all kinds 歷物之意" is things in the world. Since there are countless different things in the world, Hui Shi naturally has to "formulate theories on myriad different things 遍為萬物說" and even "talks without rest, on and on without end, yet still thinking that his words are insufficient. 說而不休，多而無已，猶以為寡。" This is the reason for Hui Shi

using these statements to make a great display in the world, making himself well-respected among debaters, and all the debaters in the world shared his delight in them. 以此為大觀於天下而曉辯者，天下之辯者相與樂之。

("All Under Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*)

It is for this reason that, in Zhuangzi's view, although Hui Shi is "learned and prolific 多方", "his way of thinking is contradictory and erroneous, and his words are wide of the mark. 其道舛駁，其言也不中。" Historical text records confirm that Hui Shi was excellent at debates. One need not be reminded of his eloquence and quickness of mind in the debate upon the river Hao in the *Zhuangzi*, which is especially relevant for its engagement with the relationship between *dao* and things. It is said that upon passing Hui Shi's 惠施 grave, Zhuangzi looked to his left and right before saying, "[S]ince you died, I have no material to work on. I have no one to talk to anymore. 自夫子之死也，吾無以為質矣，吾無與言之矣。" ("Xuwugui" in the *Zhuangzi*). The *Shuoyuan* also commented,

Yu Boya ceased playing and destroyed his zither when Zhong Ziqi passed away because he knew there is no one who can drum for him in the world; Zhuangzi became silent in contemplation when Hui Shi passed away for he saw that no one could talk to him in the world. 鍾子期死而伯牙絕弦破琴，知世莫可為鼓也；惠施卒而莊子深瞑不言，見世莫可與語也。

(“Tancong” in the *Shuoyuan* 《說苑·談叢》)

Nonetheless, although Zhuangzi loved his friend, his love for truth was greater still. Zhuangzi's criticism of Hui Shi is without reserve:

Zhaowen's zither playing, Master Kuang's baton waving, Huizi's desk slumping – the understanding these three had of their arts flourished richly. This was what they flourished in, and thus they pursued these arts to the end of their days. They delighted in them, and observing that this delight of theirs was not shared, they wanted to make it obvious to others. So they tried to make others understand as obvious what was not obvious to them, and thus some ended their days debating about the obscurities of "hardness" and "whiteness". 昭文之鼓琴也，師曠之枝策也，惠子之據梧也，三子之知幾乎！皆其盛者也，故載之末年。唯其好之也，以異於彼，其好之也，欲以明之彼。非所明而明之，故以堅白之昧終。

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

You, Hui Shi, treat your spirit like a stranger and labour your vitality, leaning against a door screen reciting your disputations or nodding off across your desk. Heaven chose your physical form and here you are using it to crow on about "hardness" and "whiteness"! 今子外乎子之神，勞乎子之精，倚樹而吟，據槁梧而瞑。天選子之形，子以堅白鳴！

(“Markers of Full Virtuosity” in the *Zhuangzi*)

[Hui Shi . . .] formulates theories on a myriad of different things. He talks without rest, on and on without end; yet still thinking that his words are insufficient, he adds even stranger ideas. Since it was really all about opposing the views of others so that he might earn fame for defeating them, he was unable to get along with the multitude of people. He spends little effort on bettering his *de* and is too good at thinking about external things. As a result, his path

was a dark one. Viewing Hui Shi's skills against the *dao* of heaven and earth, they look like the busy labours of a mosquito or a fly. What use are they to other creatures? To give its full development to any one capacity is a good thing, and he who does so is in the way to a higher estimation of *dao*; but Hui Shi can find no rest for himself in doing this. He diffuses himself over the world of things without satiety, till in the end he has only the reputation of being a skilful debater. A pity! Hui Shi's talents are fruitlessly dissipated running after all sorts of things in the world and never returning to himself. He is like a man trying to silence an echo with shouts or to outrun his own shadow. Alas! (惠施) 遍為萬物說; 說而不休, 多而無已, 猶以為寡, 益之以怪。以反人為實, 而欲以勝人為名, 是以與眾不適也。弱於德, 強於物, 其塗隩矣。由天地之道觀惠施之能, 其猶一蚤一虻之勞者也, 其於物也何庸! 夫充一尚可, 曰愈貴, 道幾矣! 惠施不能以此自寧, 散於萬物而不厭, 卒以善辯為名。惜乎! 惠施之才, 駘蕩而不得, 逐萬物而不反, 是窮響以聲, 形與影競走也。悲夫!

("All Under Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*)

Zhuangzi's repeated criticisms can be summarised from two aspects: The fruitless theories of "hardness" and "whiteness" and the fact that Hui Shi has consideration only for things in the world and not *dao*. "Hardness" and "whiteness" are topics of debaters 辯者 whose debates over the nature of external things obscure their vision of *dao*. This fault is what Zhuangzi describes as "the obscurity of [setting one's mind merely on] 'hardness' and 'whiteness' 堅白之昧". Hui Shi's expertise in the world of things correlates with his inextricable indulgence in philosophising about problems of things. In Zhuangzi's words, Hui Shi "spends little effort bettering his *de* and is too good at thinking about external things 弱於德, 強於物", and he "diffuses himself over the world of things without satiety 散於萬物而不厭" and in "fruitless dissipation of oneself running after all sorts of things in the world without return 逐萬物而不反". In Zhuangzi's view, Hui Shi's endeavours are as absurd as "trying to silence an echo with shouts or to outrun his own shadow 窮響以聲, 形與影競走", spraying oil in hopes of extinguishing a fire, or drinking hemlock to quench thirst. "Things" in philosophical Daoism bears important similarities to "existence" in the Western philosophical tradition. It refers to things that exist in space and time in external reality, which is contrasted with "being" as it is conceived in metaphysics or ontology.³ In Zhuangzi's critique, Hui Shi's "theories on a myriad of different things 遍為萬物說" are but a "fruitless dissipation of oneself running after all sorts of things in the world without return 逐萬物而不反". They demonstrate a lack of self-restraint and orderly composition as well as an ignorance of the use of returning to oneself. Hui Shi appears to be an empiricist. What are some characteristics of his knowledge of myriad different things, of which he is so proud? From the Daoist point of view, empirical knowledge has an outward facing direction. It relies on perception incurred by external things and a rationality that seeks to understand external objects. Daoist epistemology finds fitting expression of its subtle wisdom in phrases such as "the scintillating radiance of drifting convolution and the seemingly true 滑疑之耀"

and “inextinguishable and self-contained splendor 葆光”. These are direct opposites of the empiricism of “fruitless dissipation of oneself running after all sorts of things in the world without return 逐萬物而不反”, and they form the basis of Zhuangzi’s sarcastic censure of Hui Shi’s ineffectual project. Xunzi comments that “Hui Shi occludes his mind in rhetoric and does not know the real world. 惠施蔽於辭而不知實。” This reveals one aspect of Hui Shi’s academic shortcoming, but it omits another more important aspect, which is that he “occludes his mind with things in the world and does not grasp *dao* 蔽於物而不知道”. The difference between *dao* and things is what separates physics (natural philosophy) and metaphysics. Therefore, it is clear that this difference between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi is not to be overlooked. Qian Mu 錢穆 believes that “[t]he writings of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi have much in common 莊子書多與惠氏相通”, and that “most of Zhuangzi’s theories are similar to Hui Shi’s 莊書持論, 多與惠施相出入”. More specifically, the *Zhuangzi*

discusses and theorises on the myriad things including heaven and earth, mountains and lakes, fishes and birds small and great, rubbles and waste. All such sayings are on the topic of things. Philosophising about things is a style that follows Hui Shi’s philosophical discussion of the myriad things. 皆極論萬物, 天地山澤, 鯤鵬蜩鳩, 樗櫟大椿, 瓦礫矢溺, 莫不因物以為說, 本物以見旨, 以惠氏歷物之風也。

However, Qian Mu’s comments are but superficial observations about the outward characteristics. Zhuangzi’s and Hui Shi’s thoughts could not be further from one another. The following discussion is dedicated to analysing Zhuangzi’s comprehensive dismantling of Hui Shi’s philosophy.

Hui Shi’s excellence in debate is not to be contested: “Deduction is part of every discussion put forward by debaters. 凡辯者之論, 皆有所譬。” (“Jiebi” in the *Xunzi* 《荀子·解蔽》). It is similarly recorded that Hui Shi is “good at making deductions 善譬”.⁴ “Deduction” (*pi* 譬) has the meaning “starting with using what is known to tell what is not known and let others understand. 固以其所知, 論其所不知, 而使人知之。”⁵ “Good at making deductions 善譬” refers to deductive judgement based on categorisation and conceptual relations. In brief, Hui Shi is “good at argumentation 善辯” in his discussion of things in the world, and he is “good at making deductions 善譬” in his consideration of worldly affairs. In fact, Mengzi’s thinking also belongs to deduction and argumentation of this kind.

Making arguments with the theoretic entities of “the greatest and the minutest 至大至小” is a customary tactic of the School of Names. According to Meng Wentong 蒙文通, the saying “There is nothing outside the greatest, and there is nothing inside the minutest. 至大無外, 至小無內。” originated with the School of Names and was later adopted by Daoists and Confucians. Meng also says,

When these phrases are employed by the School of Names, they refer to concepts; when used by Daoists, they are thought to be existing entities. Taking a concept to be an existing thing has led to confusing words that are

incomprehensible. 名家言之為一種概念，道家言之則為一種實體，以概念為實體，此其所以每恍惚而不可究詰也。⁶

It is unclear what led Meng to form such an opinion, but the prevalence of this argumentative tactic certainly indicates a prevailing way of thinking at the time. This way of thinking has two discernible characteristics, one being the deductive method of argumentation, the other being a certain kind of atomistic predisposition. They are both characteristics of the logos of the age. The former is easy to understand, while the latter is more obscure and requires a brief discussion. To repeat the sentence quoted from the *Zhongyong* 《中庸》 in the last chapter,

Thus, were exemplary persons to discourse on the profundity of their way, there is nothing in the empire that could take its weight; were they to discourse on its minuteness or subtlety, there is nothing in the empire that could further refine it. 君子語大，天下莫能載焉；語小，天下莫能破焉。

The Chinese translator Yan Fu 嚴復 translated the English word “atom” as “unsplittable point of matter 莫破質點”, for he considers “the minutest 至小” to be equivalent to the word “atom”. More precisely, he acknowledges that the reasoning of “the minutest 至小” is similar to the intellectual approach of “atomism”, which seeks to find the primary and elemental substance of all things. The *Laozi* also references the “small” (*xiao* 小) and the “minute” (*jing* 精), which are conceptual precursors to the notion of “the minutest”. Discussions of the “minute” (*jing* 精) in the four essays of the *Guanzi* 《管子》 are theoretical developments based on “the minutest 至小”. It is in the same vein that *dao* is described as “in its greatness there is nothing outside it; in its minuteness there is nothing inside it. 其大無外，其小無內。” (“Xinshu I” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·心術上》). However, as we noted in the previous chapter, the *Zhuangzi* argues for “getting rid of knowledge and causality 去知與故” (“Constrained in Will” in the *Zhuangzi*), and is against the analytic approach that seeks to identify the primary and elemental substance of all things. Therefore, Hui Shi’s propositions that “the minutest has no form, and the largest is unencompassable. 至精無形，至大不可圍。” (“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*), and similarly that “the minutest reaches the point where there are no more divisions possible, the vastness reaches the point where it cannot be encompassed. 精至於無倫，大至於不可圍。” (“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*). These statements are in direct contrast with Zhuangzi’s idea of “the minutest has no form 至精無形”. If we fail to interpret the *Zhuangzi* in this specific context, we might make the mistake of identifying the thoughts of Zhuangzi with those of Hui Shi. “Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi* contains a paragraph in which Zhuangzi offers arguments against the then commonsensical notion of “the minutest has no form, and the largest is unencompassable. 至精無形，至大不可圍”, even though it is said to be “held by all the debaters of the world 世之議者皆曰”:

Looking at the large from the viewpoint of the minute, it appears inexhaustible. Looking at the small from the viewpoint of the large, it appears indistinct.

The minute is the smallest of the small, and the outmost boundary is the vastest of the large. [. . .] Both the minute and the coarse are limited to the realm of things with definite form. What has no form can be distinguished by no quantities; what cannot be encompassed can be exhausted by no quantities. What can be discussed in words are the coarser aspects of things. What can be considered in the mind are the minute aspects of things. But what words cannot describe and thought cannot reach cannot be determined as either minute or coarse. 夫精，小之微也，埤，大之殷也 夫精粗者，期於有形者也；無形者，數之所不能分也；不可圍者，數之所不能窮也。可以言論者，物之粗也；可以意致者，物之精也；言之所不能論，意之所不能察致者，不期精粗焉。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

It is clear from this passage that words and concepts such as large, small, minute, and coarse are only applicable to things with form, i.e. things in the world. They are inapplicable to and thus serve no purpose in describing *dao*, which is without form. *Dao*, having no form, cannot be seen or heard, cannot be identified or delineated by words, and cannot be grasped by deduction. However, on the one hand, “Autumn Floods” argues that

to try to exhaust the magnitude of the largest boundary only brings bewilderment and frustration. From this point of view, how can we know that the tip of a hair can delimit the ultimate measure of smallness, or heaven and earth the fullest expanse of vastness? 以其至小，求窮其至大之域，是故迷亂而不能自得也。由此觀之，又何以知毫末之足以定至細之倪？又何以知天地之足以窮至大之域？

On the other hand, in response to the problem of objective standard, i.e. “from within things or without, where is the standard that can divide more from the less valuable, the great from the small? 若物之外，若物之內，惡至而倪貴賤？惡至而倪小大？” , *Zhuangzi* says,

From the point of view of *dao*, nothing is more valuable than any other. But from the point of view of each thing itself, each individual values itself more than all others. From the point of view of social convention, the value of things is not determined by themselves. From the point of view of their differences, if we consider something big because it is bigger than something else, nothing is not big. If we consider something small because it is smaller than something else, nothing is not small. When you can understand the sense in which heaven and earth are just like a grain of rice and the tip of a hair is just like a mountain range, you have grasped the principle of their differences. If we consider something to be worthy because it has some positive effectiveness, there is nothing that is not worthy. If we consider it to be unworthy because there is some positive effectiveness it lacks, there is nothing that is not unworthy. 以道觀之，物無貴賤；以物觀之，自貴而相賤；以俗觀之，

貴賤不在己。以差觀之，因其所大而大之，則萬物莫不大；因其所小而小之，則萬物莫不小。知天地之為稊米也，知豪末之為丘山也，則差數等矣。以功觀之，因其所有而有之，則萬物莫不有；因其所無而無之，則萬物莫不無。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Referencing the various viewpoints of *dao*, social convention (*su* 俗), difference (*cha* 差), and worth (*gong* 功), *Zhuangzi* argues that all things are equal before *dao*, and that properties commonly ascribed to things are relative in nature. This line of argument departs entirely from the analytic and conceptual way of thinking that assumes basic properties such as size, worth, and existence as metaphysical starting points. While Hui Shi argues from the logic of empirical rationality, *Zhuangzi* paves the way for a certain kind of *a priori* knowledge and edges closer to the world of “the beyond form”.

“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly references doctrines held by the School of Names and can be seen as an essay written from the Daoist perspective in response to the former’s school of thought. *Zhuangzi*’s proposition that “generation is, at the same time, destruction, and destruction is, at the same time, generation. 方生方死，方死方生。” (“Equalizing Assessments of Things”) is clearly directed at Hui Shi’s “the sun sets at the moment that it reaches high noon, all things begin to die at the moment that they are born. 日中方睨，物方生方死。” (“All Under Heaven”). Sen Xiushu 森秀樹 observes that Hui Shi’s formulaic “at the moment that . . . at the moment that . . . 方 方” is an expression of relativity. The expression serves to indicate that “the sun’s rising and reaching high noon is such in relation to its setting; similarly, the birth of the myriad things can only be conceived in relation to their death and destruction”. Sen believes that Hui Shi’s “thoughts ranging through things of all kinds 歷物之意” intend to “relativize all knowledge by freely changing the point of view of the knower, by which all commonsensical beliefs of the world become fractured. [. . .] This means time, space, scale of perception, value and worth are fundamentally relativized”.⁷ *Zhuangzi* seizes Hui Shi’s relativity of time and space and proclaims that

generation is, at the same time, destruction, and vice versa; agreeableness is, at the same time, disagreeableness, and vice versa; what is circumstantially right is also circumstantially wrong, and vice versa. 方生方死，方死方生；方可方不可，方不可方可；因是因非，因非因是。

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

However, this is not to say that *Zhuangzi* has incorporated this kind of relativism in his own philosophy, for relativity is true only from the perspective of things and not from the perspective of *dao*. The *Laozi* says,

All in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and thus they have ugliness; they all know the skill of the skillful, and thus they have the want of skill.

So, it is that existence and non-existence give birth the one to the other; that difficulty and ease produce one another; that length and shortness offset each other; that height and lowness arise from the contrast of the one to the other; that the musical notes and tones become harmonious through the relation of one to another; and that being before and behind follow one another. 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已。皆知善之為善，斯不善已。故有無相生，難易相成，長短相較，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨。

(ch. 2 of the *Laozi*)

This passage clearly indicates a relativist view of properties of things. It is important to note that relativity applies to things and not *dao*, which is absolute in itself, without difference, without its contrary, and completely beyond space, time, and the world of change. How does Zhuangzi argue against Hui Shi's relativity of things? He pushes Hui Shi's relativist theory to the extreme and declares, "Thus, the sage does not proceed from any one of them but instead fills his vision with the broad daylight of heaven. 是以聖人不由，而照之于天。" That is to say, the sage sees from the perspective of *dao* and dismisses the perspective of things that is bound up with relativity of time, space, and incessant change. From the sage's point of view, the boundary and distinction between one thing and another and between things and himself dissolve. Consequently,

this idea becomes the same as that idea; that idea becomes the same as this idea. Holding that idea gives you a standard of right and wrong; holding this view gives you another set of right and wrong. Is the distinction between this idea and that idea real? Or that the distinction does not really exist? 是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。果且有彼是乎哉？果且無彼是乎哉？

Every existing thing has form and so must have a definite size, length, outward shape, etc. Having form inevitably means having properties that are given in a relative frame, in relation to other things. Therefore, transcending the relative frame of things means transcending the category of things and approaches the category of *dao*. Thus, Zhuangzi says,

When this idea and that idea are no longer coupled as opposites [as in a wheel], that is called the [point of view from the] "*dao* axis". Once [the point of view from] this axis begins, one occupies the position in the centre of the turning ring. With this position, one can respond to infinite changing ideas and circumstances, without end to those holding this view, and those holding that view. Therefore, I say, "Nothing compares to the illumination of the obvious". 彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞。樞始得其環中，以應無窮。是亦一無窮，非亦一無窮也。故曰‘莫若以明’。

This passage shows that Zhuangzi, as well as philosophical Daoism as a whole, does not stop at observing the relativistic nature of the properties of things, but instead

goes beyond it. Hui Shi's theories are referenced in "Equalizing Assessments of Things" because Zhuangzi wants to use them as a springboard, for Zhuangzi's purpose lies ultimately in the *dao* axis (*daoshu* 道樞), positioned at the center of the turning ring (*huanzhong* 環中), outside the world of transforming things, where "all things [. . .] succeed one another in different bodily forms. They begin and end as in an unbroken ring. 萬物 以不同形相禪，始卒若環。" ("Imputed Words" in the *Zhuangzi*). The *dao* axis and the center of the turning ring are not to be grasped through rational analysis or deduction. If there is any way by which they can be approached, it is through the illumination of the obvious (*yiming* 以明), for Zhuangzi rejects merely studying things and neglecting *dao*; he also dismisses trying to understand *dao* with ways that are used to investigate things in the world.

In addition to Sen Xiushu's observation that the expression "*fang* . . . *fang* . . . 方 方"

in the previously quoted passage implies a relativistic perspective on the nature of things, I wish to add that *fang* 方 is a temporal adverb in the same way that *zai* 在 is a spatial adverb. The aforementioned expression also implies "as soon as . . . , . . . immediately follows after". Therefore, the expression "As soon as generation takes place, destruction immediately follows. 方生方死" describes a world of transience where change is the only constancy. This proposition also agrees with the empirical epistemology of Hui Shi. We can also try to get at the relationship between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi from the latter's proposition "pointing never reaches. 指不至。" ("All Under Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi*). Zhang Zhan's 張湛 commentary on the *Liezi* 《列子注》 indicates that it is a proposition that belongs to Hui Shi. In Hui Shi's view, the generation and destruction of things constitute an incessant stream of change. As soon as things come to be, their destruction immediately follows; as soon as things perish, their generation immediately follows. What was a moment ago has now ceased to be. Things are always in between changes. This is a view that is similar to "one cannot step into the same river twice". At the moment when something is pointed at, it has undergone change, which renders it another thing altogether, distinct from what it was a moment ago. Hence, "pointing never reaches. 指不至。"⁸ It seems that Hui Shi may have believed that everything is changing, coming to be, and perishing without end.⁹

The disagreement between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi is the disagreement between Daoism and the School of Names. This important disagreement aptly demonstrates the essential distinction between *dao* and things for philosophical Daoism. As shown in the previous discussion, Zhuangzi puts forward his Daoist theories on the basis of his critique of the thoughts of Hui Shi. These arguments have, in part, become a line of thought by which Zhuangzi develops his theories. This is also the reason behind the repeated references to Hui Shi in the *Zhuangzi*. The School of Names

produces rigorous analyses that are winding and convoluted, making others unable to counter their meaning. They argue solely by names and fail to take consideration of concrete situations in the human world. 苛察繳繞，使人不得反其意，專決於名而失人情。

(“Author’s Preface of the Grand Scribe” in the *Shiji*
《史記·太史公自序》)

The fundamental deficiency of the School of Names lies in its failing to grasp the transcendence of *dao*. Hui Shi, for example, has a broad knowledge of various kinds of things in the world, but he does not go beyond the myriad things into the world of *dao*. Zhuangzi's criticism of Hui Shi is telling of the difference between the two schools. It also reveals key theories of philosophical Daoism. Such is the significance of the lengthy arguments with reference to the School of Names in "Equalizing Assessments of Things" in the *Zhuangzi*.

