



## **The Deconstruction of Dao in the Zhuanzi**

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- ¶1. The notion of dao occupies a central place in Daoist discourse. Chad Hansen has argued that dao is not exactly a metaphysical concept either in Shendao's, Laozi's or Zhuangzi's Daoism. Their primary use of dao is prescriptive and pragmatic, namely, seeing it as the guidance for human action or behavior. However, Hansen admits that a reality concept nonetheless stands behind Shendao's use of dao. Laozi, to some extent, does not overcome Shendao's influence but is "less metaphysical than Shendao." Only Zhuangzi reaches maturity in completely refuting primitive Daoists.[1] This suggests to me that while the overall context for the discourse of dao in Daoism is not metaphysical but pragmatic and prescriptive, there are reifying or totalizing expressions of dao involved in Daoism. They can be regarded as metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical elements in Daoism. In this light, it is appropriate to see the related contribution of Zhuangzi as the deconstruction of these metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical elements.[2] Zhuangzi's deconstruction involves his deconstruction of Shendao's notion of dao, his deconstruction of some of Laozi's expressions of dao, and his self-deconstruction when he attempts to elude any metaphysical reappropriation of his notion of dao.

### **The deconstruction of dao as nonbeing.**

- ¶2. The Dao De Jing shows that Laozi is ambiguous concerning his view of being and nonbeing. On the one hand, Laozi is aware that dao transcends the distinction of being and nonbeing. For instance, Laozi holds that being and nonbeing “spring forth from the same source, and yet they differ in name. This sameness is called ‘profoundly dark’.”<sup>[3]</sup> He also points out: “being and nonbeing give birth to each other.”<sup>[4]</sup> These statements indicate that the distinction between being and nonbeing is relative. Being and nonbeing involve each other. Dao subverts the self-identity of either being or nonbeing. In this sense there is no priority of nonbeing to being. On the other hand, Laozi privileges nonbeing over being, identifying dao with nonbeing, one way or another. In chapter 40, Laozi writes: “The ten thousand things in the world originate in being; being originates in nonbeing.”<sup>[5]</sup> This clarifies his early saying that nonbeing is named the origin of heaven and earth, while being is named the mother of ten thousand things.<sup>[6]</sup> However, this contradicts the claim of the sameness and relativity of being and nonbeing. Elsewhere Laozi gives the following description to dao:

We look but see it not;/It is named “the invisible.”/We listen but hear it not;/It is named “the inaudible.”/We try to seize it but find it not;/It is named “the intangible.”/These three elude our scrutiny, / And thus are intermingled into one./ . . ./Continuous, unceasing, and unnamable/It returns to “no-thing.”<sup>[7]</sup>

From this statement and some other ones, we see quite clearly that the movement of dao is regarded by Laozi as starting from nonbeing (or nothingness) and returning to nonbeing. Although being and nonbeing are both included in the movement of dao, dao is allied to nonbeing. Dao privileges, and resides in, nonbeing. It sounds like a dialectic of nonbeing. The text of Dao De Jing does not allow us to conclude with this aspect of Laozi’s thought. As we have mentioned, the other side of Laozi’s thought can subvert this dialectic closure of nonbeing. However, this privileging of nonbeing over being could easily lend itself to a metaphysical appropriation of Laozi’s thought, one that will deviate further from Laozi’s pragmatic concern.

- ¶3. Zhuangzi pushes ahead with Laozi's subversive side of dao, and forcefully interrogates the legitimacy of the priority of non-being to being. Zhuangzi states:

There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is nonbeing. But I do not know, when it comes to nonbeing, which is really being and which is nonbeing.[\[8\]](#)