7.2 *You and wu*

The disagreements between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi reflect the essential differences between Daoism and the School of Names. Zhuangzi's critique of the School of Names also reveals the relationship of *dao* and things in philosophical Daoism. How do Daoists expound the relationship in positive terms? In brief, things are *you*, and *dao* implies *wu*. One of Laozi's greatest contributions is that he was first to explain the philosophy of *wu*. *Wu*, as a philosophical concept, is an important benchmark in the first breakthrough of philosophy in the history of Chinese thought. Laozi's *wu* includes the various meanings "formlessness", "namelessness", "non-obsessive desire", and "knowing without knowledge". Intriguingly, Laozi almost always discusses *wu* on the basis of a discussion of *you* or situates his discussion in a contrastive explication of both *you* and *wu*.

7.2.1

On the topic of *dao* and things, the *Laozi* contains sayings such as "As a thing, *dao* is shadowy and indistinct. 道之為物，惟恍惟惚。" (ch. 21) and "There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth. 有物混成，先天地生。" (ch. 25). These seem to give the impression that the two are not conceptually distinct. This is not the case. It is perhaps more plausible that Laozi cares not for conceptual thinking, for is it not the case that the name *dao* is given as a "makeshift name 強名" and the ambiguous state of *dao* as a thing is given in the most ambiguous terms? Laozi makes clear one point: Before heaven and earth came to be, it was nameless; after their coming to be, names also exist. That is to say, *dao* is nameless and things have names. It is in this sense that he says,

Dimly visible, it cannot be named and returns to that which is without substance. This is called the shape that has no shape, the image that is without substance. This is called indistinct and shadowy. 繩繩不可名，復歸於無物。是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂惚恍。

(ch. 14 of the *Laozi*)

From the perspective of the world of things, *dao* is shadowy and indistinct, as if without substance. In this sense, *dao* is the opposite of things. In addition, Laozi also says, "*Dao* begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad things. 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。" (ch. 42) and "The myriad

things in the world are born from *you*, and *you* from *wu*. 天下萬物生於有，有生於無。” (ch. 40). These two passages are indicative of a strand of thought that says “*dao* begets things 道生物”, from which one can perhaps vaguely discern the inception of *qi*-centered cosmogonic theories that are typical of Han dynasty philosophy. But the essential purpose of these two passages is to explain the kinship between *dao* and things.¹⁰ The notion of “*dao* is itself objectless” is undoubtedly present in Laozi’s thought. In other words, *dao* transcends the scope of things as evidenced in passages such as “*Dao* is empty, yet use will not drain it. Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures. 道沖而用之，或不盈。” (ch. 4) and “It is empty without being exhausted. The more it works the more comes out. 虛而不屈，動而愈出。” (ch.5). These characteristics of *dao* cannot be circumscribed by ordinary understanding of things in the world and inevitably call for the emergence of a theory of metaphysics with the purpose of giving expression to *dao*, as it is beyond form.

The implicit distinction of *dao* and things in the *Laozi* is made explicit in the *Zhuangzi* through the proposition “that which turns things into things is itself not a thing 物物者非物” (“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*). A profound discussion of the difference in property between *dao* and things is included in the *Zhuangzi*:

Things are such that there is no end to their magnitude; no stop to their temporal duration; no constancy to their divisions. Its beginning and end have no cause. 夫物，量無窮，時無止，分無常，終始無故。”

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Dao has no end or beginning, while all things come to be and perish. [*Dao*] comes to no reliable completion. Now empty, now full, it does not remain positioned in any one fixed form. The years cannot be held on to; time cannot be stopped. Waxing and waning, filling and emptying, each end is succeeded by a new beginning. It is thus that we describe the way by which all is appropriately so as they are, and discuss the principle of all things. Things come to be like a galloping horse. With every moment they alter, with every moment they shift. What should you do and what should you not do? In any case, everything transforms spontaneously, you are no exception. 道無終始，物有死生。不恃其成，一虛一滿，不位乎其形。年不可舉，時不可止；消息盈虛，終則有始。是所以語大義之方，論萬物之理也。物之生也，若驟若馳，無動而不變，無時而不移。何為乎？何不為乎？夫固將自化。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The *Huainanzi* also points out:

All things have predictable traits, only *dao* lacks predictable traits. 凡物有朕，唯道無朕。

(“Bingluexun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·兵略訓》)

In these passages, the *Zhuangzi* indicates its belief in the infinitude of things in space and time (“there is no end to their magnitude; no stop to their temporal duration 量無窮，時無止”) and the lack of constancy in the flowing transformation of all things (“Things come to be like a galloping horse. With every moment they alter, with every moment they shift. 物之生也，若驟若馳，無動而不變，無時而不移。”). This appears to be a repetition of Hui Shi’s “thoughts ranging through things of all kinds 歷物之意”, but we ought to be aware that the earlier passage is mostly concerned with things, with the only exception being “[*dao*] comes to no reliable completion. Now empty, now full, it does not remain positioned in any one fixed form. 不恃其成，一虛一滿，不位乎其形。” This line alone refers exclusively to *dao*. Similarly, “the principle of all things 萬物之理” is also concerned with the realm of physics (natural philosophy) and is not applicable to the realm of “the beyond form”, for Daoist metaphysics is chiefly concerned with “the meaning of *dao* and *de* 道德之意”. The statement “*Dao* has no end or beginning, while all things come to be and perish. 道無終始，物有死生。” presents a summary of the Daoist view on the nature of *dao* and things. It admits, in part, that the phenomenal world is identifiable with the world of things. However, this doctrine is supplemented by another doctrine, “Beginnings and ends [in the world of things] have no cause 終始無故”, which fundamentally challenges the concepts of cause and causal pattern (*gu* 故) that are integral to the study of physics. This point has been sufficiently discussed in previous sections.

7.2.2

Next, let us continue our discussion of physics, or the principle of motion, within the context of the relationship of *dao* and things. While a level of physical thinking is implied by Laozi’s theory of cosmogenesis with the proposition of “*Dao* begets . . . the myriad things 道生萬物” (ch. 42 of the *Laozi*), this strand of thinking is certainly diminished in the *Zhuangzi*; for example,

All things are seeds of one another, succeeding one another in different bodily forms. They begin and end as in an unbroken ring and no one can comprehend its principle. That is called “heaven equality”. 萬物皆種也，以不同形相禪，始卒若環，莫得其倫，是謂天均。

(“Imputed Words” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The bright is born from the dark, and the determinable is born from the formless. The pure spirit is born from *dao*. It is from this pure spirit the physical body is originally born. All things generate one another by transformation of form. 昭昭生於冥冥，有倫生於無形，精神生於道，形本生於精，而萬物以形相生。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The ceaseless transformation of the myriad things consists of no more than a changing of forms. All things “succeeding one another in different bodily forms

以不同形相禪” indicates a cyclicity that is not unlike the concept of *Samsāra*. However, *dao* is outside this cycle of form. Hence, it is said that the way to grasping *dao* is “to find the centre of the turning ring 得其環中”. Based on the thought that all things generate one another and that that which facilitates generation is also a thing, Guo Xiang 郭象 argues that all things generate and transform entirely by virtue of their own power. However, his interpretation meets with difficulty with Zhuangzi’s proposition of “that which turns things into things is itself not a thing 物物者非物”, which cannot be subsumed under Guo Xiang’s worldview, where the generation and transformation of each thing is considered in and of itself and “each thing turns into a thing independently 物自物”. In fact, the *Laozi* and, especially, the *Zhuangzi* comment on the relationship between *dao* and things not so much with cosmogenic theories but with ontological ones, for lack of a more suitable term. The principal theoretical instrument or component in Chinese cosmogenic theory is the concept of *qi*. The first of the two passages quoted next contains a *qi*-based cosmology, which implies a certain kind of cosmogenic theory:

Indeterminate and indistinct, do they not seem to come from nowhere? Indistinct and indeterminate, is there no visible image of it? Each thing minds its business, and all grow by a non-purposive process. [. . .] Looking back to her beginning, she had no life. Not only had she no life, but she had no form. Not only had she no form, but she had no breath. In the midst of an ungraspable and indistinct jumble, a change took place and she had breath; another change and she took on form; another change and she was born. Now there’s been another change and she’s dead. The relation between these things is like the procession of the four seasons from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. 芒乎芴乎，而無從出乎！芴乎芒乎，而無有象乎！萬物職職，皆從無為殖。 察其始而本無生，非徒無生也，而本無形，非徒無形也，而本無氣。雜乎芒芴之間，變而有氣，氣變而有形，形變而有生，今又變而之死，是相與為春夏秋冬夏四時行也。

(“Perfect Happiness” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In the very beginning, there was nothing; no being, no name. Out of it arose one; there was one, but it had yet to have form. Things getting hold of it and coming to life is what is called *de*. Before things had form, that they had their allotments and were not cut off from one another is what is called the propensity of circumstances. Out of the flow and flux, that things were born, and as they grew, they developed distinctive shapes is what is called form. That these forms and bodies held within them a spirit, each with its own characteristics and limitations, is what is called their natural propensities. If natural propensities are nurtured, you may return to *de*, and *de* at its perfection is identical with that in the very beginning. 泰初有無，無有無名，一之所起，有一而未形。物得以生，謂之德；未形者有分，且然無間，謂之命；留動而生物，物成生理，謂之形；形體保神，各有儀則，謂之性。性修反德，德至同於初。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The phrase “*mangwu* 芒芴” from the first passage is equivalent to Laozi’s “*huanghu* 恍惚”. Both phrases indicate “there being neither something nor nothing”. The passage describes a two-stage cosmogenesis, where a time of indeterminate and indistinct being without form is followed by a time of things with form that come into and out of existence, generating one another in turn. However, the second passage explains more adequately the Daoist view on the relationship between *dao* and things, for it considers *de* to be the ultimate origin of the myriad things in the physical universe. It states that “things sprang up owing to that which is called *de*. 物得以生，謂之德。” and implies that “natural propensities” (*xing* 性), according to Daoists, are given by *de*. “As things grew, they developed in principled manners; these are called form. 物成生理，謂之形。” This line clearly draws the boundary within which principles are applicable – namely, within the world of things with form. This is the original meaning of “principle” (*li* 理). The line “the forms and bodies held within them spirits, each with its own characteristics and limitations, and this is called natural propensities. 形體保神，各有儀則，謂之性。” furthers the Daoist thesis on natural propensities while avoiding the theoretical deadlock of equating natural propensities with the essence of life or whatever that happens to develop naturally.

Moreover, Zhuangzi furthers the Daoist thesis on the relationship between *dao* and things with his proposition “that which turns things into things is itself not a thing 物物者非物”. His arguments also sparked endless discussions for posterity. Let us consider some of his arguments in turn:

Possessing a great thing, one is unable to turn things into things. The ability to turn things into things comes with not being a thing. This is transparent once one acknowledges that that which turns things into things is itself not a thing. 有大物者，不可以物物；而不物，故能物物。明乎物物者之非物也。

(“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*)

That which turns things into things is not separated from things by any border. So the borders that the things themselves take on – these are merely borders from the side of things. The borderless, when exemplified in each particular thing, has physical, outward borders; yet these borders do not separate them [from that which turns things into things]. 物物者與物無際，而物有際者，所謂物際者也；不際之際，際之不際者也。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Dao cannot be heard; whatever is heard is not it. *Dao* cannot be seen; whatever is seen is not it. *Dao* cannot be spoken; whatever is spoken is not it. Know that what forms forms has no form. *Dao* corresponds to no name. 道不可聞，聞而非也；道不可見，見而非也；道不可言，言而非也。知形形之不形乎？道不當名。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

If there is something before heaven and earth, could it be any specifiable thing? What turns things into things is itself not a thing, for as soon as a

thing has appeared, it is no longer before all things. It may seem as if there is something there, but the something this is can only be *wu*. The sage's selfless love for all people is rooted in this. 有先天地生者物邪？物物者非物。物出不得先物也，猶其有物也。猶其有物也，無已。聖人之愛人也終無已者，亦乃取於是者也。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

It is clear from these passages that “that which turns things into things” (*wuwu-zhe* 物物者) is outside the world of things, i.e. belonging to the realm of “*wu*-thing 無物”. “That which turns things into things is not separated from things by any border 物物者與物無際” from the second passage indicates an intimate and borderless relationship between *dao* and things. There is no border between *dao* and things, and as such *dao* is present even in excrement and urine.¹¹ There are borders between one thing and another, and as such one cow is not confused with the next and a mountain does not share the same space with a valley. Guo Xiang's 郭象 commentary on this line reflects his philosophical outlook as a whole. He writes,

Understanding clearly that which turns things into things is not a thing; one knows that each thing turns into a thing independently. Since each thing turns into a thing independently, such operations are impenetrable. 明物物者無物，而物自物耳。物自物耳，故冥也。

Cheng Xuanying's 成玄英 annotation to Guo's commentary states,

The word “border 際” refers to a cliff or a border between patches of fields. Only the sage can assist in the course of things turning into things. The sage, in mysterious fashion, becomes one with all situations. Hence, he is not separated from each thing.

By comparison, Zhong Tai 鐘泰 writes, “That which turns things into things is equivalent to that which forms forms but has no form”. However, ZHONG's belief that “the myriad things generate one another through the transformation of form 萬物以形相生” is equivalent to “forming form 形形”. This view is erroneous, for it confuses metaphysics, which deals with “the beyond form”, and physics, which deals with things with form. “All things generate one another through the transformation of form” is a physical proposition, whereas “the determinate is born from the formless 有倫生於無形” is a metaphysical proposition. They belong to different subjects and should not be confused. Understanding this is crucial to the proper interpretation of the final passage.

7.2.3

The concept of *qi* finds a suitable role in the theorisation of cosmogenesis and of the material composition of both the human body and the myriad things. However, it is intriguing that *qi* is not particularly favoured in the *Laozi*. The word appears

only three times in total. Among these instances is one in chapter 42, which states, “The myriad things carry on their backs *yin* and in their arms *yang* and they are harmonised in their confluence of *qi*. 萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和”；this is followed by the statement “*Dao* begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad things. 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。” Perhaps the appropriateness of *qi* in this context is not an accident, for cosmogenesis and the concept of *qi* are very congenial. Nonetheless, we have no reason to overestimate the importance of the concept of *qi* in the Lao-Zhuang School of philosophical Daoism. Neither is it necessary to label philosophical Daoism as a philosophy of cosmogenesis since the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi has clearly gone beyond physics and set foot in the realm of metaphysics.

In the passage we quoted earlier,

In the midst of an ungraspable and indistinct jumble, a change took place and there is *qi*; another change and there is form; another change and there is life. 雜乎芒芴之間，變而有氣，氣變而有形，形變而有生。” (“Perfect Happiness” in the Zhuangzi), the phrase “*mangwu* 芒芴” is equivalent to “*huanghu* 恍惚”, both meaning “indeterminate and indistinct”

Daoist thinkers often use this phrase to represent an indeterminate state between you and *wu*. *Qi* in this passage refers to the notion of “one-*qi* 一氣”, which is unique to the Zhuangzi. It can represent an indeterminate state at the beginning of the world as well as the first principle of all subsequent things that have come to be. According to “Perfect Happiness” of the Zhuangzi, *qi* is in between *dao* and things, between you and *wu*. It is “the middle joint between the metaphysical (formless *qi*) and the physical (things with form). When *qi* congeals form is formed, when form dissolves it becomes *qi*. [152] The Daoist view of *qi* does have a suggestion of cosmogenic theories. In addition to the clear example of

Dao begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad things. The myriad things carry on their backs *yin* and in their arms *yang* and they are harmonised in their confluence of *qi*. 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi* contains a passage that indicates the cosmogenic paradigm. It states, “[Those who roam outside the lines] chum about as a human being with the maker of things, and roam in the one-*qi* of heaven and earth. 彼方且與造物者為人，而遊乎天地之一氣。” Development of this line of thinking is found in both the previous quoted passage from “Perfect Happiness” and another passage from “Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*:

Life is the follower of death, and death is the beginning of life; who can discern any fixed order to them? The birth of persons is just a convergence of *qi*. When it converges, they live. When it scatters, they die. [. . .] Hence, it is said, “Open oneself into the one-*qi* that is this world”. 生也死之徒，死也生

之始，孰知其紀！人之生，氣之聚也，聚則為生，散則為死 故曰：『通天下一氣耳。』

The convergence and scattering of *qi* is thus used by Daoist thinkers to explain the coming and ceasing to be of all things. In this sense, *qi* is equivalent to the ancient Greek *archē*, or atom, and Daoist theories of *qi* are similar to ancient Greek physics. However, as *qi* is in between *you* and *wu*, it also serves as the bridge between *dao* and things. From a theoretical point of view, “a medial state is required in the process where the formless and non-purposive *dao* begets the myriad things with form”.¹² The Daoist notion of *qi* is peculiarly interesting, for it stands for neither *you* nor *wu* and at the same time directly relates to both *you* and *wu*. In any case, Daoists are definite on the greater importance and primariness of *dao* over *qi*. Li Cunshan 李存山 accurately points out,

Qi is nowhere as important as *dao*. *Dao* “is its own root and origin 自本自根”, “is as it is since the beginning 自古以固存”. The coming to be of *qi*, on the other hand, is entirely different. “In the midst of an ungraspable and indistinct jumble, a change took place and there is *qi*. 雜乎芒芴之間，變而有氣。” This proves that Zhuangzi does not consider *qi* to be the most fundamental substance.¹³

7.2.4

Wu in philosophical Daoism is complex, profound, pregnant with implicative meanings, and it deserves scholarly attention across the board. Meng Wentong 蒙文通 writes,

Discussions in the Zhou and Qin dynasties focussed on the topics of natural propensities and *dao* and did not involve the topics of emptiness (*shūnyatā*) and *you*. Since the introduction of Indian thought to China, debaters of these topics became widespread.¹⁴

Meng’s observation is factually correct. However, there was no lack of discussions of *you* and *wu* during the Zhou and Qin dynasties, which were representative of the earliest philosophical works by ancient thinkers during the Axial Age. The earliest philosophically significant terms were not as abstract as later ones. *You* and *wu* both contain elements of concrete imagery. One may reference Giambattista Vico’s “poetic wisdom” to describe these characteristics. The *Laozi* is truly a philosophical poem. Its terms and phrases are, more often than not, concrete and not abstract. For example, *you* and *wu* in the *Laozi*, contrary to the interpretations of Song dynasty Confucian scholars, are not abstract concepts. Instead, they are the abbreviated form of having form and formlessness, having name and namelessness, having-obsessive-desire and its opposite, purposive action and non-purposive action, and so on.

Referencing the early classics (including the *Book of Songs*, the *Shang Shu*, the *Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Guo Yu*), it can be

deduced that the notion of ghosts and spirits (*guishen* 鬼神) in the ancient Chinese religious consciousness contributed to the formation of the concepts of *you* and *wu* in subsequent philosophical development. This is because ghosts and spirits were believed to be capable of effecting good and ill fortune, auspicious and disastrous happenings, and yet they were invisible, i.e. formless. These characteristics may have directly or indirectly inspired the earliest concepts of *you* and *wu*. The earliest instances of *you* and *wu* refer precisely to “having form” and “formlessness”. Let us first examine one of these instances in “Ming Gui III” in the *Mozi* 《墨子·明鬼下》, for it is perhaps the earliest text in which the problem of *you* and *wu* is discussed. Interestingly, the central thesis of “Ming Gui III” is “the difference between the *you* and *wu* of ghosts and spirits 鬼神之有與無之別”, where *wu* is used to stand for “non-existence” (*wuyou* 無有). The question of whether ghosts and spirits existed sprang from treating ghosts and spirits as things. Hence, Mozi points out,

The way to find out whether anything exists (*you*) or not (*wuyou*) is to rely upon the testimony of the ears and eyes of the multitude. If some have heard it or some have seen it then we have to say it exists (*you*). If no one has heard it and no one has seen it then we have to say it does not exist (*wu*). 是與天下之所以察知有與無之道者，必以眾之耳目之實知有與亡為儀者也，請惑聞之見之，則必以為有，莫聞莫見，則必以為無。

It is clear from this quote that *you* and *wuyou* refer to “having form” and “formlessness”. These notions went through subsequent philosophic distillation in which concrete reasoning became abstract reasoning. As seen from the “Ming Gui III”, it is possible that the earliest discussions of *you* and *wu* were derived from the problem of whether ghosts and spirits were *you* (having form) or *wuyou* (formless).

In addition, “Gengsangchu” in the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子·庚桑楚》 includes a passage that mentions ghosts. It argues that the essence of ghosts is “invisible and yet having substance 滅而有實”, and that the word “ghost” (*gui* 鬼) comes from “using that with form to represent that which is without form”. If this is not rational disenchantment, what is? The *Zhongyong* 《中庸》 also includes the example

The *de* of the ghosts and spirits [. . .] is such that looking, we do not see them, and listening we do not hear them. They are embodied in all things without exception. 鬼神之為德 視之而弗見，聽之而弗聞，體物而不可遺。

This shows that the author of this passage acknowledges the formless existence of ghosts and spirits and their imperceptibility by the ordinary senses. Another example is found in “Xiang Furen” in the *Jiuge* 《九歌·湘夫人》:

The child of god, descending the northern bank, turns on me her eyes that are dark with longing. [. . .] I gaze without object on the distance over the swiftly moving waters. 帝子降兮北渚，目眇眇兮愁予。 荒忽兮遠望，觀流水兮潺湲。

These lines depict the descending of spirit (*jiangshen* 降神), where spirit (*shen* 神) is invited into one's consciousness through a certain ritual. “*Miaomiao* 眇眇” from the first sentence means “looking out but not seeing clearly the object of one's sight 望之不見” (Hong Xingzu 洪興祖, *Chuci Buzhu* 《楚辭補註》). “*Huanghu* 荒忽” from the second sentence is equivalent to “*huanghu* 恍惚”, i.e. seeing with a vision whose object is indeterminate and indistinct. Two lines from the *Yuanyou* 《遠遊》 that depict the experience of undergoing the descending of spirit are also relevant here: “Restless, frustrated, consumed with constant yearning. 怵怵而乖懷” and “My thoughts were wild and wandered distractedly. 意荒忽而流蕩兮”. “*Changhuang* 惛惛” from the first line depicts a restless state of mind. “*Huanghu* 荒忽” from the second line refers to distracted thoughts. With regard to these lines, Wang Yi 王逸 notes in *Chuci Zhangju* 《楚辭章句》, “Thought and mind are distracted, for there is nothing to rely on. 情思罔兩, 無據依也。” Accordingly, we can deduce that “*changhuang* 惛惛” and “*huanghu* 荒忽” are phrases that describe the experience of undergoing the descending of spirit into one's consciousness, and that these words have their origin in religious experience. Similarly, with regard to another line from the *Yuanyou*, “[My wish is] to rise on high by transformations of qi; in wondrous strange motion swiftly quicken; seen betimes vaguely and at distance far; in perfect brightness shuttle through the space under heaven. 因氣變而遂曾舉兮, 忽神奔而鬼怪。時彷彿以遙見兮, 精皎皎以往來。”, Lin Yunming 林雲銘 notes that the transformation of qi “is volatile and neigh imperceptible. Its wondrous transformations are unpredictable. 忽如神出鬼沒, 其變幻不可端倪。” [156] The *Yuanyou* also contains another line, “When I looked, my startled eyes saw nothing; when I listened, no sound met my amazed ear. 視倏忽而無見兮, 聽惛恍而無聞。超無為以至清兮, 與泰初而為鄰。”, on which Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 comments,

With clear vision, one sees that things have never had an outward image; hearing with clarity, one finds that transformations have no sound. This is why Zhuangzi says there is a true ruler [of things] but its real presence has no trace 視徹乎倏忽, 物本無象, 而何有見。聽察乎惛恍, 化本無聲也, 而有何聞。莊生謂有真君焉而不得其朕者也。

Other examples include Wang Chong 王充, who says that “ghosts and spirits are names for the imperceptible and invisible. 鬼神, 荒忽不見之名也。” This is because “human beings take the spirit-*qi* to have life, and after death one returns to the spirit-*qi*. 人用神氣生, 其死復歸神氣。” (“Lun Si” in the *Lun Heng* 《論衡·論死》).

The previously quoted examples present two questions worthy of investigation. First, it is possible that the issue of having form and formlessness was originally formulated through religious experience and the concept of ghosts and spirits in ancient religious practices, although the precise process through which this development came about is thus far unclear. Ghosts and spirits, as they are conceived in religious practices (including offering rituals, *jisi* 祭祀, and spiritual communication practices, *wushu* 巫術), exist neither substantially nor insubstantially.

Although ghosts and spirits are certainly formless and imperceptible with the ordinary senses, they are beings that effect changes in the world in mysterious ways. In the examples quoted earlier, *you* and *wu* are directly related to hearing (*wen* 聞) and sight (*jian* 見). This is no coincidence. Explanation can be found in a passage from the *Zhuangzi*:

He lets his spirit ascend and mount on the light; with his bodily form, he dissolves and is gone. This is called the vast illumination. He lives out his fate, follows to the end his true form, and rests in the joy of heaven and earth while the myriad cares melt away. So, all things return to their true form. This is called murky darkness. 上神乘光，與形滅亡，此謂照曠。天地樂而萬事銷亡，萬物復情，此之謂混冥。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Second, phrases such as “*changhuang* 惝怳” and “*shuhu* 倏忽” present a complex and paradoxical relationship between *you* and *wu*. When neither sight nor hearing can reveal a clear object, this indeterminate sensual condition is extended to become a subjective state of mind or, more precisely, a state of attainment that does not differentiate subject and object, this and that. On this point, Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 interpretation takes note of these two issues. For Wang, the “*changhuang* 惝怳” and “*shuhu* 倏忽” states of consciousness when “communicating with spiritual illuminance 通與神明” are identified with *dao*, which is not to be seen and not to be heard. This indicates the intimate link between religious experience and the philosophical issue of *you* and *wu*.

Daoist thinkers often relate things with *you* and *dao* with *wu* and make explicit that the difference between *dao* and things is equivalent to that between *you* and *wu*. Nonetheless, Laozi speaks of *dao* as a thing. Why is that? Let us examine relevant passages:

As a thing, *dao* is indeterminate and indistinct. Indistinct and indeterminate, yet within it is an image; indeterminate and indistinct, yet within it is a thing. Dim and dark, yet within it is an essence. This essence is so genuine and within it is truthfulness. 道之為物，唯恍唯惚。忽兮恍兮，其中有象；恍兮忽兮，其中有物。窈兮冥兮，其中有精；其精甚真，其中有信。

(ch. 21 of the *Laozi*)

Dimly visible, it cannot be named and returns to that which is without substance. This is called the shape that has no shape, the image that is without substance. This is called indistinct and indeterminate. 繩繩不可名，復歸於無物。是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂惚恍。

(ch. 14 of the *Laozi*)

These passages indicate that *dao* as a thing is a *wu*-thing (a thing that is not a thing), which is similar to *to on* (τὸ ὄν, i.e. “being”, as it is conceived in subsequent philosophical history).¹⁵ It is to be contrasted with a general thing in physical reality and also with *you*, i.e. existence in time and space, as it is considered in Western

philosophy. This contrast between *dao* and things is key to Daoist thought as a whole. In the previously quoted passages, Laozi explains the relationship between *dao* and *wu* (more specifically with the notion of formlessness) through the phrase “indeterminate and indistinct” (*huanghu* 恍惚). In ontological terms, it is a state in between *you* and *wu* (*youwuzhijian* 有無之間). According to the Chen Bixu 陳碧虛’s commentary, “‘indistinct (*hu* 惚)’ means *wu* and represents *wu* and not-*wu*; ‘indeterminate (*huang* 恍)’ means *you* and represents *you* and not-*you*”. Laozi uses the expressions “as a thing” (*weiwu* 為物) and “is a thing” (*youwu* 有物) merely to convey that *dao* is real and can exert its effect like a *to on*. In Chen Bixu’s words,

Since *dao* is formless, how could it be described as *you*? Since it has no form, and cannot be named, how is one to convey what it is? One could only reference the phrase “indeterminate and indistinct” to portray its imperceptible image with its shadowy echo. The word “indeterminate”, which is akin to *you*, is to illustrate that *dao* is *you* and not *you*; “indistinct”, akin to *wu*, illustrates that *dao* is *wu* and not *wu*.¹⁶

By contrast, in Zhuangzi’s words, *dao* is “agitating as though it is not 惘然若有亡” (“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*). These are, in fact, philosophically distilled expressions of the same characteristics (being simultaneously formless and real) that also belong to ghosts and spirits. “Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi* contains a passage that can be seen as a footnote to this aspect of *dao*, which has its origin in the *Laozi*. It says,

What turns things into things is itself not a thing, for as soon as a thing has appeared, it is no longer before all things. It may seem as if there is something there, but the something this is, can only be *wu*. 物物者非物。物出不得先物也，猶其有物也。猶其有物也，無已。

“Indeterminate and indistinct” (*huanghu* 恍惚) and “dim and dark” (*yaoming* 窈冥) are often chosen phrases that Daoist thinkers have used to describe *dao* as a *wu*-thing. They highlight *dao* as in between *you* and *wu*, between what is graspable and what is incognizable. These are the basic characteristics of *dao*. Nonetheless, there are several other aspects of *dao* that are not to be neglected. In fact, the following representations of *dao* are perhaps more typical in the *Laozi*:

Dao is empty, yet use will not drain it. Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures. Blunt the sharpness; untangle the knots; soften the glare; and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there. 道沖而用之或不盈。淵兮似萬物之宗。挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。湛兮，似或存。

(ch. 4)

Tentative, it is as if fording a river in winter. Hesitant, it is as if in fear of his neighbours. Grave, it is like a guest in awe. Falling apart, it is like the thawing

ice. Unpretentious, it is like an uncarved block. Vacant and broad, it is like a valley. Murky and dull, it is like muddy water. 豫兮若冬涉川；猶兮若畏四鄰；儼兮其若容；渙兮若冰之將釋；敦兮其若樸；曠兮其若谷；混兮其若濁。

(ch. 15)

The multitude are joyous, as if partaking of the offering or going up to a terrace in spring. I alone am inactive and reveal no signs, waxing without having reached the limit, and like a baby that has not yet learned to smile, listless as though with no home to go back to. The multitude all have more than enough. I alone seem to be in want. My mind is that of a fool – how blank! And how muddy! Vulgar people are clear. I alone am drowsy. Vulgar people are alert. I alone am muddled. Calm like the sea; and like a high wind that never ceases. 荒兮其未央哉！衆人熙熙，如享太牢，如春登臺。我獨怕兮其未兆；如嬰兒之未孩；儻儻兮若無所歸。衆人皆有餘，而我獨若遺。我愚人之心也哉！沌沌兮，俗人昭昭，我獨若昏。俗人察察，我獨悶悶。澹兮其若海，颺兮若無止。

(ch. 20)

Do these passages echo Heidegger's "poetic thinking" that he holds in such high regard? We must not consider these passages in separation from the aforementioned phrases, such as "indeterminate and indistinct", "alone and silent" (*jiliao* 寂寥), "dim and dark". In the first passage, in addition to a vague depiction of the image of *dao*, Laozi introduces similar imagery within the heart-mind; namely, "Blunt the sharpness; untangle the knots; soften the glare; and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. 挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。" Equally, the second and third passages use a language typical of the depiction of *dao*'s image to reflect a state of consciousness. Just as indeterminate and indistinct and dim and dark represent *dao*'s image, drowsy (*hunhun* 昏昏) and muddled (*menmen* 悶悶) represent a state of consciousness and a level of attainment that are in communion with *dao*. Since this heart-mind condition is attainable only by sages, Laozi says,

The sage in his attempt to distract the mind of the empire seeks urgently to muddle it. The people all have something to occupy their eyes and ears, and the sage treats them all like children. 聖人在天下歛歛，為天下渾其心，百姓皆注其耳目，聖人皆孩之。

(ch. 49 of the *Laozi*)

Put in a perhaps somewhat farfetched way, *dao* is not merely ontological, it is also of the heart-mind. It is very important to note that the various "indeterminate and indistinct" expressions are typically used to represent a state of consciousness that is in communion with *dao*, for this is the most vital key to interpreting philosophical Daoism as a whole. Yang Xiong 楊雄 has the expression "indeterminate and indistinct spirit and heart-mind" (*shenxin huanghu* 神心恍惚) (*Fayanxu*

《法言序》), and he implies that “indeterminate and indistinct” is precisely a way to describe the state of “the heart-mind in contact with spirits” (*jiaoshenzhixin* 交神之心). This is a reasonable interpretation because in the *Laozi* non-purposive action stands not only for the indeterminate and silent state at the beginning of the universe but also for the empty and quiescent state of consciousness when in communion with *dao*. These two aspects echo each other. In Zhuangzi’s words,

The essence of the perfect *dao* is deep and darkly shrouded; the principle of the perfect *dao* is mysterious and hushed in silence. Let there be no seeing, no hearing; enfold the spirit in quietude, and the body will right itself. [. . .] I form a triad with the light of the sun and moon, to partake in the constancy of heaven and earth. What stands before me I mingle with, what is far from me I leave in darkness. [. . .] Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget you are a thing among other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless. Undo the mind, slough off spirit, be blank and soulless, and the ten thousand things one by one will return to the root – return to the root and not know why. Muddled indeterminacy – to the end of life, none will depart from it. 至道之精，窈窈冥冥；至道之極，昏昏默默。無視無聽，抱神以靜，形將自正。 吾與日月參光，吾與天地為常。當我，緝乎。遠我，昏乎。 墮爾形體，吐爾聰明；倫與物忘，大同乎溟溟；解心釋神，莫然無魂。萬物云云，各復其根，各復其根而不知。渾渾沌沌，終身不離。

(“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Dao – how deep its dwelling, how pure its clearness! [. . .] Broad and boundless, suddenly it emerges. Abruptly he moves, and the myriad things follow. [. . .] You may join with heaven and earth. Your joining is obscure and indistinct, as though you were stupid, as though you could not see. This is called murky-*de*. 夫道，淵乎其居也，濇乎其清也。 蕩蕩乎！忽然出，勃然動，而萬物從之乎！ 與天地為合。其合緝緝，若愚若昏，是謂玄德。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The men of old dwelled in the midst of muddled indeterminacy; side by side with the rest of the world, they attained simplicity and silence there. At that time the *yin* and *yang* were harmonious and still; ghosts and spirits worked no mischief. 古之人在混芒之中，與一而得澹漠焉。當是時也，陰陽和靜，鬼神不擾。

(“Mending What Was Natural” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In these passages, phrases such as “deep and darkly shrouded” (*yaoyaoming-ming* 窈窈冥冥), “mysterious and silent” (*hunhunmomo* 昏昏默默), and “muddled indeterminacy” (*hunhundundun* 渾渾沌沌) are synonymous with “indeterminate and indistinct”. They are visual depictions that portray unclarity, corresponding to the conceptual tension between *you* and *wu*. They are used to portray both *dao* as it is and the state of attainment when in communion with *dao* from a subjective

point of view. Clearly, Zhuangzi has further developed and enriched Laozi's notion of *wu*, incorporating vibrant notions in the context of heart-mind theory. In other words, Zhuangzi's discussion of *dao* is not limited to *dao* as the origin and underlying principle of all things; his creative master stroke is to transform the ontological and metaphysical meanings of *wu* into a profound understanding in the lived experience of the truth of *dao* in terms of theories of the heart-mind as well as of state of attainment. Hence, from a structural perspective, physical theories in philosophical Daoism invariably lead to theories of heart-mind and state of attainment. Heart-mind theories, spiritual philosophy, practical philosophy, and state-of-attainment metaphysics are the ultimate ends of philosophical Daoism.

In conclusion, there are at least two theoretical frameworks that Daoist thinkers have used to explain the relationship between *dao* and things. One of these is the theoretical framework of physics that is commonly presented in terms of cosmogonic theories and their derivative forms, or through physical deductive reasoning, leading to propositions such as “the minutest has no form 至精無形”. Alternatively, Daoist thinkers go beyond the physical realm and theorise in the metaphysical framework, asserting straightforwardly “that which turns things into things is not itself a thing 物物者非物” (*dao* and things are different and yet conceptually related). In any case, the clear distinction and close relationship of *dao* and things are essential aspects of philosophical Daoism. This is also the basis of Daoist philosophical theorisation. Daoist physics (natural philosophy) purports to explain natural phenomena in the world of things; namely, the principle behind their transformation of coming to be and going out of existence, which is also called the principle of heaven and earth. This physical aspect of philosophical Daoism clearly displays a transitional nature, for its ultimate end lies in metaphysics; namely, the metaphysical theory of *dao*. The previous analysis has investigated the process by which Daoist theory develops from physics (natural philosophy) to metaphysics. This is a process that seems to echo the history of philosophy in ancient Greece in which physics (*physis*-related theories) developed into metaphysics (philosophies on *logos*, *eidōs*, and *ousia*). As we embark on some of the most vital aspects of philosophical Daoism, it is necessary for us to survey thoroughly the characteristics of philosophical Daoism and make appropriate comparisons with ancient Greek philosophy to clearly delineate the bounds of Daoist metaphysics, which we are about to expound in greater detail.

7.3 No gap between *dao* and things

We have discussed the complex relationship between *you* and *wu*, including their interdependence or, more precisely, their “inter-generation” (*youwuxiangsheng* 有無相生). Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 once said that Laozi's *dao* is the totality of *you* and *wu*.¹⁷ Based on the lines “These two come forth from the same origin but diverge in name. Being the same they are called murkiness. 此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。” in the first chapter of the *Laozi*, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 points out that *you* and *wu* have the same root and origin. Their dual nature represents the duality of *dao*, whereas murkiness (*xuan* 玄) is the totality that unifies both *you* and *wu*.

Wu represents that which is the most primary and fundamental, and *you* represents that which effectuates.¹⁸

We have briefly discussed the problem of being, which is at the centre of ancient Greek metaphysics. Ancient Greek philosophers have approached being from logical, linguistic (i.e. intellectual), and epistemological aspects, which is entirely different from the Daoist way of reasoning, whose starting point is “The *dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *dao*; the name that can be named is not the constant name. 道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。” Between these two traditions, one important divergence is that between the entrenched essentialism since ancient Greece (subsequently criticised by modern philosophers) and the Daoist doctrine of there being “no gap between *dao* and things 道物無際”. Modern and post-modern philosophers in the West have made it clear that essentialism is an aspect of logocentrism that has long been in place in the Western philosophical tradition. In other words, essentialism and logocentrism are two aspects of the same strand of thought. By contrast, Daoist thinkers have always assumed that there is no gap between *dao* and things, i.e. they are inseparably connected. The relationship between *dao* and things is key to understanding the essential difference between physics and metaphysics and is also key to interpreting Daoist metaphysics. However, from the perspective of metaphysics, or “from the perspective of *dao* 以道觀之”, *dao* is such that “there is no place which it has once been and does not return 無往不復” (a notion that is similar to Nietzsche’s eternal return). *Dao* is never separated from any particular thing, nor is anything independent of *dao*. Zhuangzi says that “*dao* is everywhere 道無所不在”, and that “*dao* is in excrement and urine 道在屎溺” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*). Such expressions assume implicitly the notion of there being no gap between *dao* and things, which receives a more straightforward statement in “there is no gap between that which turns things into things and things themselves 物物者與物無際” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*). This notion is echoed in the doctrine of “principles and application originate from one and the same source 體用一源” developed by Song dynasty Confucian thinkers.¹⁹ In contrast to the Western philosophical tradition, Chinese philosophers have repeatedly stressed the doctrine of “no gap between *dao* and things” or “principles and application are not-two 體用不二”. The physical universe and ultimate reality are one and the very same.

Next, let us examine how Zhuangzi uses the method of “grasping the two ends and accomplishing what is optimally appropriate 執兩用中” to appropriately express the theory of “no gap between *dao* and things”. “Optimally appropriate” or centre (of the target) (*zhong* 中) is the centre of the turning ring (*huanzhong* 環中) in previous discussions. Of the two ends, one end that misses the mark is assuming the existence of a higher ruler that governs the workings of the myriad things, i.e. “something does it” (*huoshi* 或使), said to be the position of Jiezi 接子. The other mistaken end is categorically denying the existence of a *dao* that governs all behind the observable reality and assuming the self-dependent transformation of all things. This position assumes the concepts of self-generation (*zisheng* 自生) and spontaneous transformation (*zihua* 自化).

At this point, it is useful to revisit the topic of Daoist physics we mentioned earlier to further our discussion of *you* and *wu*. The problem of “something does it” (*huoshi* 或使) and “no one does it” (*mowei* 莫為) is first found in “Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*:

Between Jizhen’s theory that “no one does it” and Jiezi’s theory that “something causes it”, which is true to the facts and which is merely partial apprehension of how it all fits together? 季真之莫為，接子之或使，二家之議，孰正於其情？孰偏於其理？

Both Jizhen 季真 and Jiezi 接子 were thinkers active in the Jixia School of Daoism 稷下道家. “No one does it” (*mowei* 莫為) and “something causes it” (*huoshi* 或使) constitute the only reliable record of their thoughts. What do these two terms mean? In Han Kangbo’s 韓康伯 annotation to the *Book of Change*, he writes,

[T]he word “spirit” (*shen*) is a word that expresses the mystery that is the myriad things. [. . .] It is used here to highlight the fact that in the motion of the eight diagrams and the process of change and transformation, there is nothing and no one that makes it so. It is spirit-like (*shen*) for there is nothing [that causes it]. It is said so in order to represent the mystery that is the myriad things. 神也者，妙萬物而為言也 於此言神者，明八卦運動變化推移，莫有使之然者。神則無物，妙萬物而為言也。

Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 says,

“No” (*mo* 莫) means “there is not”. “To order” (*shi* 使) means “cause”. Jizhen equates non-purposive action with *dao*, while Jiezi believes that *dao* has the responsibility of ordering things to be as they are. 莫，無也；使，為也。季真以無為為道，接子謂道有使物之功。

Lin Yixi 林逸希 says,

“No one does it” refers to the notion of there never being a ruler behind our reality, and everything happens merely incidentally. “Something causes it” is the belief of the existence of a governing entity that ordains all, just as in the saying “If something moves, it has been ordered to move. If it stops, it has been told to stop”. 莫為者言冥冥之初無主宰，皆偶然爾。或使者，有主宰無非使然，所謂‘行或使之，止或尼之’是也。

It is useful to reference LIN’s idea of occurrences happening “incidentally” to interpret Wang Chong’s 王充 and Guo Xiang’s 郭象 theories of incidental generation (*ousheng* 偶生) and self-generation (*zisheng* 自生). It is noteworthy that the aforementioned proposition is one regarding the relationship between *dao* and things. However, the dichotomy between these two sides conceals an inconspicuous trap. That is, dichotomous answers are certainly both wrong. *Zhuangzi*

considers such problems at considerable length and shows us a way to overcome dichotomous impasses:

Vast Unbiased Harmony said, “Chickens squawk, dogs bark – this is something people know. But even someone with the greatest understanding cannot describe in words whence they come to be this way, nor can she plumb by thought what they will do next. We can go on splitting and analyzing things further, until ‘the minutest reaches the point where there are no more divisions possible, the vastness reaches the point where it cannot be encompassed.’ Whether it is ‘something causes it’ or ‘nothing does it’, they are remarks merely about things; and the end is that we shall find we are in error. ‘Something causes it’ – then there was a real thing. ‘No one does it’ – then there is mere vacancy. To have a name and a real existence – that is the condition of a thing. Not to have a name, and not to have real thing – that is vacancy and no thing. [. . .] These theories of ‘something causes it’ or ‘nothing does it’ are merely crutches for your doubt to lean on. I gaze at its root, and its antecedents go back without end; I seek its furthest developments, and their coming stretches on without stop. Having no end and no stop – these are negations within the scope of language and thus share only in the sense made within the realm of mere things. ‘Something causes it’ and ‘nothing does it’ – these are attempted descriptions of the root, but actually they end and begin where things do. *Dao* cannot be considered a physical thing, nor can it be considered a non-existent entity. The name ‘*dao*’ is what we avail ourselves of so as to walk it. ‘Something causes it’ and ‘nothing does it’ each occupy only one corner of the realm of things. What do they have to do with the great wide world? If words were completely sufficient, one could speak all day and all of it would be *dao*. If words were insufficient, one could talk all day and all of it would concern only particular things. The principle of *dao* and things cannot be conveyed by either words or silence. Only where there is neither words nor silence does discussion really come to its ultimate end”. 太公調曰：“雞鳴狗吠，是人之所知，雖有大知，不能以言讀其所自化，又不能以意其所將為。斯而析之，精至於無倫，大至於不可圍，或之使，莫之為，未免於物而終以為過。或使則實，莫為則虛。有名有實，是物之居；無名無實，在物之虛。 或之使，莫之為，疑之所假。吾觀之本，其往無窮；吾求之末，其來無止。無窮、無止，言之無也，與物同理；或使、莫為，言之本也，與物終始。道不可有，有不可無。道之為名，所假而行。或使莫為，在物一曲，夫胡為於大方？言而足，則終日言而盡道；言而不足，則終日言而盡物。道、物之極，言、默不足以載；非言非默，議其有極。”