- ¶4. Zhuangzi is emphasizing that we cannot find reason to support such a logocentric closure of nonbeing.[\[9\]](#) First, the distinction between being and nonbeing, just like all binary distinctions, can never, and will never, be clear-cut. Being and nonbeing always already rely on each other and involve each other. Each transforms itself from and into the other. They can by no means establish their own identities within changing situations. If we keep up with living flux, how can we isolate and distinguish being from nonbeing, and vice versa? Second, the vulnerability of the imagined priority of nonbeing also lies in that there are always third possibilities outside any closure of nonbeing and being. Nonbeing is caught in the chain of infinite transformations. If nonbeing is prior to being, then "a not yet beginning to be nonbeing," namely, nonbeing of nonbeing, is prior to nonbeing. This nonbeing of nonbeing is neither nonbeing nor being. It is the third possibility.[\[10\]](#) It makes all closures open to change, to disruption. Zhuangzi's dao apparently is allied to this third possibility. However, even this third possibility is in the chain of further transformation, according to Zhuangzi. It can be replaced by another possibility or by other possibilities without exception. A main meaning of Zhuangzi's dao then, to my understanding, is this chain and process of transformation itself. It has no beginning and end. Transformation is always possible even before any single possibility of transformation is found. Therefore, "Dao cannot be thought of as being, nor can it be thought of as nonbeing. In calling it dao we are only adopting a temporary expedient."[\[11\]](#) By calling dao "a temporary expedient," Zhuangzi suggests that even the term dao is ineluctably in the chain of transformation and substitution. As a matter of fact, it is replaceable by a series of other terms such as tianni (the balancing of nature), tianlai (the piping of nature), baoguang (shaded light), lianghang (double walking), ming (enlightenment) in the Zhuangzi.[\[12\]](#) By this de-sedimentation of the term dao, Zhuangzi eschews any reifying appropriation of dao, and maintains the prescriptive and pragmatic character of his dao. The main purpose of doing so is to free our minds from any fixation either on being or nonbeing, to keep up with living flux and transformation.

## The deconstruction of dao as one.

- ¶5. In the above-quoted verses from chapter 14 of Dao De Jing, Laozi not only shows his preference for nonbeing, but also for oneness in interpreting his dao. In other words, dao is considered one as opposed to many. Elsewhere Laozi says: “The ten thousand things are alive by virtue of the one.”[\[13\]](#) This notion of oneness is prominent in Laozi’s thought of dao. As Zhuangzi correctly observes, Laozi heads his doctrine of dao “with the concept of great oneness.”[\[14\]](#) Chad Hansen has tracked this preference for the oneness of dao back to Shendao, the primitive Daoist. For Shendao asserts: “The great dao can embrace but it cannot distinguish. . . . Dao is that which leaves nothing out.”[\[15\]](#) Hansen calls Shendao’s thesis a thesis of “All is one,” and defines it as an absolute monism.[\[16\]](#) In Hansen’s view, Zhuangzi is a hero in refuting Shendao’s monism. Thus some important passages in the Zhuangzi are seen simply by Hansen as commentaries on Shendao’s thought. I do not want to deny Hansen’s contribution to distinguishing Zhuangzi’s thought from Shendao’s monism. It is insightful. But what about its relationship with Laozi’s dao? Those passages in the Zhuangzi, it seems to me, are more likely the commentaries on some passages in the Dao De Jing. To facilitate his own interpretation of Laozi, Hansen either neglects those passages showing Laozi’s quasi-monistic view or simply emphasizes their prescriptive function.[\[17\]](#) However, this neglect is inconsistent with his position that a prescriptive or pragmatic theory can involve a certain kind of metaphysical point of view or element as in the case of primitive Daoism. My view is that Zhuangzi refutes both Shendao’s and Laozi’s preference for oneness. As far as their influences in the Daoist tradition are concerned, Laozi is, without question, greater than Shendao. As our textual evidence indicates, Laozi hence becomes reasonably the primary target of Zhuangzi’s deconstructive operation.
- ¶6. The oneness of Laozi’s dao contains two major meanings. First, dao as one is the origin, source or foundation of myriad things. Look at the following passages in the Dao De Jing: “Bottomless,/It seems to be the ‘ancestor’ of the ten thousand things.”[\[18\]](#) “Dao is ‘something’ elusive and evasive./Evasive and elusive!/Yet within it there is ‘image.’ /Elusive and evasive!/Yet within it there is ‘something’.”[\[19\]](#)