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Guo Xiang 郭象 holds the theory of transformation by virtue of oneself alone, where “there is nothing that creates things, and all things are self-created. 上知造物無物，下知有物之自造。” (preface to the commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 《庄子注·序》). Therefore, in his commentary on this passage, he writes, “Jizhen’s

words are right. 季真之言當也。” The key to this problem is the relationship between *dao* and things, for it involves the relationship between *you* and *wu*. Guo begins by arguing against “*you* is born from *wu* 有生於無” and moves on to explain that all things are self-generated, and each has its particular natural propensities – namely, self(-developing) natural propensities (*zixing* 自性). The self-developing natural propensities are the principles by which all things become as they are. They do not owe their origin or principle of growth to anything external to themselves. Their self-guided development is as it is merely to suit its own natural propensities. Therefore, Guo says, “There is no ruler above who generates things, for all things are self-generated. 造物者無主而物各自造。” (commentary on “Equalizing Assessments of Things” 《齊物論注》), in which case *wu* cannot generate *you*. Guo thus argues,

Is that which generates things an existing thing or not? If it is not, then how is it capable of generating things? 請問：夫造物者，有耶無耶？無也，則胡能造物哉？

In Guo’s view, *wu* simply means non-existence. Therefore, non-existence is incapable of generating *you*. He says,

What is that which is before the coming-to-be of things? I assume *yinyang* to be the primordial thing. Then *yinyang* is already a thing. What is to be more primordial than *yinyang*? I assume (the state of) spontaneously self-so to be more primordial, but that is merely (a state of) things being as they are. I assume *dao* to be more primordial, but *dao* is absolutely *wu*. Since it is *wu*, how can it be primordial? Then what is that which is before all things? Even then there were things and *wu*. Things are as they are of their own accord, nothing causes them to be so. 誰得先物乎哉？吾以陰陽為先物，而陰陽者即所謂物耳。誰又先陰陽者乎？吾以自然為先之，而自然即物之自爾耳。吾以至道為先之矣，而至道者乃至無也。既以無矣，又奚為先？然則先物者誰乎哉？而猶有物，無已。明物之自然，非有使然也。

(commentary on “Knowledge Wanders North” 《知北遊注》)

For Guo Xiang, all that exists are things. There is nothing that had existed before things came to be. Things (i.e. *you*) are without beginning. They exist as they do without cause. For this reason, everything that exists in accordance with its own self-accomplished natural propensities comes to be and transforms by virtue of itself. Guo calls this “transformation by virtue of oneself alone” (*duhua* 獨化). He says,

Those who attain it do not do so with the external aid of *dao*, nor with the aid of what is internal to oneself. It is entirely self-attained and one’s transformation is due only to oneself. Generation is difficult, but it is a transformation by virtue of oneself alone and is self-achieved. Since generation is accomplished, why bother to act purposively in fear that it is unaccomplished? 凡得之者，

外不資於道，內不由於己，掘然自得而獨化也。夫生之難也，猶獨化而自得之矣。既得其生，又何患於生之不得而為之哉？

(commentary on “Great Source as Teacher” 《大宗師注》)

GUO's interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* swerves too far from the original. Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 borrows principles from Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy to disprove both “something does it” and “no one does it” as an interpretation that is closer to Zhuangzi's thought. He condemns both sides of the argument, as he writes that “‘something does it’ is caught in the mire of purposive action; ‘nothing causes it’ drowns in the water of causelessness. 或使，滯有為也；莫為，溺無故也。” Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 also refrains from pinning his judgement on one side or the other. He writes,

Everyone knows that cocks crow and dogs bark, but no one knows why they do so. Is it such that nothing causes them to behave this way, or is it that something causes them to be like this? Who knows for certain the principle of transformation by virtue of oneself? Who knows for sure the reality of causes behind perceptible phenomena? However, should one suspend the notion of “nothing causes it”, one could then investigate the causes of events; should one assume the principle of “something causes it”, one could then adjudicate the truth of “nothing causes it”. From this, regardless of matter grand or minute, one acknowledges that they concern the world of things, and their nature is confined to their kind. 雞鳴狗吠是人所知，而莫知其所以鳴吠。謂其莫為耶，何緣而忽鳴吠？謂其或使耶，他物何為？寂然自化之理孰知，將為之情孰識？唯置其莫為則可以察或使之情，任其或使則可以審莫為之理。推此而論，雖至大至細，皆不免於物，莫逃乎累。

Clearly, the central thesis in this quoted passage is “Whether it is ‘something causes it’ or ‘nothing does it’, they are remarks merely about things, and in the end they both miss the mark. 或之使，莫之為，未免於物而終以為過。” However, the latter half of the passage focusses on the issue of discourse (*yan* 言). It argues that the application of words and language is confined to the world of things and cannot contribute to approaching *dao*. There are two sentences that need to be examined in parallel, the first of which is

Having no end and no stop – these are negations within the scope of language and thus share only in the sense made within the realm of mere things. “Something causes it” and “nothing does it” – these are the roots of discourse, but actually they end and begin where things do. 無窮、無止，言之無也，與物同理；或使、莫為，言之本也，與物終始。

The second sentence is

I gaze at its root, and its antecedents go back without end; I seek its furthest developments, and their coming stretches on without end. 吾觀之本，其往無窮；吾求之末，其來無止。

Hu Wenying 胡文英 insightfully remarks that the “root 本” and “end 末” in these sentences represent *dao* and things: “*Dao* has no end or beginning, while all things come to be and perish. 道無終始，物有死生。” *Dao* is spatially and temporally infinite; therefore, it is imperceptible and without form. By contrast, things come to be and perish in their various transformations. They have form and image. Nonetheless, *dao*, which is nominally represented by the name *wu*, is never separated from things. Therefore, it is said to be “sharing the same principle with things 與物同理”. We ought to interpret the latter half of the second sentence with another sentence: “The principle of *dao* and things cannot be conveyed by either words or silence. 道、物之極，言、默不足以載”. According to Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, “the root of discourse 言之本” is the beginning of discourse. This is to say, seeking to understand the beginning (i.e. cause or primary principle) of all things with theses such as “something causes it” and “no one does it” is bound to fail, for

all that has a beginning has an end. Those which have beginnings and ends are far from *dao* and are confined to the world of things. Therefore, they are said to “end and begin where things do”. 夫有始則有終。有始有終，則離道而泥於物，故曰‘與物終始’。²⁰

In this sense, the insufficiency of “something causes it” and “no one does it” is limited to their applicable domain of the world of things and inability to reach *dao*. Whether it is “something is governing all in some obscure fashion 冥冥之中有物以司之” or “there is no mysterious ruler 冥冥之中無所主”, taking either side severs the connexion between *dao* and things.

Guo Xiang’s philosophy of spontaneously self-so (things come to be and transform by virtue of themselves alone) can be classified as a variant of “nothing does it”. Guo’s commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子注》 has had a lasting influence on the interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*, which contributed greatly to the lack of scholarly interest in the theory of “something causes it”. By contrast, there has been no lack of supporters of “something causes it” in Western philosophy since ancient Greece. The essentialist tradition is a major representative among them. Incipient notions of essentialism are found in the investigation of primordial substance (*archē*) that constitutes the physical philosophy of the Milesian philosophers. Subsequent developments in ancient Greek philosophy saw the continuing strengthening of this tradition. Take the example of Plato: He seeks to find a world of forms behind the intransigent world of perceptible objects and, following the teachings of Socrates, develops the theory of forms. Every beautiful object is beautiful because of the form of beauty (*Phaedo*). Similarly, everything is a member of its kind owing to its participation in a form of the same name. Accordingly, Plato’s theory of forms is developed to counter Parmenides’s theory of existence (i.e. being).²¹ Simply put, form is the common form of things or, ontologically speaking, the essence of things. Forms are thought to be separate from particular objects (*Phaedo*), which gives rise to a troubling philosophical problem. We should keep in mind that Plato’s theory of forms is formulated from an epistemological standpoint. In this sense, form is the strongest *logos*. In brief,

form is the essence of things and is the reason for the cognizability of things. Upon this basis, Plato makes clear the boundary between opinion and knowledge, the perceptible world and the intelligible world.²² In addition, even though Plato mainly develops his theories from epistemological perspectives, it is undeniable that his notion of form retains an ontological sense, and that his theory of participation retains traces of physical reasoning as a kind of essentialism. Aristotle inherits this strand of thought from Plato. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, being qua being is simultaneously the pure formal cause and the reason for the intelligibility (capable of being thought and spoken of) of all things. For Aristotle, being is equivalent to "those that are intelligible" (and thus having *eidōs*), and non-being is equivalent to "those that are unintelligible" (lacking *eidōs*). If we compare Plato's forms with the Daoist *dao*, two important differences are immediately noticeable. First, form is intelligible, cognisable, and *dao* is not. Second, "there is no gap between *dao* and things 道物無際", while forms and things are separated. The ancient Greek epistemological investigation of the essence of things (including *eidōs*, *ousia*) gave birth to the essentialist tendency in its metaphysical tradition. This tendency is typified by the existence of an essence that governs the world of phenomena that is relegated or exiled because knowledge of essence (i.e. truth) is grasped only by logical reasoning, whereas phenomena are illusions presented to the senses.²³ The proposition "there is no gap between *dao* and things" indicates that Daoism does not relegate or banish the world of things. Instead, it is said "The sage comprehends the intertwining connexions of things, so that everything forms a single body around him. 聖人達綢繆，周盡一體。" ("Zeyang" in the *Zhuangzi*); "There is no place where *dao* is not present 道無所不在。" ("Knowledge Wanders North" in the *Zhuangzi*); and "*Dao* is present as soon as the eye strikes. 目擊而道存。" ("Tianzifang" in the *Zhuangzi*). The Daoist theory of the transformation of things is commensurate with the doctrine of "there is no gap between *dao* and things". In short, the world of *dao* is not separated or isolated from the world of things. In other words, the world of *dao* permeates and is coextensive with the world of things. It does not exist as a part within or external to the world of things. The world of things is not a lesser form of the world of *dao*. Instead, it is the manifestation of the world of *dao*.

Finally, we return to the issue of how *dao* is presented in terms of the relationship between *you* and *wu*. Daoist thinkers typically use ambiguous language to convey *dao* and the image of *dao*. "Indeterminate and indistinct" is its characteristic because, on the one hand, *dao* is without form; on the other hand, *dao* is *you* (i.e. being, or that which effects motion). Therefore, Laozi says that *dao* is "dimly visible, it only seems as if it were there. 湛兮似或存" (ch. 4 of the *Laozi*); "Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there, yet use will never drain it. 綿綿若存，用之不勤。" (ch. 6 of the *Laozi*); and "Is not the space between heaven and earth like a bellows? It is empty without being exhausted; the more it works the more comes out. 天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出。" (ch. 5 of the *Laozi*). The *Zhuangzi* says, "Obscure, it is present, but only by being as if absent. Ever gliding away, it has no form and is spirit-like. 昏然若亡而存，油然不形而神。" ("Knowledge Wanders North" in the *Zhuangzi*); "Such indeterminacy, what is it?"

芒乎何之？” (“All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*); and “If there is some controller behind it all, it is peculiarly devoid of any manifest sign. Its ability to flow and to stop makes its presence plausible, but even then it shows no definite form. 若有真宰，而特不得其朕。可行已信，而不見其形，有情而無形。” (“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*). The *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》 says that “all things have manifest signs, only *dao* has no manifest sign. 凡物有朕，唯道無朕。” (“Bingluexun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·兵略訓》), which clearly states that *dao* is called *wu*, for it is without form or image (unlike things). It is said to be “seeming as if it were there 若存”, and it “only seems as if it were there 似或存”, for it exists without form, which is comparable to the notion of being in ancient Greece. In Guo Xiang’s commentary on the line “Dimly visible, it only seems as if it were there. 湛兮似或存” (ch. 4 of the *Laozi*), he writes that “it exists but not in the form of a thing. Therefore, it is ‘as if’ it was there. 存而無物，故曰似也。”²⁴ Form can be thought of as the threshold of a corridor by which two courts – namely, physics and metaphysics – are conjoined. Han Kangbo 韓康伯, who borrows much from Daoist philosophy in his interpretive commentary on the *Book of Change*, also uses *you* and *wu* (or, more precisely, having form and without form) in his writings; for example, “The dark and the illuminated are images which represent those with form and those without form. 幽明者，有形無形之象。” (commentary on “The cause of the dark and the illuminated 幽明之故” in the original text); “To grasp the principle of that which is yet to have form is called ‘profundity’; to suit the principle of opportune action is called ‘subtlety’. 極未形之理則曰‘深’，適動微之會則曰‘幾’。” (commentary on “*Yi* is that for which sages investigate the profound and study the subtle. 易，聖人之所以極深而研究幾也。” in the “Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*); and

The “subtle” represents that which departs from *wu* and enters *you*. It follows a principle with no definite form to be observed and knowledge of it cannot be sought by name. [. . .] (Only a spirit-like mind) can know with clarity and brightness affairs both murky and plain, and identify issues prior to their taking definite form. 幾者，去無入有。理而無形《不可以名尋，不可以形睹者也。 (唯神也) 故能朗然玄昭，鑒于未形也。

In this light, it is worth noting that all metaphysical investigations in the history of Chinese philosophy go beyond the threshold of *you* to examine truth that is formless or beyond formlessness. While ancient Greek philosophy establishes the tradition of using the epistemological method to investigate metaphysics, philosophical Daoism omits physics (natural philosophy) and builds upon theories of intuitive experience and practical wisdom to establish a unique philosophy of heart-mind and natural propensities that then extends into a metaphysics of state of attainment concerning spiritual freedom. It is my express purpose to elucidate state-of-attainment metaphysics that holds “spirit above and beyond the world of things 精神高於物外” at its heart.

I will now offer a few words in summary. The relationship between *dao* and things implies the dual concepts of the world of *dao* and the world of things and

that they are essentially different. This seems analogous to Plato's world of sense and world of ideas, but the two are fundamentally different, for in philosophical Daoism the world of *dao* coincides with the world of things. The world of *dao* is concealed within the world of things. For this reason, grasping the truth of *dao* is utterly unlike the various ways of studying the principles of physics. Daoist metaphysics (study of "the beyond form") is not an appendix or an extension to physics. It is not physics made to be more systematic or complete. Instead, it emerges abruptly at the outmost edge of physical knowledge and enters an altogether different world by breaking off from and exceeding the logic and method of physical investigation. This new world is where spiritual state of attainment finds its ground. This new world or new state of attainment implies a stark change in philosophical point of view and also represents a turning point in one's philosophical method.

At this point, our theoretical analysis of philosophical Daoism has covered its development from physics to metaphysics, uncovering its essential aspect of "arguing for vacant *wu* to reprove *you* 課虛無以責有" (Lu Ji 陸機, *Wen Fu* 《文賦》), among other important aspects of its metaphysics. Having now crossed the threshold of physics, we will take a closer look at the wisdom of Daoist metaphysics in the following chapter.

Notes

- 1 Hanfeizi says, "Dao is not the same with the myriad things; the ruler is not the same as the many ministers. 道不同於萬物，君不同於群臣。" ("Yangquan" in the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子·揚權》).
- 2 Feibai Wu 伍非百, *Sayings by Thinkers of the School of Names in China* 中國古名家言 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1983), 813.
- 3 Taiqing Wang 王太慶, "How Do We Understand 'Is' in the West?" 我們怎麼認識西方人的'是'?" *Xueren* 學人, Vol. 4 (1993).
- 4 A similar line of reasoning is present in "Jifu" in the *Gongsunlongzi* 《公孫龍子·跡府》. "Shanshuo" in the *Shuoyuan* 《說苑·善說》 even argues that "without analogy 無譬" is impossible. It is thus reasonable to believe that analogy is not merely a rhetorical device in ancient Chinese but is an elementary form of logical deduction.
- 5 This saying by Hui Shi is recorded in "Shanshuo" in the *Shuoyuan* 《說苑·善說》.
- 6 Wentong Meng 蒙文通, *Meng Wentong Xueji* 蒙文通學記 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 1993), 13.
- 7 Xiushu Sen 森秀樹, "Between the Daoist School and the School of Names 道家和名家之間", *Daoist Culture Study* 道家文化研究, Vol. 15 (1999): 64–69.
- 8 Jiaxi Yu 余嘉錫, *Commentary on the Shishuoxinyu* 世說新語箋疏 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1993), 205.
- 9 This marks a point of difference with Gongsun Long, who believes that things are equivalent to their formal properties and are without substance.
- 10 "Generation 生" is used to represent some kind of kinship, just as Laozi often uses the analogy of mother and son to describe the relationship of *dao* and things.
- 11 That is to say, *dao* is everywhere. See "Knowledge Wanders North" in the *Zhuangzi*.
- 12 Xiaogan Liu 劉笑敢, *Zhuangzi Philosophy and Its Evolution* 莊子哲學及其演變 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1988), 137.
- 13 Cunshan Li 李存山, *Investigative Studies on Theory of Qi in China and Its Origin* 中國氣論探源與發微 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press 中國社會科學出版社, 1990), 136.

- 14 Wentong Meng 蒙文通, *Meng Wentong Xueji* 蒙文通學記 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 1993), 11.
- 15 Taiqing Wang 王太慶, “How Do We Understand ‘Is’ in the West?” 我們怎麼認識西方人的“是”?, *Xueren* 學人, Vol. 4 (1993).
- 16 Wentong Meng 蒙文通, *Ten Daoist Texts* 道書輯校十種 (Chengdu: Bashushushe 巴蜀書社, 2001), 771.
- 17 Youlan Feng 馮友蘭, “On Zhuangzi 論莊子”, in *An Anthology of Papers on Zhuangzi Philosophy* 莊子哲學討論集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1962), 124.
- 18 Zongsan Mou 牟宗三, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Book of Change* 周易哲學演講錄 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2004), 4–5.
- 19 Hao Cheng 程顥, Yi Cheng 程頤, *The Works of the Two Cheng* 二程集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 2004), 582.
- 20 Tai Zhong 鐘泰, *Commentary on the Zhuangzi* 莊子發微 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2002), 626.
- 21 Zisong Wang 汪子嵩, *The History of Greek Philosophy* 希臘哲學史, Vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Press 人民出版社, 1993), 666.
- 22 M. Hare, *Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 13.
- 23 Dunhua Zhao 趙敦華, “The Metaphysics of ‘Shi’, ‘Zai’, ‘You’ ‘是’、‘在’、‘有’的形而上學之辨”, *Xueren* 學人, Vol. 4 (1993).
- 24 Wentong Meng 蒙文通, *Ten Daoist Texts* 《道書輯校十種》 (Chengdu: Bashushushe, 2001), 152.

8 Transformation

Between eternity and transience

An interesting and complicated example can further illustrate the theoretical and intellectual development from physics to metaphysics in philosophical Daoism. It is the paradigmatic concept of transformation (*hua* 化) in the *Zhuangzi*. As a philosophical concept, Zhuangzi's notion of "transformation" is unique in every aspect, perhaps only comparable to Heraclitus's "becoming", Henri Bergson's "duration", A. N. Whitehead's "process", and Jacques Derrida's *différance*. On the surface, transformation has the meaning of change, which seems easy enough to comprehend. The issue is that in Zhuangzi's philosophy, transformation is synonymous with things (*wu* 物). "Myriad transformations" (*wanhua* 萬化), in his terminology, also represents the transient world of "myriad things" (*wanwu* 萬物) and the "entire course of transformation" (*zaohua* 造化). Ancient Chinese thinkers agree that we live in a world without constancy, where all things are in the process of coming to be and perishing. Guo Xiang's commentary on the *Zhuangzi* illustrates this fundamental assumption:

The sage wanders on the path of great transformation and indulges in the stream of constant renewal. The myriad things participate in their myriad transformations, together with which the sage's transformations are also numberless. Those that transform follow no determinate principle, together with which the sage also follows no determinate principle. 聖人遊於變化之塗，放於日新之流。萬物萬化，亦與之萬化；化者無極，亦與之無極。

(Commentary [on "They transform in numberless ways and have yet to follow a determinate principle. 萬化而未有其極也" in "The Great Source as Teacher" in the *Zhuangzi*])

However, since it is the ambition of philosophical reasoning to study the root-source of all things, philosophy has always desired to reach beyond the evanescent world into that which is eternal, to rise above opinions to attain knowledge. Some radical philosophers have even attempted to disprove the reality of change. Guo Xiang's invention of "transformation by virtue of oneself alone" (*duhua* 獨化) is targeted against Wang Bi's 王弼 theory of "the universal root is *wu* 以無為本". Guo's argument is to establish the reality of fragmented, localised, and independent transformations.

Zhuangzi's philosophy is inspiring because not only does he affirm the reality of transformation (*hua* 化), but he also emphasises the reality of the non-transforming (*buhua* 不化) behind the world of constant transformation. Transformation and the non-transforming are two sides of the same coin and cannot be without one another. It is precisely because of the non-transforming that transformations can constitute a coherent and interrelated whole. This is where Zhuangzi's thought differs from Guo Xiang's interpretation.

More specifically, the concept of transformation in the *Zhuangzi* deserves systematic and focussed consideration, for it contains several different meanings. The following sections are devoted to three aspects of the issue of transformation – namely, transformation, non-transforming, and transformation of things (*wuhua* 物化) – to offer analysis and elucidation of natural philosophy, metaphysics, and aesthetics. These will be followed by an analysis of change and transformation (*bianhua* 變化, i.e. the transformation of changing things) to illustrate the religious ideas that permeate Zhuangzi's idea of transformation. The concept of transformation involves many different layers of complex theoretical issues, constituting an important example of the development from physics to metaphysics.

8.1 Transformation

The word “transformation” (*hua* 化) is used a meagre three times in the *Laozi*, serving mostly rhetorical purposes or as a political term. For this reason, it is difficult to analyse it as a philosophical concept. “Transformation” makes more than 70 appearances in the *Zhuangzi*, including in philosophical concepts such as “the entire course of transformation” (*zaohua* 造化) and “transformation of things” (*wuhua* 物化). Chen Guu-ying 陳鼓應 believes that the *Zhuangzi* is the first philosophical work to elaborate on the concept of transformation, thus offering a reasonable assessment.¹ Albeit one of the more important concepts in the *Zhuangzi* and worthy of close examination, “transformation” is by no means easy to interpret, for it clearly contains several different meanings.

Ancient commentary on the *Book of Change* points out that “[t]he one name of *yi* contains three meanings. 易一名而含三義。” – namely, “change” (*yi* 易), “unchanging” (*buyi* 不易), and “simple” (*jianyi* 簡易). Interestingly, although the basic meaning of “transformation” in the *Zhuangzi* is similar to “change” in the *Book of Change*, it contains comparatively richer twists in meaning. Not only does it have the opposite and complementary meanings of “transformation” and “non-transforming”, but it also has the meaning of “transformation of things”. Simply put, “transformation” in the *Zhuangzi* chiefly refers to the natural process of the generation and destruction of all things in the universe. By contrast, all processes of transformation in the physical world are propelled by its opposite, the non-transforming. In other words, Zhuangzi's “transformation” is the world of things, where ceaseless change is the only constancy and where all things turn to their opposites when they reach their extreme; while “non-transforming” is the perennial and changeless “being”. The concept of transformation of things is intertwined with various topics, such as aesthetic theories and philosophy of heart-mind-nature, and

is therefore more complicated. In addition, “transformation” in the *Zhuangzi* has retained certain strange and bizarre early concepts, including asexual procreation with the wind (*fenghua* 風化) and “butterfly transforming into a bug 蝴蝶化蟲”. The generalisation of such notions can be summed up as “transformation of things”.

Clearly, transformation mainly falls into the category of natural philosophy (physics), while non-transforming is an ontological or metaphysical notion. Transformation of things is more closely related to aesthetics, heart-mind-nature, and state of attainment. Transformation and change are derived from folk knowledge and religious practices. Therefore, it seems that we ought to try to further investigate transformation, non-transforming, and transformation and change through the relationship between physics (natural philosophy) and metaphysics.

Transformation is frequently mentioned in the *Book of Change*. Examples include “The *dao* of *qian* transform and change 乾道變化” (“Qian”, “Tuanzhuan” 《象傳·乾》) and “comprehended the inscrutable and spirit-like, and know the processes of transformation 窮神知化” (“Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*), in which the meaning of “transformation” is very similar to the way it is used in the *Zhuangzi*. “All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* says that “the *Book of Change* intends to explicate the *dao* of *yin-yang*. 《易》以道陰陽。” Similarly, the “Author’s Preface of the Grand Scribe” in the *Shiji* 《史記·太史公自序》 states that “the *Book of Change* intends to explicate the *dao* of the process of transformation. 《易》以道化。” The *Zhuangzi* mentions that “[the great fish Kun] transforms and becomes a bird 化而為鳥” (“Free and Easy Wandering” in the *Zhuangzi*), and “[the butterfly] transforms and becomes a bug 化而為蟲” (“Perfect Happiness” in the *Zhuangzi*). These transformations are similar to the way “transformation” is used in “Yuandaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·原道訓》, as in the case of “a tangerine plant changes and becomes a hedge thorn 橘化而為枳”. These transformations are similar in meaning to the vernacular use of the word. Using this meaning, the *Zhuangzi* also puts forward propositions such as “the odious and rotten transforms into the sacred and wonderful, and the sacred and wonderful transforms into the odious and rotten. 臭腐復化為神奇, 神奇復化為臭腐。” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*). This also indicates that the *Zhuangzi* includes attempts to formulate the concept of transformation philosophically. In fact, the *Zhuangzi* frequently uses the concept of transformation to inspire philosophical discussions. Examples include:

Life and death are a great matter, but they are unable to alter [a sage]. Even if heaven and earth were to topple over, he would not be lost with them. He discerns what alone is unborrowed, so he is not transferred away with the things around him. He looks on the transformations of all things as his own fate, and thus holds fast to their source. 死生亦大矣, 而不得與之變, 雖天地覆墜, 亦將不與之遺。審乎無假, 而不與物遷, 命物之化, 而守其宗也。

(“Markers of Full Virtuosity” in the *Zhuangzi*)

This human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with, just something stumbled into, but those who have become humans take delight in it nonetheless. Now the human form in its time undergoes ten thousand

transformations, never stopping for an instant – so the joys it brings must be beyond calculation! Hence, the sage uses it to roam in that from which nothing ever escapes, where all things are maintained. Early death, old age, the beginning, the end – this allows him to see each of them as good. People may try to model themselves on him. But they would be better off emulating what ties all things together, on which depends even their slightest transformation, on which depends the total mass of transformation that they are! 若人之形者，萬化而未始有極也，其為樂可勝計邪！故聖人將遊於物之所不得遯而皆存。善妖善老，善始善終，人猶效之，又況萬物之所係，而一化之所待乎！

(“The Great Source as Master” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The workings of heaven and earth, the shifts of ever turning things. These are what are called the things which we travel together side by side with. 天地之行也，運物之泄也，言與之偕逝之謂也。

(“The Mountain Tree” in the *Zhuangzi*)

All things are transformation. 萬物皆化。

(“Perfect Happiness” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Noticeably, *Zhuangzi* considers and writes on the issue of life and death from the macroscopic perspective of the “evanescent transformations of all things” (*wanhua* 萬化). That is to say,

The precedence of spring and summer and the sequence of autumn and winter mark the order of the four seasons. In the transformations and growth of all things, every bud and feature has its proper form; and in this we have their gradual maturing and decay, the constant flow of transformation and change. 春夏先，秋冬後，四時之序也。萬物化作，萌區有狀，盛衰之殺，變化之流也。

(“The Dao of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Such is the condition and basis of human life. The stream of myriad transformations is ever-turning, grand, and emotionless. In Laozi’s words, “Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs. 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗。” (ch. 5 of the *Laozi*). From this perspective, human lives are insignificant and powerless, seemingly trapped within an iron necessity with no escape. Fate – from which even gods and goddesses are unable to flee – in ancient Greek tragedies highlights this iron necessity. This idea of fate is projected into ancient Greek thought. In other words, reflections on the meaning and value of human life by ancient Greek thinkers were developed against this universal and tragic human condition. So, what is *Zhuangzi*’s treatment of the fateful tragic consciousness in face of the flowing stream of myriad transformations, and what reflective philosophical insight does he offer?

First, the *Zhuangzi* uses the *Laozi* as its “food for thought” and furthers the concept of spontaneous transformation (*zihua* 自化) from the *Laozi* based on the

thought and reasoning of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action;² for example,

With every moment they alter, with every moment they shift. What should you do and what should you not do? In any case, everything transforms spontaneously, you are no exception. 物之生也，若驟若馳，無動而不變，無時而不移。何為乎？何不為乎？夫固將自化。

(“Autumn Floods” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Zhuangzi's “spontaneous transformation” can also mean “the transformation of natural spontaneity” (*ziranzhihua* 自然之化) and “the entire course of transformation” (*zaohua* 造化), which are identified by phrases such as the “grand transformation” (*dahua* 大化) and the “transformation of *yinyang*” (*yinyangzhihua* 陰陽之化). These terms are used to explain the philosophical concept of “the harmonious principle of *yinyang* transformation” (*yinyangxieli* 陰陽變理) and are slightly different from the notion of “spontaneous transformation” in the *Laozi*. The same term in the latter refers to “living life spontaneously” or “living in accordance to what is spontaneously called for”. However, philosophical concepts in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* usually have multiple meanings. Spontaneous transformation in the *Laozi* is imbued with the notion of non-purposive action, which is inherited by the *Zhuangzi*; for example,

Rest in the position of non-purposive action, and things will transform spontaneously. Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget you are a thing among other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless. Undo the mind, slough off spirit, be blank and soulless, and the myriad things one by one will return to the root – return to the root and not know why. Utterly without determinacy and distinction, to the end of life, none will depart from it. But if you try to know it, you have already departed from it. Do not ask what its name is; do not try to see what it is. Things will generate spontaneously and of themselves. 汝徒處無為，而物自化。墮爾形體，吐爾聰明；倫與物忘，大同乎溟溟；解心釋神，莫然無魂。萬物云云，各復其根，各復其根而不知。渾渾沌沌，終身不離；若彼知之，乃是離之。無問其名，無闕其情，物故自生。

(“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Clearly, “spontaneous transformation” is the same as “spontaneous generation” (*zisheng* 自生). Here is another example:

Heaven and earth are huge, but they are alike in their transformations. The myriad things are numerous, but they are one in their good order [. . .] those who shepherded the world in ancient times were without obsessive desire, and the world was satisfied. They were without purposive action, and the myriad things were transformed. They were deep and silent, and all the peoples were at peace. [. . .] When deeds and words proceed spontaneously from themselves

as they do, the world transforms (spontaneously). 天地雖大，其化均也；萬物雖多，其治一也。 古之畜天下者，無欲而天下足，無為而萬物化，淵靜而百姓定。 行言自為而天下化。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

From these excerpts, we can see that non-purposive action, spontaneous action (*ziwei* 自為), and spontaneous transformation are intricately interwoven.

Second, “transformation” in the *Zhuangzi* ought to be interpreted from the perspective of “the end and beginning of things, the birth and death of human beings”, regardless of whether this transformation refers to the universal process of “grand transformation” and the “entire course of transformation” or the human process of “life and death as transformations”:

A person’s life between heaven and earth is like a white stallion galloping past a crack in a wall: just a sudden whoosh and then it is all over. Pouring and surging forth this way and that, everything emerges; slipping and sinking away, everything is submerged again. One transformation and you are alive, another and you’re dead. Living creatures lament it, and human beings bemoan it. 人生天地之間，若白駒之過郤，忽然而已。注然勃然，莫不出焉；油然漻然，莫不入焉。已化而生，又化而死，生物哀之，人類悲之。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

That is to say, Zhuangzi tries to comprehend things and the nature of things from the perspective of the “process of life and death, end and beginning” since it is a process in which all things participate. The “Zeyang” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* contains an example:

Qu Boyu has been going along for sixty years and has transformed sixty times. There was nothing he didn’t initially affirm as right that he didn’t later repudiate as wrong, so he could never be sure whether what he presently called right was not fifty-nine times wrong. 蘧伯玉行年六十而六十化，未嘗不始於是之而卒詘之以非也，未知今之所謂是之非五十九年非也。

This example is particularly indicative of Zhuangzi’s way of analysing things and their corresponding knowledge in the broad frame of infinite time. “Jingshenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·精神訓》 says, “Take the death and birth [of a life] as one transformation; take the myriad things as a small corner [of the world]. 以死生為一化，以萬物為一方。” This line is a further elaboration on Zhuangzi’s “Life is the working of heaven; death is the transformation of things. 其生也天行，其死也物化。” (“The Dao of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*). The old saying “I am no longer the old me, although being the old me. 我非昔人，猶昔人。” and the modern saying “Judge a person only after he is dead. 蓋棺論定。” reflect a similar kind of thinking. It is an interesting way of thinking, for it is very different from the Western intellectual mainstream since ancient Greece (namely, the method of philosophical analysis based on atomism and logic that tends to divide

the world into smallest units of original substance). Surely, Heraclitus is an exception and should be excluded. In sum, “things exist in such a way that they perpetually generate and change [. . .] where changes are renewed by the day. [. . .] This kind of existence is called ‘transformation’”.³

The *Zhuangzi* also states, “Each season has its ending and beginning; each age has its changes and transformations. 時有終始，世有變化。” (“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*), which constitutes a commonsensical notion in a certain sense. This indicates that concepts and phrases, including seasonal timing (*shi* 時), change (*bian* 變), and generation (*sheng* 生), are all related to transformation. Passages from the “Autumn Floods” and “Perfect Happiness” chapters of the *Zhuangzi* illustrate this point. Two passages from the *Huainanzi* and the *Wenzi* serve as annotations to this conception of temporal change (*shibian* 時變):

As such no transformation of the myriad things is not entertained (*yu*); no change of affairs is not met with appropriate response. 如是則萬物之化無不遇，而百事之變無不應。

(“Yuandaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·原道訓》)

Laozi says, those who initiate affairs act in response to changes, changes come at opportune moments. Those who understand opportune moments have no constant ways of action. 老子曰：夫事生者應變而動，變生于時，知時者無常之行。

(“Daoyuan” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·道原》)

There is an issue with the word “*yu* 遇” in the “Yuandaoxun”. According to Sun Yirang’s 孫詒讓 philological research, Gao You 高誘 believes the word should take the meaning “opportune timing” (*shi* 時), whereas Sun Yirang believes “*yu* 遇” is equivalent to “*ou* 耦” in this case and could be a miswriting of “*ou* 偶” (*Zhaqian* Vol. 7 《札遷》卷七). In fact, although Sun Yirang’s argument is subtle and acute, Gao You’s commentaries are also worthy of consideration. The notion of “act in response to change; change comes at opportune moments 應變而動，變生於時。” is almost identical to doctrines of the Huang-Lao School of Daoism. We can also further our investigation of the characteristics of transformation in the *Zhuangzi* through an example from “Equalizing Assessments of Things”:

Generation is, at the same time, destruction, and destruction is, at the same time, generation. [. . .] Its separation is its completion; its completion is its dissolution. 方生方死，方死方生。 其分也，成也；其成也，毀也。”

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

This passage indicates that transformation does not pause: “That which generates things perpetually does not rest. 生生不息。” By contrast, it also indicates that transformation is a process of creation that seems similar to Heraclitus’s “One cannot step into the same river twice”, for “the coming waters are not the same as those that previously flowed by”. In addition, “[p]erpetual generation is called *yi*.

生生之謂易。” (“Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*), and “[e]very day the sun is new” (*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6). These thoughts could also be used to explain Zhuangzi’s concept of transformation. Even so, we can still find that the notion of “the myriad things transform and generate 萬物化生” contains the important meaning of creative evolution, which explains why Zhuangzi’s “transformation” has the meaning “transforming and nourishing” (*huayu* 化育).

Finally, although transformation in the *Zhuangzi* is related to opportune timing, change, and generation, it is used to represent the entire process of the natural universe; for example:

That by which all things transform continuously without end – how does one know its end? How does one know its beginning? 化其萬物而不知其禪之者，焉知其所終？焉知其所始？

(“Mountain Tree” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Clearly, “transformation” is related to “the end and beginning of things 物之終始”. It is also related to the totality of all transformations in the universe. In other words, transformation is not part of a whole but the entirety, i.e. the entire process of all transformations that compose the universe. For Zhuangzi, the “transformation of things” is equivalent to the perpetual process of “whatever that has an end has a beginning 終則有始”, and “[the transformation of things] begin and end as in an unbroken ring 始卒若環”. Heraclitus’s natural philosophy is relatively unique precisely because the object of his investigation is change and becoming and not being.⁴ It is noteworthy that Zhuangzi’s “transformation” is directed towards things. He never talks of transformation independently of things. In other words, transformation is a concept that belongs to natural philosophy (physics). Regarding this point, the later authors of the *Huainanzi* and *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子》 make perfectly clear that

[w]ith respect to that which has no contact with things, it is difficult to discuss transformation. 不通于物者，難與言化。

(“Qisuxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·齊俗訓》)

and

[c]hange and afterwards opportune moments become discernible; transform and afterwards *dao* becomes apparent. “變而後可以見時，化而後可以見道。”

(“Tianze” in the *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子·天則》)

Generally, “transformation” is difficult to understand and interpret, for it involves a pantoscopic understanding of the universe and human life. Therefore, the *Huainanzi* repeatedly says, “Those who only consider one corner of the world are incapable of participating in a discussion of transformation. 察一曲者，不可與言化。” (“Miuchengxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·繆稱訓》), and, “Only the sage understands transformation. 唯聖人知其化。” (“Qisuxun” in the

Huainanzi 《淮南子·齊俗訓》). Similarly, the “Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change* says, “Comprehended the inscrutable and spirit-like, and know the processes of transformation 窮神知化”, and,

Yi, it has no determinate idea; it has no definite purpose. It is silent and at rest. When prompted it finds no obstacle in any affair in the world. If it were not the most spirit-like under heaven, how could it do this? 易，无思也，无為也，寂然不動，感而遂通天下之故。非天下之至神，其孰能與於此。

This indicates that comprehension of “transformation” and “*yi* 易” requires the spiritual state of attainment, i.e. “[to attain a] spirit-like mind and to understand with perspicacity depends on the person. 神而明之，存乎其人。” (“Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*).

The previous discussion of “transformation” focusses on the natural philosophical side of the material. Next, we will further our investigation by looking at its political and ethical aspects. In fact, “transformation” is involved in the philosophical and social aspects of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. Its reasoning is akin to the way the *Book of Change* describes the “significance of opportune timing” (*shiyi* 時義):

Heaven and earth undergo their changes, and the four seasons complete their functions. Tang and Wu changed the appointment from heaven [to rule] in accordance with heaven and in response to [the will of] the people. 天地革而四時成，湯武革命，順乎天而應乎人。

(“Tuanzhuang” commentary on the *Book of Change* 《周易·象傳》)

The Huang-Lao School of Daoism places particular emphasis on the importance of “[acting] appropriately with reference to timing” (*yinshi* 因時) and “[acting] appropriately with reference to transformation” (*yinhua* 因化). The following sentence is quoted from the “Dao of Heaven” and “Constrained in Will” chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which are themselves works by authors of the Huang-Lao School of Daoism:

For he who knows the joy of heaven, his birth is the act of heaven; his death the transformation of things; in his stillness he shares the quality of yin; in his movement he shares the power of yang. 知天樂者，其生也天行，其死也物化；靜而與陰同德，動而與陽同波。

(“Dao of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

“Jingshenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·精神訓》 elaborates on the central theme of “Dao of Heaven” and “Constrained in Will” in the *Zhuangzi*, referencing this sentence, the last part of which is rephrased as “Be at rest and one is closed as with *yin*; act and one is open as with *yang*. 靜則與陰俱閉；動則與陽俱開。” More importantly, subsequent passages in “Dao of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* connect the idea of “transformation of things” with its political philosophy (of non-purposive action). It states,

Heaven produces nothing, yet the myriad things undergo their various transformations; earth effects no growth, yet the myriad things receive their nurture; rulers and kings undertake non-purposive action, yet all the world work [towards their various achievements. . . .] This is the way in which they ride atop the course of heaven and earth and the galloping of the myriad things, allowing all groups of people to be have effective use. 天不產而萬物化，地不長而萬物育，帝王無為而天下功。 此乘天地，馳萬物，而用人群之道也。

Therefore, the emphasis on “agreeing with transformation” (*shunhua* 順化) implies “acting appropriately in response to the situation at the time” (*yinshi* 因時), “acting appropriately in response to changes at the time” (*yinbian* 因變), “initiating affairs as things change” (*suibianjushi* 隨變舉事), and “transforming with the development and evolution of things” (*yuhuatuaiyi* 與化推移). The Huang-Lao School and the Legalists put great emphasis on “changing laws appropriately in response to the situation at the time” (*yinshibianfa* 因時變法). The *Zhuangzi* argues that the difference between the past and the present is identical to that between land and sea. The difference in political institutions and establishments of Zhou 周 and Lu 魯 is identical to that between a boat and a wagon. Thus, “implementing the way of Zhou in Lu 行周於魯” is no different from “punting a boat on land”. Therefore,

[t]he rituals, rules of propriety, laws, and judgements of the three ancient emperors and five kings derived their excellence not from their being the same with each other but from being the same in bringing good order. [. . .] Rituals, rules of propriety, laws, and judgements need to change appropriately in response to situation at the time. 故夫三皇、五帝之禮義法度，不矜於同而矜於治。 故禮義法度者，應時而變者也。

(“The Turnings of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The *Wenzi* also argues,

Using books on legal documents from one age in time to argue against practices that have been passed on for generations is no different from tuning a zither with a glued head. The sage observes and responds to the situation at the time and acts appropriately considering the changes that are in place. [. . .] Understanding the time and erection of official measures and laws need to be undertaken with good timing with respect to current affairs. The ancient rulers of old held different judgements and laws. This is not because the past is the opposite of the present, but because the affairs and businesses of the times are different. Therefore, one should not imitate established laws of the past, but imitate the way in which laws and measures were contemplated and established, always transforming with the development and evolution of things. 執一世之法籍，以非傳代之俗，譬猶膠柱調瑟。聖人者，應時權變，見形施宜 論世立法，隨時舉事。上古之王，法度不同，非

古相反也，時務異也，是故不法其已成之法，而法其所以爲法者，與化推移。

(“Daode” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·道德》)

These examples show that the concept of transformation serves well to illustrate an important characteristic of philosophical Daoism – namely, “a changing philosophy in changing times”.⁵ While “changing measures and laws in response to the situation at the time” is a political proposition based on the notion of “all things are in the process of transformation” (*wanwujiehua* 萬物皆化) (“Perfect Happiness” in the *Zhuangzi*), “to transform each day with all transforming things” (*riyuwuhua* 日與物化) and “to move together along with the situation of the time without end 與世偕行而不替” (“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*) constitute another way to escape from the painful condition of human life. In other words, the perpetual and endless transformation of the universe is a tragic and inescapable condition for all humans, and human lives are fragile and meek: “One transformation and you are alive, another and you are dead. Living creatures lament it, and human beings bemoan it. 已化而生，又化而死，生物哀之，人類悲之。” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*). In this case, dissolving oneself in the grand transformation of the entire world lifts one above the passing of life and death and the division between external things and oneself. This is an important aspect of Zhuangzi’s thought that is particularly unique: “The sage is at peace as his body passes away and [his life] comes to an end. 聖人晏然體逝而終。” (“Mountain Tree” in the *Zhuangzi*) and “The myriad things are various and complexly intertwined; one is to turn and transform along with them. 萬物紛糅，與之轉化” (“Yundaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《原道訓·淮南子》). Such are the basic viewpoints philosophical Daoists take on the philosophy of life. We find echoes of this strand of thought in the ideas of “to rise and fall with the world at the time 與世浮沉” and “to wander and rest with the transformation of all things 與化遊息” (“Yaolue” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·要略》) as well as Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 “Releasing oneself unreservedly in the grand transformation, one finds neither bliss nor fear. 縱浪大化中，不喜亦不懼。” (*Xingyingshen III* 《形影神》之三).

8.2 Non-transforming

Apart from arguing for transformation in a rather systematic fashion, the *Zhuangzi* also repeatedly mentions the non-transforming (*buhua* 不化). Transformation and non-transforming are interdependent opposites. They present an interlocking (*ouhe* 耦合) or paired opposites (*duifan* 對反) kind of relationship; for example,

As soon as you have received your complete form, it remains so and does not perish until its end. In the process, you grind and lacerate yourself against all the things around you. Its activities will be over as quickly as a horse galloping by, unstoppable – is it not sad? 一受其成形，不忘以待盡。與物相刃相靡，其行盡如馳，而莫之能止，不亦悲乎！

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Mengsun understands nothing about why he lives or why he dies. His ignorance applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next transformation into the unknown, nothing more. When he is in the process of transforming, what could he know about not transforming? When he is no longer transforming, what could he know about having already transformed? 孟孫氏不知所以生，不知所以死，不知就先，不知就後，若化為物，以待其所不知之化已乎！且方將化，惡知不化哉？方將不化，惡知已化哉？

(“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*)

In parallel with “it remains so and does not perish until its end 不忘以待盡”, “Tianzifang” in the *Zhuangzi* has “not transforming until the end 不化以待盡”, which has the meaning of not lamenting perishing at the end of life and treating life and death with equal repose. In the words of Guo Xiang, it is the attitude of “[s]haring the same body with the grand transformation of things, drifting for thousands of generations in time, and becoming indistinguishable among all things in the world. 與化為體，流萬代而冥物。” (preface to the commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子注·序》); or, in the words of Tao Yuanming, it is “letting all form and traces roam with the transformation [of all things]. 形跡雖化往” (*Encountering Fire in Mid-June in the Year of Wu-shen* 《戊申歲六月月中遇火》). Zhuangzi’s “non-transforming” contains at least two meanings: First, in the metaphysical sense, “oneness in equivalence” (*junyi* 均一), “non-generating” (*busheng* 不生), “non-transforming” (*buhua* 不化), “unchanging” (*bubian* 不變); second, in the sense of theory of heart-mind-nature, “open and empty” (*xuwu* 虛無) and “non-purposive” (*wuwei* 無為). More specifically, it is the peaceful concentration of the spirit-mind, similar to that in the “Xici” commentary on the *Book of Change*, “Yi, it has no determinate idea; it has no definite purpose. It is silent and at rest. When prompted it finds no obstacle in any affair in the world. 易，无思也，无為也，寂然不動，感而遂通天下之故。”, and Mengzi’s 孟子 “undisturbed heart-mind” (*budongxin* 不動心).

“Transformation” is mostly involved with Zhuangzi’s natural philosophy, whereas “non-transforming” is concerned with metaphysics. “Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi* theorises on physics with the following words: “Its separation is its completion; its completion is its dissolution. 其分也，成也；其成也，毀也。” Clearly, “completion” (*cheng* 成), “dissolution” (*hui* 毀), “birth” (*sheng* 生), and “perishing” (*mie* 滅) are but slices of the great transformation. More importantly, “Equalizing Assessments of Things” follows up with “Hence, all things are neither formed nor destroyed, for these two open into each other, connecting to form a oneness. 凡物無成與毀，復通為一。” “Imputed Words” in the *Zhuangzi* says the following:

All things are seeds of one another, succeeding one another in different bodily forms. They begin and end as in an unbroken ring and no one can comprehend its principle. That is called “heaven equality”. 萬物皆種也，以不同形相禪，始卒若環，莫得其倫，是謂天均。

“Oneness” (*yi* 一) and “equality” (*jun* 均) in these passages refer to the “constant principle” (*changze* 常則) above all change and transformation in the world. This implies a restful and quiet constancy that knows no birth or destruction. This is also the ultimate justification for “Whatever has an end has a beginning 終則有始” and “[The transformations of things] begin and end as in an unbroken ring 始卒若環”:

That which transforms with all things is the sole non-transforming. What things transform and what things do not? What things does it grind against and find harm? In the process of transforming with all things, it never commits the fault of exceeding [what is appropriate.] 與物化者，一不化者也。安化安不化？安與之相靡？必與之莫多。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Renxiang catches the centre of the ring and rides along to completion. Joining with things, the end and the beginning of things, time and the seasons have all escaped his mind. And because he transforms day by day with things, he is one with that which does not transform – so why should he ever try to stop doing this? He who tries to make heaven his teacher will never get heaven to teach him – he will end up following blindly along with all other things, and then no matter how he goes about it, what can he do? The sage has never begun to think of heaven, has never begun to think of human society, has never begun to think of the beginning, has never begun to think of things. He moves in company with the time and age without bias; wherever he moves, he finds completion and no impediment. Others try to imitate him, but what can they do? 冉相氏得其環中以隨成，與物無終無始，無幾無時日。與物化者，一不化者也，闔嘗舍之！夫師天而不得師天，與物皆殉，其以為事也若之何？夫聖人未始有天，未始有人，未始有始，未始有物，與世偕行而不替，所行之備而不泄，其合之也若之何？

(“Zeyang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The non-transforming is also expressed in “Mastering Life” in the *Zhuangzi*: “Things have their creation in what has no form, and their conclusion in what does not transform. 物之造乎不形，而止乎無所化。” For Zhuangzi, “[t]hat which gives form form has no form 形形之不形” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*) and “[t]hat which turns things into things is itself not a thing 物物者非物” (“Let It Be, Leave It Alone” in the *Zhuangzi*). “Without form” (*buxing* 不形), “non-transforming”, and “not-thing” (*buwu* 不物) are but different expressions of *dao*. In this sense, the complementary pair transformation and non-transforming find unification in the theoretical framework of the “relationship between *dao* and things”. The relationship between transformation and non-transforming is equivalent to that of “[*d*]ao which can be spoken of is not the constant *dao*. 道可道，非常道。” “[*y*]ou and *wu* produce each other. 有無相生”, and “[*d*]ao never undertakes purposive-action and there is nothing it does not accomplish. 道常無為而無不為。” and the relationship between “change and the unchanging 易與不易” in the *Book of Change*. In brief, although non-transforming is the opposite

of transformation, it is also the ultimate ground for the unending effect of transformation. By contrast, the non-transforming is manifested by the various processes of transformation in time. Hence, the relationship between transformation and the non-transforming is in essence the relationship between *dao* and things. Specifically, it is such that

[*d*]ao does not depart from things; things do not depart from *dao*. *Dao* does not exist independently from things; things do not exist independently from *dao*. 道不離物，物不離道；道外無物，物外無道。

(Cheng Xuanying, commentary on the *Laozi* 《老子義疏》)

Philosophical Daoism since Zhuangzi has always emphasised the significance of treating “the existence of things” as they are situated in natural processes within the complementary relationship of transformation and non-transforming:

That which produces things is not produced; that which transforms things is itself non-transforming. 生物者不生，化物者不化。

(“Tianrui” in the *Liezi* 《列子·天瑞》)

It changes along with the times and yet does not itself transform; in agreement with all things and it never falters. 與時變而不化，從物而不移。

(“Neiye” in the *Guanzi* 《管子·內業》)

Thus, that which produces production is itself never produced, its production is what is called production; that which transforms transformation does not undergo transformation, those that are transformed are called transformation. 故生生者未嘗生，其所生者即生；化化者未嘗化，其所化者即化。

(“Shishou” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·十守》)

That which effects the transformation of birth does not die; that which effects the various processes of transformation itself never transforms. 夫化生者不死；而化物者不化。

(“Chuzhenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·俶真訓》)

Thus, even though the body disappears, the spirit is never transformed. If you use what does not transform in response to transformations, [even through] a thousand alterations and ten thousand evolutions, you will not have begun to reach a limit. What transforms returns to what is formless; what does not transform had come to be together with heaven and earth. A tree dies because its greenness has departed. But can that which gives life to a tree be a tree itself? Analogously, what fills forms is not itself a form. Thus, what gives birth to the living never dies, yet that to which it gives birth does die. What transforms things never transforms, yet that which it transforms does transform. 故形有摩而神未嘗化者，以不化應化，千變萬珍，而未始有極。化者，複歸於無形也；不化者，與天地俱生也。夫木之死也，青青去之也。夫

使木生者豈木也？猶充形者之非形也。故生生者未嘗死也，其所生則死矣；化物者未嘗化也，其所化則化矣。

(“Jingshenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·精神訓》)

When the sage encounters things in the world amid their thousand alterations and myriad evolutions, he invariably relies on what never transforms to respond to what is always transforming.

(“Quanyanxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·詮言訓》)

Transformation represents change (*bian* 變) – namely, the great change of the universe in which all things participate. Non-transforming represents constancy (*chang* 常) – namely, that which does not transform and neither comes to be nor perishes. It does not transform but responds to all transformations. In brief, transformation encompasses all things, and non-transforming is concerned with *dao*. From the perspective of the relationship between *dao* and things, transformation and non-transforming are opposites that form a mutually complementing unity, serving well to illustrate the thoughts “change which does not change” and “transformation which does not transform”, which are embedded in the philosophies of the *Zhuangzi*, the *Book of Change*, and the thought of Heraclitus. As Su Shi 蘇軾 says in the *First Ode to the Red Cliff* 《赤壁賦》,

Water is always on the run like this, but never lost in its course; the moon always waxes and wanes like that, but never out of its sphere. 逝者如斯，而未嘗往也；盈虛者如彼，而卒莫消長也。

In comparison, Heraclitus ponders change while Parmenides and Plato pursue the non-transforming. *Zhuangzi*'s theory of transformation, by contrast, encompasses both.

In addition, the Daoist notion of transformation is not limited to physics or the theory of things, for it belongs to the metaphysical category. Naturally, *Zhuangzi* uses it to argue for an ideal state of attainment in which “the spirit rises above the world of things 精神高於物外”. That is to say, although human beings do not escape from the tragic fate of eventual death in the emotionless transformation of all things, one can transcend the transient transformation of the world of things by elevating one's spiritual state of attainment, thus giving infinite meaning and value to the finite lives of individuals. In fact, the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly discusses non-transforming in terms of the internal (*nei* 內) and external (*wai* 外). Examples include:

If you cling without transforming, externally accommodating but internally without any self-criticism, how could that ever work? 將執而不化，外合而內不訾，其庸詎可乎！

(“In the Human World” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The persons of old transformed externally but not internally. Nowadays, people transform internally but not externally. That which transforms with all things is the sole non-transforming. What things transform and what things do not? What things does it grind against and find harm? In the process of

transforming with all things, it never commits the fault of exceeding (what is appropriate). 古之人，外化而內不化；今之人，內化而外不化。與物化者，一不化者也。安化安不化？安與之相靡？必與之莫多。

(“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*)

“External change” (*waihua* 外化) in this passage is equivalent to the notion of transformation in our previous discussions. “Not changing internally” (*neibuhua* 內不化) refers to the tranquil and silent state of the internal heart-mind, i.e. spiritual state of attainment. By contrast, “internal change” (*neihua* 內化), or internal disturbance, means anxiety, nervousness, and confusion of the mind. As a mere traveller in the stream of the myriad transformations, one ought to maintain an undisturbed heart-mind (*budongxin* 不動心) amid the ceaseless transformations to guard against “losing oneself in the world of things 喪己於物”. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* says,

Worth lies within myself, and no external shift will cause it to change. And since the myriad transformations continue without definite order, why bring anxiety to your mind on their account? [. . .] For all things, it is thus. They must be met with something before they die, met with something before they come to be. Having once received this fixed bodily form, I wait upon its end with an unperturbed heart-mind. Moving in imitations of how things do, not distinguishing night and day, I know not the end to which it leads. 貴在於我而不失於變。且萬化而未始有極也，夫孰足以患心！ 萬物亦然，有待也而死，有待也而生。吾一受其成形，而不化以待盡，效物而動，日夜無隙，而不知其所終。

(“Tianzifang” in the *Zhuangzi*)

From this passage, it is clear that an important aspect of non-transforming is “Worth lies within myself, and no external shift will cause it to change. 貴在於我而不失於變。” In this particular sentence, the speaker “I” represents “genuine nature” (*zhenxing* 真性), “the genuine nature and inborn condition of one’s life” (*xingmingzhiqing* 性命之情), and the “constant heart-mind” (*changxin* 常心). Since the “transformation of all things” (*wanhua* 萬化) is “dependent upon something” (*youdai* 有待), it is also reasonable to borrow Guo Xiang’s concept of “not dependent upon anything” (*wudai* 無待) to explain “non-transforming”. “Qisuxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·齊俗訓》 says,

The sage perceives *dao* and returns to his natural propensities. He does not transform [his heart-mind] to suit external transformation. As such the sage is close to never encountering any danger. 故聖人體道反性，不化以待化，則幾於免矣。

In short, the concept of non-transforming is not only used in ontological theories by Daoist thinkers but is also involved in a new, internal perspective, namely that of heart-mind-nature theory, where the concept of “not transforming internally”

(*neibuhua* 內不化) signifies the spiritual state of attainment that is unique to a sage. Further developments of this idea are found in the *Huainanzi*; for example,

Those who break through to *dao* do not assume the truth of the human world to change [the *dao* of] heaven. Externally they transform together with things, but internally they do not lose their genuine responses. They attain *wu*, but their needs are provided for. They are always on the move and lodge at a place but for the night. 故達於道者，不以人易天，外與物化，而內不失其情，至無而供其求，時騁而要其宿。

(“Yuandaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·原道訓》)

Someone who attains *dao* transforms externally but does not transform internally. Transforming externally is how one approaches other people. Not transforming internally is how one preserves one’s person. 得道之士，外化而內不化，外化，所以入人也，內不化，所以全其身也。

(“Renjianshi” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·人間世》)

Transformation is engendered from without; it is not engendered from within. [. . .] Now those who possess *dao* preserve essence inside themselves and lodge spirit within their heart-minds. They are quiet and indifferent, tranquil and undisturbed, with pleasure and profundity in their breasts. Thus, the *qi* of depravity has no place to tarry or obstruct. The joints of their four limbs are well articulated; their hairs’ vapor vents away in an orderly fashion. Thus, the main axes of their bodies are harmonious and advantageous, so that none of the hundred channels and the nine apertures fail to flow freely. Where the spirit dwells, it is sure to attain its proper place. How could we say that this is just [a matter of] soothing the joints or arranging the hair? 化生於外，非生於內也。 今夫道者，藏精於內，棲神於心，靜漠恬淡，訟繆胸中，邪氣無所留滯，四枝節族，毛蒸理泄，則機樞調利，百脈九竅莫不順比，其所居神者得其位也，豈節拊而毛修之哉！

(“Taizuxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·泰族訓》)

It is worth noting that the *Huainanzi* follows the proposition of “transforming externally but not internally” with “preserving essence inside themselves and lodging spirit within their heart-minds 藏精於內，棲神於心。” This is an important indication of its development in terms of heart-mind-nature theory. The Mawangdui-excavated text of *Mingli* 《名理》 says,

Staying within the bounds of proper judgement and observing those which are beyond the bounds of proper judgement, that is called spiritual illumination. Being within the bounds of proper judgement, one is deemed trustworthy without having to pass specific decrees; going beyond the bounds of proper judgement, [the state of affairs] cannot be changed even when decrees are issued. Being still, one does not become disturbed; being in action, [one’s heart-mind] is not transformed. Being so, one is said to be spirit-like. 神明者，處於度之內而見於度之外者也。處於度之內者，不言而信；見於

度之外者，言而不可易也。處於度之內者，靜而不可移也；見於度之外者，動而不可化也。靜而不移，動而不化，故曰神。

This shows that the “spirit-like mind” (*shen* 神), or the “pure spirit-like mind” (*jingshen* 精神), is precisely the “internal aspect”. It is commonly said that “the spirit-like mind is produced internally. 精神生于内。” More specifically,

[t]he [mind of a] sage is like a mirror. It does not reject, nor does it affirm. It responds without retaining anything. Therefore, it transforms endlessly without doing harm to itself. 聖（人之心）若鏡，不將不迎，應而不藏，故萬化而無傷。

(“Lanmingxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·覽冥訓》)

In addition, a particular line in “Yuandaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·原道訓》, “Those who are open to the spiritual illuminations are those who have attained internally. 通於神明者，得其內者。”, can be seen as an interpretive elaboration on the following passage from the “Dao of Heaven” and “Constrained in Will” chapters of the *Zhuangzi*:

Grief and happiness are perversions of *de*; joy and anger are transgressions of *dao*; love and hate are offenses against *de*. When the mind is without care or joy, this is the height of *de*. When it is unified and unchanging, this is the height of stillness. When it grates against nothing, this is the height of emptiness. When it has no commerce with things, this is the height of limpidity. When it rebels against nothing, this is the height of purity. So, it is said that if the body is made to labour and take no rest, it will wear out; if the spirit-like mind is taxed without cessation, it will grow weary, and weariness will bring exhaustion. It is the nature of water that if it is not mixed with other things, it will be clear, and if nothing stirs it, it will be level. But if it is dammed and hemmed in and not allowed to flow, then it, too, will cease to be clear. As such, it is a symbol of heavenly virtue. So, it is said that to be pure, clean, and mixed with nothing; still, unified, and unchanging; at rest and non-purposive; moving with the workings of heaven – this is the way to care for the spirit-mind. The man who owns a sword from Gan or Yue lays it in a box and stores it away, not daring to use it, for to him it is the greatest of treasures. Pure spirit reaches in the four directions, flows now this way, now that – there is no place it does not extend to. Above, it brushes heaven; below, it coils on the earth. It transforms and nurses all things, but no one can make out its form. Its name is called One-with-Heaven. The way to purity and whiteness is to guard the spirit, this alone; guard it and never lose it, and you will become one with spirit, one with its pure essence, which communicates and mingles with the order of heaven. 悲樂者，德之邪；喜怒者，道之過；好惡者，德之失。故心不憂樂，德之至也；一而不變，靜之至也；無所於忤，虛之至也；不與物交，愜之至也；無所於逆，粹之至也。故曰：形勞而不休則弊，精用而不已則勞，勞則竭。水之性，不雜則清，莫動則平，

鬱閉而不流，亦不能清，天德之象也。故曰：純粹而不雜，靜一而不變，惔而無為，動而以天行，此養神之道也。夫有干、越之劍者，柙而藏之，不敢用也，寶之至也。精神四達並流，無所不極，上際於天，下蟠於地，化育萬物，不可為象，其名為同帝。純素之道，惟神是守，守而勿失，與神為一，一之精通，合於天倫。

（“Constrained in Will” in the *Zhuangzi*）

This passage is clearly indicative of argumentation given with respect to the heart-mind-nature theory. Among the various notions that are mentioned, “natural propensities” (*xing* 性), “pure” (*jing* 精), “spirit” (*shen* 神), “limpidity” (*jing* 靜), “at rest” (*dan* 惔), “clear” (*qing* 清), and “clean” (*cui* 粹) are particularly intriguing. Similarly, “Jingshenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·精神訓》, with a clear intention to elaborate on the *Zhuangzi*, also argues repeatedly in terms of heart-mind-nature theory:

Sadness and joy are aberrations of *de*; pleasure and anger are excesses of *dao*; fondness and resentment are the fetters of the mind. Therefore, it is said that [sages] act in accord with heaven in their life, and transform with things in their death. In tranquillity, they close off as with *yin*; in activity, they open up as with *yang*. Being calm and limitless, their spirit-like mind is not dissipated amid external things, and the world spontaneously submits to them. [. . .] Moreover, there are those who mortify their bodies without harming their minds, and those who cede their dwelling [i.e. the conscious mind] without diminishing their spirit-like mind. The thinking of the leper is not altered; the body of the madman not impaired. But when their spirits eventually make their far-off journey, who will have time to think about what they did [in their lives]? Thus, even though the body disappears, the spirit is never transformed. If you use what does not transform in response to transformations, [even through] a thousand alterations and ten thousand evolutions, you will not have begun to reach a limit. What transforms returns to that which is formless; what does not transform is born together with heaven and earth. A tree dies because its greenness has departed. But can that which gives life to a tree be a tree itself? Analogously, what fills the body is not the body. Thus, what gives birth to the living never dies, yet that to which it gives birth does die. What transforms things never transforms, yet that which it transforms does transform. If you take the world lightly, then your spirit-like mind has no attachments. If you minimize the [worth of the] myriad things, then your mind finds no confusion. If you equalize death and life, then your will is met with fear. If you take all alterations and transformations as [being] the same, then your clarity will not be darkened. The masses take these as empty words, but I take them as my ideal and prove them true. [. . .] You will be alive but seem to be dead. In the end, you will return to the foundation of the time before your birth and form one body with the various transformations of all things. [After all,] death and life are of one body. 夫悲樂者，德之邪也；而喜怒者，道之過也；好憎者，心之暴也。故曰：其生也，天行；其死也，

物化。靜則與陰俱閉，動則與陽俱開。精神澹然無極，不與物散，而天下自服。．．．．．且人有戒形而無損於心，有綴宅而無耗精。夫癩者趨不變，狂者形不虧，神將有所遠徙，孰暇知其所為！故形有摩而神未嘗化者，以不化應化，千變萬珍，而未始有極。化者，復歸於無形也；不化者，與天地俱生也。夫木之死也，青青去之也。夫使木生者豈木也？猶充形者之非形也。故生生者未嘗死也，其所生則死矣；化物者未嘗化也，其所化則化矣。輕天下，則神無累矣；細萬物，則心不惑矣；齊死生，則志不懼矣；同變化，則明不眩矣。眾人以為虛言，吾將舉類而實之。．．．．．以生而若死，終則反本未生之時，而與化為一體。死之與生，一體也。

The “spirit-like mind” (*shen* 神) is the “heart-mind on a deeper level 深層之心”. It is the “constant heart-mind” (*changxin* 常心) that transcends rational reasoning and is capable of grasping the truth of *dao*. In addition, the spirit-like mind, or the pure spirit-like mind (*jingshen* 精神), also represents an extraordinary spiritual level of attainment. The relationship between the spirit-like mind and transformation consists of two aspects. On the one hand, it is the notion of “transformation and change are spirit-like. 變化若神.” This notion is similarly expressed in the *Zhuangzi*, the *Book of Change*, the *Xunzi*, the *Wenzi*, and the *Huainanzi*. On the other hand, the mental state of “not transforming internally” (*neibuhua* 內不化) can only be manifested in terms of the spirit-like mind. Based on this, later philosophical Daoists put forward the notion of “wandering of the spirit-mind with the transformation of all things 神與化遊” (“Yuandaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·原道訓》, “Yuandao” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·原道》): “[The sage’s] pure mind is open to the spirit-like house, and they are human beings alongside that which grounds the creation and transformation of all things. 精通於靈府，與造化者為人。” (“Yuandaoxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·原道訓》, “Xiade” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·下德》); and “Above, [the rulers of antiquity] took spirit illumination as their friend; below, they took creation and transformation as their companions. 上與神明為友，下與造化為人。” (“Qisuxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·齊俗訓》).

8.3 Transformation of things

We have discussed in relative detail the concepts of transformation and non-transforming in the *Zhuangzi*. On this basis, we will further our analysis of the concept of “transformation of things” (*wuhua* 物化) in this section. The concept of transformation of things has made its appearance in the natural philosophical (physical) context, such as the aforementioned “Life is the working of heaven; death is the transformation of things. 其生也天行，其死也物化。” (“The Dao of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*) as well as a passage on the principle of things in “Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*:

He will start leaning on men and forget about heaven. He will put himself first and relegate others to a class apart. He will worship knowledge and chase

after it with the speed of fire. He will become the servant of causes, the victim of things, looking in all four directions to see how things are faring, trying to attend to all wants, changing along with things, and possessing no trace of any constancy of his own. How could he possibly do as counterpart of heaven? 彼且乘人而無天，方且本身而異形，方且尊知而火馳，方且為緒使，方且為物絃，方且四顧而物應，方且應眾宜，方且與物化而未始有恒。夫何足以配天乎？。

(“Perfect Happiness” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Various interpreters in history have disagreed on the exact meaning of this passage. However, it is obvious that “transformation of things” (*wuhua* 物化) in this passage is equivalent to “transformation” and “being in accordance with transformation” (*shunhua* 順化). In this particular sense, “transformation of things” is merely “transformation” and does not reach the concept of non-transforming. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* argues that it “possesses no constancy of its own 未始有恆” and suspects “how it could possibly be counterpart of heaven. 夫何足以配天乎？” However, the significance of “transformation of things” in the aesthetic context is notably different. In this context, “transformation of things” is neither “transformation” nor “non-transforming”, for it is above such distinction. The *Zhuangzi* writes,

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities! Such is what we call the transformation of things. 昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂物化。

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The craftsman Chui’s swooping freehand arcs could match the lines made with compasses and T-squares, for his fingers transformed along with the thing he was making, and his mind never lingered to check or verify. Hence his spirit-mind was unified and unshackled to any one place. The forgetting of the foot means the shoe fits comfortably. The forgetting of the waist means the belt fits comfortably. And when the understanding forgets right and wrong, the mind fits comfortably. When the internal is not disturbed and the external is not made master; when everything fits, from beginning to end, even this fitting is forgotten, and that is the perfect fit. 工倕旋而蓋規矩，指與物化，而不以心稽，故其靈臺一而不桎。忘足，履之適也；忘要，帶之適也；知忘是非，心之適也；不內變，不外從，事會之適也。始乎適而未嘗不適者，忘適之適也。

(“Mastering Life” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The first quoted passage can be seen as an elaboration and extension of the *Zhuangzi's* theory of the subject-object relationship. This is a particularly difficult topic, so much so that even Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying failed to note its essential significance. In comparison, it is worth referencing Chu Boxiu's 褚伯秀 interpretation. He says,

Zhuang Zhou, the butterfly, the dream, the awakening – none of them know of the others. They have all released themselves into the transformation of all things and as such there is no difference between any of them. 莊、蝶、夢、覺各不相知，終歸於化而未嘗有異。

In fact, the meaning of “transformation” in this particular passage is twofold – namely, “transformation” and “non-transforming” – just as *yi* 易 in the *Book of Change* has the twofold meanings of “change” and “unchanging”. Chen Bixu 陳碧虛 further points out that the natures of both Zhuangzi and the butterfly belong to the “*qi* of this wondrous world 妙有之氣” and are thus intrinsically connected to the transformation of things.⁶ Therefore, the Daoist stance on how to be in accordance with the transformation of things incorporates both the seeming inevitability found in the statement “Understanding nothing about delighting in being alive or hating death, the minds of the genuine person of old [. . .] were cool like the autumn, warm like the spring. 古之真人，不知說生，不知惡死 淒然似秋，煖然似春。” (“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*) and the disinterested approach of treating life and death as a matter of dreaming and waking.

It follows that the essence of the story of Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly is transformation of things. Then how are we to interpret this concept? Zhong Tai 鐘泰 mentions two points that deserve our attention. First, he references “the persons of old transformed externally but not internally. 古之人，外化而內不化” and “that which transforms with all things is the sole non-transforming. 與物化者，一不化者也。” (“Knowledge Wanders North” in the *Zhuangzi*) to explain the notion of “transformation of things” in “Equalizing Assessments of Things”. This reveals a correct interpretive direction. Second, the transformation of things is a more profound iteration of the proposition “I lose me 吾喪我” at the beginning of “Equalizing Assessments of Things”. That is to say, “losing the self” (*sangwo* 喪我) and “indefinite self” (*wuwo* 無我) are essential foundations for understanding the concept of the transformation of things.⁷ The statement “[Chui’s] fingers transform along with things 指與物化” in “Mastering Life” is equivalent to Zhuang Zhou’s “transforming into a butterfly in his dream. 夢化為蝶”. In the passage quoted, “not changing internally 內不變” has the same meaning as “not transforming internally 內不化”, previously discussed. Notably, “Mastering Life” repeatedly emphasises “not being conscious of a certain condition, or forgetting that something is in fact present” (*wang* 忘). It indicates a state of attainment “without a definite self” (*wuwo* 無我), which is also discussed at length in the “The Great Source as Teacher”:

When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, gasping on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But

that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes. Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we'd be better off forgetting them both and transforming along with *dao*. [. . .] The human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with, just something stumbled into, but those who have become humans take delight in it nonetheless. Now the human form in its time undergoes innumerable transformations, never stopping for an instant – so the joys it brings must be beyond calculation! Hence, the sage uses it to roam in that from which nothing is never lost [or gained], and all is left to be as they are. Early death, old age, the beginning, the end – this allows him to see each of them as good. People emulate those who live well, age well, have good beginnings and ends, but would they not be better off emulating that to which all things are tied, that on which the transformation of all things depend? 泉涸，魚相與處於陸，相呿以溼，相濡以沫，不如相忘於江湖。與其譽堯而非桀，不如兩忘而化其道。 特犯人之形而猶喜之，若人之形者，萬化而未始有極也，其為樂可勝計邪！故聖人將遊於物之所不得遯而皆存。善妖善老，善始善終，人猶效之，又況萬物之所係，而一化之所待乎！

A certain kind of ethical and value judgement is inherent in the sayings “forgetting each other in the streams and lakes 相忘於江湖” and “forgetting them both and transforming along with *dao* 兩忘而化其道”. But, more importantly, Zhuangzi’s theory of transformation of things is an essential aspect of his aesthetic theory, for it involves important ideas regarding skills and artistic practices. The story of “Butcher Ding dismembering an ox 庖丁解牛” in “Primacy of Nourishing Life” and stories of artisans in “Mastering Life” are clear presentations of the idea “the approaching of *dao* in artistic practices 技進乎道”. “The debate over the river Hao 濠梁之辯” shows that the “joy of being a fish 魚樂” can perhaps be “known upon the river Hao 知之濠上”. In other words, although “things” and “I” are different, they are commensurate and can be open to one another. Thus, the concept of transformation of things reflects Zhuangzi’s unique take on the idea of “the inseparability of heaven and human 天人合一”, which is typically imbued with highly spiritual notions, in terms of heart-mind-nature, and lofty notions, in terms of aesthetic consciousness.

“Free and Easy Wandering” in the *Zhuangzi* says, “Liezzi moved about by riding upon the wind, in weightlessly graceful fashion. 夫列子御風而行，泠然善也。” The *Liezi* further elaborates on this imagery and its message. It asks,

My mind stilled. My body relaxed. My bones and muscles all became flexible. I was unaware of what my body rested on, or what my feet tread on. Going along with the wind east and west, I was like a dry leaf. How was I to know whether the wind was riding me or I was riding the wind? 心凝形釋，骨肉都融；不覺形之所倚，足之所履，隨風東西，猶木葉幹殼。竟不知風乘我邪？我乘風乎？

(“Huangdi” in the *Liezi* 《列子·黃帝》)

Su Zhe 蘇轍 explained,

Leave behind what you think you can hear and see, surrender your heart-mind and your will, in a state where the foot knows not on what it treads, the hand knows not on what it leans, with great peacefulness, one becomes indistinguishable from the wind. As such, the wind knows not me; nor do I the wind. 方黜聰明，遺心胸，足不知所履，手不知所馮，淡乎與風為一，故風不知有我而吾不知有風也。

(*Luanchengji*, Vol 18 《欒城集》卷十八)

It is precisely this notion of dissolving the “I” in “things” that forms the foundation of the aesthetic ideal of “the state of the indistinguishable self 無我之境”, for what is genuine artistic practice if not that which leaves behind the barrier between the heart-mind and the hand? Su Shi 蘇軾 dedicated a poem to his friend Wen Yuke’s 文與可 bamboo drawing skills:

When Yuke is immersed in a bamboo drawing, he sees only the bamboo and no one else around him. Not only does he forget his surroundings, he leaves behind his entire body in great serenity. His whole body thus transforms along with the bamboo that finds itself with infinite freshness on the paper. Since Zhuang Zhou no longer treads the world today, then who else knows of this stillness of the spirit-mind? 與可畫竹時，見竹不見人。豈獨不見人，嗒然遺其身。其身與竹化，無窮出清新。莊周世無有，誰知此凝神？

(*Su Dongpo Ji*, Vol. 16 《蘇東坡集》卷十六)

Is this not a fine commentary on “Primacy of Nourishing Life” in the *Zhuangzi*? Luo Dajing 羅大經 recollected the Song dynasty:

When I was a child I was once very fond of capturing bugs that dwell in wild grasses. I would put them in a cage to observe them, without getting tired of them. I then feared that their spirit-minds are not whole living in that condition, so I returned them among the grasses to observe them. That was when I began to grasp their natural propensities. When my pen touches the paper, I do not know whether I am the grass-bug, or the grass-bug is me. This is no different from the subtle mystery of the natural production and transformation of things in the world. 某自少時取草蟲，籠而觀之，窮晝夜不厭。又恐其神之不完也。復就草地之間觀之，於是始得其天。方其落筆之際，不知我之為草蟲耶，草蟲之為我耶。此與造化生物之機緘，蓋無以異。

(*Helinyulu* 《鶴林玉露》)

Shi Tao 石濤 said,

The mountains and rivers are born out of you; you are born out of the mountains and rivers. [. . .] The mountains and rivers encounter you in spirit and

their traces are transformed. 山川脫胎於予也，予脫胎於山川也。
山川與予神遇而跡化也。

Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 is celebrated for the line “The pond engenders spring grass. 池塘生春草。”, but he confessed, “This line had the help of the spirits; it wasn’t me who said it. 此語有神助，非吾語也。” When a great poet on occasion produces a wondrous line, it seems like it has not been written by any human being, but by the spirits. It is as if “there were something that has borrowed my mind in order to think. 有物假我以思。”⁸ “Entering the spirit-like mind” (*rushen* 入神) is the quintessential characteristic of entering the state of transformation in all artistic creations and practices of freedom. It is a psychological-conscious state where the heart-mind and the hand intimately synchronise and where things in the external world and the subjective consciousness link up symbiotically. It is a spiritual state of attainment where “heaven and human beings join to become one 天人合一”, where one’s artistic, aesthetic, and creative activities listen solely to a mysterious and unreasoning sound. Yuan Mei 袁枚 said,

When I stopped seeking the poem and the poem started to seek me, then I began to understand that the music of heaven is completed by nature. 我不覺詩詩覺我，始知天籟本天成。

(*Laolai* 《老來》)

Therefore, aesthetic and artistic creative activities are different from cognitive activities in the general sense, for they share the characteristic of “acting through the spirit-mind as though it were the clear sky, acting through the bodily *qi* as though it were a rainbow. 行神如空，行氣如虹。” Similarly, the author of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri, said, “[I]f you want to depict something, you must become that object. Otherwise, you fail to capture it truthfully”. Henri Matisse said, “The artist understands his object so deeply that he and it dissolve to become a unified whole. He discovers himself in his object, so that his treatment of it is also the presentation of his own essence”, and, “No two fig leaves are the same. They all have their own characteristics, yet each leaf proclaims to us: I am a fig leaf”.⁹ Paul Cézanne, who is known as the father of modern art, extracted from his own artistic experience insights similar to Zhuangzi’s concept of the transformation of things. He believed that the artist and nature must interpenetrate each other. For example, he said, when painting a landscape,

[I]n my mind, the landscape reflects itself; man transforms himself, cognises himself. It is then objectified and solidified on my canvas. [. . .] It is as if I am the landscape’s subjective consciousness, and I am the canvas’s objective consciousness.¹⁰

Clearly, in this mental condition in which the subject and object are indistinguishable, heaven and the human being join to become one. Such is the core and essence

of artistic creation, which is also the cause of the unique attractiveness behind artistic truths that are manifested by practice.

Artistic experiences and artistic truths are something that we grasp directly. This also reflects an important aspect of the Daoist understanding of the truth of *dao*. What is the truth of *dao* that the *Zhuangzi* tries to illustrate with its stories? In essence, the story of Zhuang Zhou's dream of being a butterfly and the debate over the river Hao are meant to tell us about the transformation of things and spirit-like encounters (*shenyu* 神遇), where the subjective self permeates into the core of the existence of all things, resulting in a correspondence between the spirit-like illuminated mind and the world as it is. Deng Chun 鄧椿 says,

The world only knows that people have spirits but are unaware that things have spirits too. Just like in the case where various outline artists (who prioritise accurate formal depiction) are despised by artists with an empty and deep heart-mind, although the outline artists paint, they are not painters. For they only convey a thing's outward form, but not its spirit-mind. 世徒知人之有神而不知物之有神。此若虛深鄙眾工，謂雖曰畫而非畫者，蓋止能傳其形，不能傳其神也。

Deng's words reveal a secret of nature and also the truth of aesthetic and artistic creation. This is why ancient Chinese painters typically sought to "convey the object's spirit and depict its illuminated form 傳神寫照". Daoist thinkers believe that the spirits of things are also one's own spirit. Only by letting one's mind descend into a deepest plane can one "dwell in solitary stillness with spiritual illuminations 澹然獨與神明居" and be "open to the course of all things 通乎物之所造".

Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 famous lines "Picking chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence at will, leisurely I see the southern hill. 采菊東籬下，悠然見南山。" (*Yinjiu*, V 《飲酒》之五) received high praise from Su Shi 蘇軾, who said, "These lines are the most exquisite and ingenious. 此句最有妙處。" (*Tiuanmingyinjishihou* 《題淵明飲酒詩後》). What is so exquisite and ingenious about these two lines? Su Shi said, "The landscape and the consciousness meet. 境與意會。" Cai Mengbi 蔡夢弼 said, "On the occasion of chrysanthemum picking, [Tao] has no intention of seeing the mountain, yet the view corresponds with the mind. 采菊之際，無意於山，而景與意會。" (*Dugongbucaodaoshihua*, Vol. 1 《杜工部草堂詩話》卷一). Mou Yan 牟巘 said,

To chance upon an outward correspondence with the mind. [. . .] It is in between that which is thought of and that which is not thought of. It is not something that can be exhausted by words. 適與意會 蓋在有意無意之間，非言所可盡也。

(*Lingyangji*, Vol. 7 《陵陽集》卷七)

Wang Guowei 王國維 also commented that this poem is an example of the "ego-less state 無我之境" and "without barrier 不隔". Tao's poems overcome the

dichotomous distinction of subject and object and reveal a more original and primordial relationship between things and the subject (or intersubjective relationship). This gives his poems a profound, quiet, and leisurely tone. Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 writes in the *Hexinlang* 《賀新郎》, “The view of the lush green mountains is ever so enchanting; perchance its view of me is this way also. 我見青山多嫵媚, 料青山見我應如是。” Here the mountains and the speaker are no longer separable or distinguishable. Xin echoes Tao in this respect perfectly.

The significance of Zhuangzi’s concept of transformation of things lies in its revealing of the relationship between Zhuangzi and the butterfly in his dream, between Zhuangzi and the fish in the river Hao, between Butcher Ding’s 庖丁 knife in his hand and his ox, between Liezi and the wind, between Luo Dajing 羅大經 and his grass-bugs, between Wen Yuke 文與可 and his ink bamboo, between Yuan Mei 袁枚 and his poetry, between Shi Tao 石濤 and the mountains and waters in his artistic vision, between Matisse and the fig leaves in his mind, between Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 and the southern mountain in his backyard, between Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 and the lush green mountains, and so on. Such is the relationship that cannot be subsumed under the subject-object dichotomy that has taken hold of mainstream Western thought. These thinkers and artists have overcome the objectifying mode of thought. That is to say, from the perspective of aesthetic theory, the kind of relationship detailed previously cannot be explained by Aristotle’s theory of art as imitation,¹¹ nor does it fit well with contemporary conception of art as “a harmony in parallel with nature”, which Cézanne claimed it to be.¹² The subject-object relationship in philosophy is equivalent to the art-instrument-artwork relationship in artistic practice. In this case, Zhuangzi’s notion of the transformation of things is a clear attempt to overcome the opposition, barrier, and distance between the heart-mind, the hand, and external things. In brief, “transformation of things” is neither “transformation” nor “non-transforming”. It implies a total immersion of mind in which one’s physical body and the perceived distance to the external world are left behind and one awakes completely. In this sense, it is more powerful and more profound than the concept of correspondence in Western aesthetics.

8.4 Change and transformation

The meaning of change and transformation (*bianhua* 變化) that we are about to discuss in this section is very clear. It refers to the transformation of one kind of thing into another. For this reason, we can more accurately give this notion the name “transformation of one thing changing into another 變物之化”. Ying Shao’s 應劭 *Fengsutong* 《風俗通》 references Gan Bao’s 幹寶 *Bianhualun* 《變化論》: “Withered rice turns into insects, withered wheat becomes butterflies. 朽稻成蟲, 朽麥為蛺蝶。” “Change and transformation” in this example refers to the transmutation from a thing of one kind to another. “Change and transformation” in this sense is used commonly in the ancient world. It is also an ingredient for philosophical thought. Examining this notion via the tension between religion and philosophy is particularly thought-provoking.

The *Zhuangzi* holds that “[h]eaven and earth are a great foundry, and the entire course of transformation a great ironsmith. 以天地為大鑪，以造化為大冶。” (“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*). This proposition is particularly important to our understanding of the concept of change and transformation in the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* believes that the entire course of transformation (*zaohua* 造化) is the non-transforming in transformation by which all change, coming to be, and perishing become one in the “one *qi* of heaven and earth 天地之一氣” and “death and birth, living on and disappearing, compose one body. 生死存亡之一體者。” (“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*). On this basis, we can appreciate with a balanced mind the following passage:

Perhaps he will transform my left arm into a rooster, thereby I will be announcing the dawn. Perhaps he will transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet, thereby I will be seeking out an owl to roast. Perhaps he will transform my buttocks into wheels and my spirit into a horse, thereby I will be riding along – will I have need of a vehicle to travel? 浸假而化予之左臂以為雞，予因以求時夜；浸假而化予之右臂以為彈，予因以求鴉炙；浸假而化予之尻以為輪，以神為馬，予因以乘之，豈更駕哉！

(“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*)

This passage is a great example of the *Zhuangzi*’s bizarre and self-indulgent style of writing. Is this merely an extravagance that serves only literary purposes, or does it reflect a deeper intellectual impulse? Of course, the *Zhuangzi* also contains other apparently bizarre and outlandish passages, including this one on “wind [procreative] transformation” (*fenghua* 風化):

I have been studying the Six Classics – the *Book of Songs*, the *Documents*, the *Ritual*, the *Music*, the *Book of Change*, and the *Spring and Autumn* – for what I would call a long time, and I know their contents through and through. But I have been around to seventy-two different rulers with them, expounding the ways of the former kings and making clear the path trod by the dukes of Zhou and Shao, and yet not a single ruler has found anything to excite his interest. How difficult it is to persuade others, how difficult to make clear of *dao*! Laozi said, “It’s lucky you didn’t meet with a ruler who would try to govern the world as you say. The Six Classics are the old worn-out paths of the former kings – they are not the thing that walked the path. What you are expounding are simply these paths. Paths are made by shoes that walk them; they are by no means the shoes themselves! The white fish hawk has only to stare unblinking at its mate for fertilization to occur. With insects, the male cries on the wind above, the female cries on the wind below, and there is fertilization. The creature called the *lei* is both male and female, and so it can fertilize itself. Natural propensities cannot be changed, fate cannot be altered, time cannot be stopped, *dao* cannot be obstructed. Get hold of *dao* and there is nothing that cannot be done; lose it and there is nothing that can be accomplished”. Confucius stayed home for three months and then went

to see Lao Dan once again. “I’ve got it”, he said. “The magpie hatches its young; the fish spit out their milt; the slim-waisted wasp has its stages of transformation; and when baby brother is born, big brother howls. For a long time now, I have not been taking my place as a man along with the process of change. And if I do not take my own place as a man along with the process of change, how can I hope to change other people?” Laozi said, “Good, Qiu – now you’ve got it!” 孔子謂老聃曰：“丘治《詩》、《書》、《禮》、《樂》、《易》、《春秋》六經，自以為久矣，孰知其故矣，以奸者七十二君，論先王之道而明周、召之跡，一君無所鈎用。甚矣夫！人之難說也，道之難明邪！”老子曰：“幸矣，子之不遇治世之君也！夫六經，先王之陳跡也，豈其所以跡哉！今子之所言，猶迹也。夫迹，履之所出，而迹豈履哉！夫白鴟之相視，眸子不運而風化；蟲，雄鳴於上風，雌應於下風而風化。類自為雌雄，故風化。性不可易，命不可變，時不可止，道不可壅。苟得其道，無自而不可；失焉者，無自而可。”孔子不出三月，復見，曰：“丘得之矣。烏鵲孺，魚傅沫，細要者化，有弟而兄啼。久矣夫，丘不與化為人！不與化為人，安能化人！”老子曰：“可。丘得之矣。”

(“The Turning of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Examining these passages on transformation and the contexts in which the word appears, it is not difficult to note that they refer to transformation and change in a special sense – namely, that between different kinds of things. Since “transformation and change” in this sense incorporates elements of metamorphosis and also implies a mysterious sense of spirit-like transformation, it deserves much of our attention. A relatively typical example is the Daoist theory of evolution (or a relatively special theory of change) in “All lives come to be out of the mysterious workings and go back into them again. 萬物皆出於機，皆入於機。”:

The seeds of things have mysterious workings. In the water, they become Break Vine; on the edges of the water, they become Frog’s Robe. If they sprout on the slopes, they become Hill Slippers. If Hill Slippers get rich soil, they turn into Crow’s Feet. The roots of Crow’s Feet turn into maggots, and their leaves turn into butterflies. Before long, the butterflies are transformed and turn into insects that live under the stove; they look like snakes, and their name is Qutuo. After a thousand days, the Qutuo insects become birds called Dried Leftover Bones. The saliva of the Dried Leftover Bones becomes Simi bugs, and the Simi bugs become Vinegar Eaters. Yiluo bugs are born from the Vinegar Eaters, and Huangshuang bugs from Jiuyou bugs. Jiuyou bugs are born from Mourui bugs, and Mourui bugs are born from Rot Grubs, and Rot Grubs are born from Sheep’s Groom. Sheep’s Groom couples with bamboo that has not sprouted for a long while and produces Green Peace plants. Green Peace plants produce leopards, and leopards produce horses, and horses produce men. People in time return again to the mysterious workings. So all lives come to be out of the mysterious workings and go back into them again. 種有幾，得水則為鱉，得水土之際則為蛙蟻之衣，生於陵屯則為陵烏，陵

烏得鬱棲則為烏足，烏足之根為螻蛄，其葉為蝴蝶。胡蝶，胥也化而為蟲，生於灶下，其狀若脫，其名為鵲掇。鵲掇千日為鳥，其名曰乾餘骨。乾餘骨之沫為斯彌，斯彌為食醢。頤輅生乎食醢，黃軛生乎九猷，蒼苳生乎腐蠶。羊奚比乎不筍，久竹生青寧，青寧生程，程生馬，馬生人，人又反入於機。萬物皆出於機，皆入於機。

(“Perfect Happiness” in the *Zhuangzi*)

The seeds of things have mysterious workings. If a frog becomes a quail, in water it becomes water plantain; at water's edge it becomes moss. Growing on high ground it becomes plantain; when plantain is on a dung-heap, it becomes crowfoot grass. Crowfoot roots become maggots, the blades become butterflies. Butterflies are evanescent; changing into grubs, they hatch under stoves; shaped like sloughed-off skins, they're called parrot-plucks. In a thousand days parrot-plucks transmute into birds called dry leftover bones. The saliva of dry leftover bones birds becomes a kind of insect, which turns into a vinegar bug. The vinegar-eating bug produces vinegar flies, vinegar flies produce bacon beetles, bacon beetles produce mosquitoes, mosquitoes produce cucumber flies. Sheep liver turns to madder, horse blood turns to phosphorus, human blood turns to fox-fire, kites become sparrow-hawks, sparrow-hawks become cuckoos, with cuckoos eventually turning back into sparrow-hawks, swallows become clams, field mice become quails, rotten melons become fish, leeks become amaranth, old ewes become monkeys, fish eggs become insects. Animals on certain mountains reproduce by parthenogenesis, some water birds reproduce by gazing at each other. There's a totally female species called big waist, and a totally male species called immature ants. Sensitive men are aroused without marrying, sensitive women get pregnant without marrying. Hou Ji was born from a giant footprint, Yi Yin was born in a hollow mulberry tree. Dragonflies are born in moisture, flies are born in wine. Weeds grow by bamboo, old bamboo engenders insects, insects engender panthers, panthers engender horses, horses engender humans. People in time return again to the mysterious workings. So, all lives come to be out of the mysterious workings and go back into them again. 種有幾：若蠅為鶉，得水為蕘，得水土之際，則為蠅蟻之衣。生於陵屯，則為陵烏。陵烏得鬱栖，則為烏足。烏足之根為螻蛄，其葉為胡蝶。胡蝶胥也，化而為蟲，生竈下，其狀若脫，其名曰鵲掇。鵲掇千日，化而為鳥，其名曰乾餘骨。乾餘骨之沫為斯彌。斯彌為食醢頤輅。食醢頤輅生乎食醢黃軛，食醢黃軛生乎九猷。九猷生乎蒼苳，蒼苳生乎腐蠶。羊肝化為地臯，馬血之為轉鄰也，人血之為野火也。鷓之為鷓，鷓之為布穀，布穀久復為鷓也。鷓之為蛤也，田鼠之為鶉也，朽瓜之為魚也，老韭之為菟也。老榆之為猿也，魚卵之為蟲。亶爰之獸，自孕而生，曰類。河澤之鳥，視而生，曰鷓。純雌其名大腰，純雄其名釋蜂。思士不妻而感，思女不夫而孕。后稷生乎巨跡，伊尹生乎空桑。厥昭生乎濕，醢雞生乎酒。羊奚比乎不筍，久竹生青寧，青寧生程，程生馬，馬生人。人久入於機。萬物皆出於機，皆入於機。

(“Tianrui” in the *Liezi* 《列子·天瑞》)

It is important to note that “transformation and change” in this sense is also a kind of transformation. In other words, among all the various uses of the word “transformation” (*hua* 化) in the *Zhuangzi*, one of them has the special meaning of change in kind. In fact, this use of the word is not uncommon in ancient classics. For example, the *Guoyu* 《國語》 records the words of Zhao Jian 趙簡, who says,

The bird goes into the sea and becomes a clam. The chicken goes into the river Huai and becomes a mussel. The sea turtle, the alligator, fishes, and the soft-shell turtle, all such animals can transform. Humans are the only exception. 雀入于海為蛤，雉入于淮為蜃。鼃鼉魚鱉，莫不能化，唯人不能。

(“Jinyu IX” in the *Guoyu* 《國語·晉語九》)

“Transformation” in this passage is a change in kind – a kind of thing transforms to become a thing of another kind. By contrast, the transformation previously discussed is “the course of existence of all things”. From an empirical point of view, a thing turning into another, especially one creature becoming another, is abnormal and alarming. However, the concept of “transformation of a thing changing into another 變物之化” has a long history, embedded with ideas of an ancient religious tradition that permeates the folk culture.

The *Mojing* 《墨經》 says, “Transformation is change in features. 化，征易也。” Its counterpart, *Jingshuo* 《經說》， says, “For example, a turtle becomes a quail. 若鼃為鶉。” The *Mojing*’s use of the word “transformation” indicates that the meaning of the word contains the notion of change and transformation in kind in early Chinese thought and that this notion of transformation has a broad conceptual foundation. It seems that the ancients were particularly concerned with the physical transformation of animals such as the soft-shelled turtle (*yuan* 鼃). It is clear that animals such as insects, snakes, birds, mussels, fish, soft-shelled turtles, shrimps, and toads go through different forms in their lives. Such phenomena occur in the minds of the ancients for inexplicable reasons and are abstracted to form the special concept of transformation. According to the *Shuowen* 《說文》， the character “𪚩” (*meng*) refers to various amphibians with a snake-like head, including frogs, turtles, and toads. By parity of reasoning, one can surmise that “[s]wallows become clams, field mice become quails, rotten melons become fish, leeks become amaranth. 鶩之為蛤也，田鼠之為鶉也，朽瓜之為魚也，老韭之為菹也。” (“Tianrui” in the *Liezi* 《列子·天瑞》). Judging by the received texts, this relatively special concept of transformation is a part of early empirical knowledge that has had a lasting influence. At least we can believe that it contributed partially to the shaping of fundamental conceptions in the cultural tradition at the time. Such influences can be observed in ancient classical texts and the writings of learned scholars; for example:

In the first month of spring [. . .] voles become quails. [. . .] In the first month of summer, rotten grass becomes firefly. [. . .] In the first month of autumn, sparrows go into floods and become clams. 季春之月 田鼠化為鶉 季夏之月 腐草為螢 季秋之月 爵入大水為蛤。

(“Yueling” in the *Liji* 《禮記·月令》)

Gong Niu'ai fell ill and after seven days he transformed to become a tiger. 公牛哀轉病也，七日化為虎。

(“Chuzhenxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·俶真訓》)

As months and years pass by, *qi* changes and things do too. Shrimps and toads become quails; birds become clams. 歲月推移，氣變物類，蝦蟆為鶉，雀為蜃蛤。

(“Wuxing” in the *Lunheng* 《論衡·無形》)

If what is received from *qi* is the same and fixed, then how do we explain small birds becoming small clams, larger birds becoming larger clams, earth-bugs growing wings, frogs in streams flipping and becoming capable of flying, oysters becoming blood-sucking flies, water lilies and fungus becoming maggots, voles becoming quails, rotten grass becoming fireflies, alligators becoming tigers, snakes becoming water dragons? 若謂受氣皆有一定，則雉之為蜃，雀之為蛤，壤蟲假翼，川蛙翻飛，水蠭為蛉，苻芩為蛆，田鼠為鴛，腐草為螢，鼯之為虎，蛇之為龍？

(“Lunxian” in the *Baopuzi* 《抱樸子·論仙》)

Dao is the beginning of heaven and earth, unifying its principles. It is that for which things come to be and that for which heaven brings about generation. It encompasses vastness and is formless. Transforming *qi*, it came together before heaven and earth. Its form is not seen, its name is not known. As such, it is called spirit-like intelligence. Therefore, *dao* is the origin of spirit-like illuminations. It unifies all transformations. This is fostering the five vapours with *de*. When the heart-mind obtains unity, its techniques come into being. Techniques are *dao* of the heart-mind's *qi*. What is resident in the body is made to act by the spirit. The nine openings and the twelve lodges are the passageways of *qi* and are the collective aids to the heart-mind. When still living and yet accepted by heaven, that person is called a genuine person. The genuine person is one with heaven. He who is inwardly refined and studied, and who knows this, is called a sage. The sage knows things by their type. Therefore, people and the continuous generation of things are both born out of the transformation of things. The key to knowing things by their type is through one's openings. If one has doubts or is confused, one has to clear the openings by using the techniques of the heart-mind. Without techniques of the heart-mind, there is certain to be failings in one's understanding. Succeed in doing so, the five *qi* is nourished. To achieve this, one's mission is to house one's spirit-like mind. This is called transformation. There are five *qi* to one's transformation, intention, consideration, spirit, heat-mind, and *de*. Spirit is the overall leader. Tranquility and harmony nourish one's *qi*. When one's *qi* is in harmony, the four do not diminish. When there is awe and influence all around, all is achieved. Preserving and housing this condition is called spirit. When transformations return to the body, one is called the genuine person. The genuine person is together with heaven and joined with *dao*. He grasps unity and nourishes and

produces all things. He embraces the heart-mind of heaven. He implements the nurturing of *de*. He does not initiate, thus preserving his intentions. Keeping his ideas in mind, he practices power and influence. For officials, perceive and understand this in order to make your spirit-like mind flourish, then your resolution will be fostered. 道者，天地之始，一其紀也。物之所造，天之所生，包宏無形，化氣先天地而成，莫見其形，莫知其名，謂之神靈。故道者，神明之源，一其化端，是以德養五氣，心能得一，乃有其術。術者，心氣之道所由舍者，神乃為之使。九竅十二舍者，氣之門戶，心之總攝也。生受於天，謂之真人；真人者，與天為一。而知之者，內修練而知之，謂之聖人；聖人者，以類知之。故人與生一出於化物。知類在竅，有所疑惑，通於心術，心無其術，必有不通。其通也，五氣得養，務在舍神，此謂之化。化有五氣者，志也、思也、神也、德也；神其一長也。靜和者，養氣。氣得其和，四者不衰。四邊威勢無不為，存而舍之，是謂神化。歸於身，謂之真人。真人者，同天而合道，執一而養產萬類，懷天心，施德養，無為以包志慮思意而行威勢者也。士者，通達之神盛，乃能養志。

(“Shengshenfawulong” in the *Guiguzi* 《鬼谷子·盛神法五龍》)

It is worth noting that this passage repeatedly mentions “technique” (*shu* 術) and “techniques of the heart-mind” (*xinshu* 心術). Emphasising “techniques of the heart-mind” is surely a feature of the Han dynasty Huang-Lao School. The meaning of “transformation” in this passage is different from the sense of the word in Daoist texts. To understand the *Guiguzi*’s transformation, one must consider its use of *qi* and “spirit”. The core thesis of this passage is to explain the ways in which the “genuine person” (*zhenren* 真人) composes his heart-mind, *qi*, and spirit to attain the state of “being at one with heaven 與天為一” and “joining with heaven in *dao* 同天合道”, i.e. “transforming like a spirit 神化”. It is worth referencing the *Shuowen*’s 《說文》 explanation and analysis of the word “genuine” (*zhen* 真). It says, “Genuine is when a spiritually ascended person changes his bodily form and mounts to heaven. 真，仙人變形而登天也。” This is an interpretive explanation based on the character’s hieroglyphic structure. Duan Yucai’s 段玉裁 commentary on this entry references various ways of transformation from “Zaying” in the *Baopuzi* 《抱樸子·雜應》 to further explain the word. This indicates that the word “genuine” (*zhen* 真) already contains the meanings “change in bodily form” and “transformation”. In other words, “change in *qi* and essence 變化氣質” is an inherent meaning of “genuine 真”. This notion of change forms an important basis for the concepts of spiritually ascended person (*xianren* 仙人) and genuine person. As Cao Zhi 曹植 says,

Some people cast doubt on the existence of spiritually ascended persons. [They ask,] are spiritually ascended persons a kind of primate? Is it that an ordinary person becomes a spiritually ascended person upon attaining *dao*? The bird goes into the sea and turns into a clam; the sparrow goes into the sea and becomes a mussel. When it lingers on the waters and preens its feathers, it is learning about itself. As it suddenly throws itself into the deep, its body transforms in spirit-like fashion and soon it joins the ranks of turtles and

soft-shelled turtles. Then, how could it still recognise the joy of soaring above forests and making nests on wood beams? Niu Ai fell sick and turned into a tiger. He chanced upon his brother and devoured him. Since there are such things in the world, what is so special about change and transformation? 又世虛然有仙人之說。仙人者，儻獐猿之屬與？世人得道化為仙人乎？夫雉入海為蛤，燕入海為蜃，當其徘徊其翼，差池其羽，猶自識也。忽然自投，神化體變，乃更與黿鱉為群，豈復自識翔林薄、巢垣屋之娛乎？牛哀病而為虎，逢其兄而噬之。若此者，何貴於變化邪？

(*Biandaolun* 《辯道論》)

These examples illustrate the extensive religious-cultural tradition around the notion of “transformation of one kind of thing into another 變物之化”, including that from an ordinary kind to the otherworldly.

This notion of transformation of one kind of thing into another has directly influenced the concept of the spiritually ascended person and the corresponding religious practices in religious Daoism (including Huang-Lao Daoism). The *Shenxianzhuan* 《神仙傳》, the *Taishangdengzhen Sanjiao Lingyanjing* 《太上登真三矯靈驗經》, and the *Huashu* 《化書》 are clear examples. Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 says,

When I read the *Huashu* and got to the passage “Some inanimate objects become feeling creatures: old maple trees turn to spiritually ascended persons; withered wheat transforms and becomes butterflies. Some living creatures turn into inanimate objects: Steadfast women turn into stone; mountain worms turn into lilies”. Then I came to understand that the author of this passage knows well the essence of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and understands well the case of panthers engendering horses, horses engendering humans. 予讀《化書》，至“老楓化為羽人，朽麥化為蝴蝶，自無情而之有情也。賢女化為貞石，山蚯化為百合，自有情而之無情也”，乃知作之者明乎莊、列之旨，達乎程生馬而馬生人也。

(*Huashu Houxu* 《化書後序》)

Examining the *Huashu* 《化書》 reveals that not only does the book accept without doubt phenomena such as “snakes transforming into turtles, birds transforming into clams. 蛇化為龜，雀化為蛤。” and “Old maple trees turn to spiritually ascended persons; withered wheat transforms into butterflies 老楓化為羽人，朽麥化為蝴蝶”，but it also claims that “those with body over six *chi* can turn into dragons, snakes, metals, stones, grass, or trees. 六尺之軀，可以為龍蛇，可以為金石，可以為草木。” This is because although different things have various forms, they share a common and identical spirit. This is the basis of the *Huashu*’s concept of “*dao* of spirit-like transformation 神化之道”. It says,

Emptiness transforms into spirit; spirit transforms into *qi*; *qi* transforms into form; form is produced and the myriad things are thus separated from one another. 虛化神，神化氣，氣化形，形生而萬物所以塞也。

(“Daohua” in the *Huashu* 《化書·道化》)

Emptiness transforms into spirit; spirit transforms into *qi*; *qi* transforms into form; form transforms into minute essence. 虛化神，神化氣，氣化形，形化精。

(“Dahua” in the *Huashu* 《化書·大化》)

Emptiness transforms into spirit; spirit transforms into *qi*; *qi* transforms into form; form transforms into an infant; an infant transforms into a child; a child transforms into an adolescent; an adolescent transforms into a mature [creature]; a mature [creature] transforms into an old [creature]; an old [creature] transforms into a dead [creature]. Dead creatures again transform into emptiness; emptiness again transforms into spirit; spirit again transforms into *qi*; *qi* again transforms into various things. There is no gap between one transformation and another, just as a ring has no finitude. 虛化神，神化氣，氣化血，血化形，形化嬰，嬰化童，童化少，少化壯，壯化老，老化死。死復化為虛，虛復化為神，神復化為氣，氣復化為物。化化不間，由環之無窮。

(“Sisheng” in the *Huashu* 《化書·死生》)

Emptiness (i.e. not filled with any definite thing) (*xu* 虛) is the “place of action 用武之地” for all transformations. The *Huashu* explains,

Emptiness contains emptiness; spirit contains spirit; *qi* contains *qi*; brightness contains brightness; things contain things. Those who understand this principle are capable of being open to any such circumstances and let their bodily form conform [to things in the world.] Those which are homogeneous with fire transform into fire; those which are homogeneous with water transform into water; those which are homogeneous with the sun and the moon transform into the sun and the moon; those who are homogeneous with metals and stones transform into metals and stones. Only the accomplished person is homogeneous with all things; thus he can transform into all things, which makes him sufficiently capable of riding the same chariot with the lord of emptiness. 虛含虛，神含神，氣含氣，明含明，物含物。達此理者，情可以通，形可以同。同於火者化為火，同於水者化為水，同於日月者化為日月，同於金石者化為金石。唯大人無所不同，無所不化，足可以與虛皇並駕。

(“Datong” in the *Huashu* 《化書·大同》)

This concept of transformation is an essential foundation for the pursuit of spiritual ascension and the attainment of genuineness by religious Daoists. This is the case even from a technical point of view. Early religious Daoists attempted to achieve immortality and ascension to spirit persons by ingesting *dan* 丹 medicine. Because of this, ancient Chinese alchemy has unexpectedly been given the modern title of “primitive chemistry”. The Chinese phrase for “chemistry” (*huaxue* 化學) is precisely the study of transformations (*hua* 化), i.e. the changing of physical properties of a thing as well as the changing of a kind of substance into another kind of

substance. Surely, as early religious Daoists devoted a great amount of financial and material resources to the refining of *dan* 丹 medicine by transforming one kind of thing into another, they did not neglect their internal spiritual transformations.

In comparison with Western thought, the notion of transformation and change (the changing of a thing from one kind to another), which appears repeatedly in religious and philosophical Daoist texts, is indeed a very peculiar notion. Many Westerners believe that all things and affairs are God's creation. As such, things cannot transform from one kind to another by the sheer power of their own inclinations. Of course, Darwin's theory of evolution is an exception. This is not the case in China. For the Chinese people, who once accepted the theory of revolution gladly, the idea of transformation is in their bones. The concept of transformation and change is deeply embedded in religious Daoism and folk religion. This concept is also mercurial and capable of many variations. To conclude, the concept of transformation and change in religious Daoism and folk religion implies that all that exists in the world, humans and objects alike, is inherently connected by a timeless and mysterious link. Grasping this internal connexion and applying it in concrete practice will turn the ordinary into the genuine – still worldly and yet spirit-like.

Notes

- 1 Guu-ying Chen 陳鼓應, "On the Relationship of *Dao* and Things 論道與關係問題", *Daoist Culture Study* 道家文化研究, Vol. 22 (2007).
- 2 Instances of "transformation of themselves" (*zihua* 自化) are found in chapters 37, 57.
- 3 Yiming Cui 崔宜明, *Living and Wisdom* 生存與智慧 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press 上海人民出版社, 1996), 187–190.
- 4 Fancheng Xu 徐梵澄, "Pondering the Unity of Great Wisdom 玄理參同", in *The Works of Xu Fancheng* 徐梵澄文集, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2006), 105–106.
- 5 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization of China*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: China Science Publishing 科學出版社, 2018), 57–58.
- 6 Dahua Cui 崔大華, *Interpreting the Zhuangzi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 2012), 109.
- 7 Tai Zhong 鐘泰, *Commentary on the Zhuangzi* 莊子發微 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2002), 62–63.
- 8 Zhongshu Qian 錢鐘書, *Guanzhuibian* 管錐編, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1979), 1206.
- 9 Jack D. Fiam, *Matisse on Art* 馬蒂斯論藝術, Ying Ouyang 歐陽英 (*trans.*) (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House 人民藝術出版社, 1987), 54–55, 58.
- 10 Baihua Zong 宗白華, *Selection of Works in Fine Arts Studies Translated by Zong Baihua* 宗白華美學文學文選 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1988), 217.
- 11 Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 1.
- 12 Baihua Zong 宗白華, *Selection of Works in Fine Arts Studies Translated by Zong Baihua* 宗白華美學文學文選 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1988), 217.

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