There is “something” nebulously complete in and by itself, /Which comes before Heaven and Earth./Silent, boundless, standing alone, and changeless;/ . . ./It may be considered the mother of the world./ I do not know its name;/I give it the name “dao.”/I am compelled to name it “great.”[\[20\]](#)

- ¶7. Here terms such as “ancestor (zong),” “mother (mu),” “image (xiang)” and “something (wu)” are obviously quasi-reifying ones that can easily lend themselves to a stronger hypostatization of origin or source. Although scholars have proposed to rule out the accountability of these metaphorical expressions of dao as cosmic origin, these statements nonetheless involve the ontological implication of dao as the primordial source of the world. [21] Therefore, although we should not see Laozi’s notion as purely “metaphysical” in the Western sense of this word, [22] the problematic of the reification of this oneness should not be simply ignored. Secondly, dao as one is the totality or the whole of myriad things. Laozi says: “The great dao flows everywhere, / . . . / The ten thousand things derive their life from it, / . . . / It accomplishes its task without claiming anything.” [23] “Dao in the world is likened to the sea, / Into which flows rivers and streams.” [24] This amounts to saying that dao is the whole within which everything thrives. Dao as totality embraces everything, leaving nothing outside. Here we see the overlapping of Shendao’s monistic view and Laozi’s. We also see that the two meanings of Laozi’s oneness of dao are closely interrelated. Dao for Laozi is both the original source and the whole of everything. Now let us see how Zhuangzi performs a deconstructive operation upon them.
- ¶8. Zhuangzi’s deconstruction of dao as one is a part of his deconstruction of all conceptual oppositions between nonbeing and being, one and many, self and other, and the like. For Zhuangzi, dao cannot be reified, since dao is neither an entity nor a concept. Dao designates the absence of things, namely, the absence of fixed distinctions between things such as between one and others. Dao denotes the chain and process of infinite transformations, denotes dynamic interrelations. This chain or process brings everything into being, makes possible all distinctions, but does not claim anything for itself or attempt to fix on anything. Laozi’s dao of wuwei (no-action) has implied this meaning. However, Zhuangzi tries to make clear that not only does dao claim nothing but also dao itself is not a thing. When we conceive dao as one or as nonbeing, we have already fallen into the realm of things, the realm of fixed binary distinctions. We have distorted dao. Therefore, Zhuangzi insists that dao cannot be identified as anything. “That which treats things as things is not limited by things.” [25] Things have their limits such as that all things have their beginning and end. But “dao has no beginning, no end.” [26] The conception of dao as an origin or source presupposes a beginning of all transformations, and affirms an original presence. Contrary to Laozi’s saying that there is something which comes before heaven and earth, Zhuangzi asks:

There is that which comes before heaven and earth, but is it a thing? That which treats things as things is not a thing. Things that come forth can never precede all other things, because there were already things existing then; and before that, too, there were already things existing—so on without end.[\[27\]](#)

- ¶9. In other words, we have no way to break the chain of substitution and interrelation. Even if we assume something original or primordial, this “something” or one thing nonetheless is caught in the relation with its other. Its other and its other’s other are always traceable without an end. The closure of any “great one,” any divine origin or source, has always already been leaking. Here Zhuangzi uses the same strategy as he employed in overturning Laozi’s privileging of nonbeing.
- ¶10. Zhuangzi is fully aware of problems inherent in Laozi’s and Shendao’s preference for oneness. Zhuangzi himself never declares that everything is one in the way Shendao does, unless he is quoting something like Hui Shi’s opinion.[\[28\]](#) The dismantling of their preference for oneness consummates in one of Zhuangzi’s most powerful philosophical criticisms.

Since all things are one, how can there be anything to talk about? But since I have already said that all things are one, how can there be nothing to talk about? One and speech makes two, two and one makes three. Continuing on in this fashion, even the cleverest mathematician couldn’t keep up, how much less an ordinary person! Therefore, if in proceeding from nonbeing to being we arrive at three, how much farther we shall reach when proceeding from being to being. We need not proceed at all if we understand the mutual dependence of “this” and “that.” [\[29\]](#)

Zhuangzi first reveals the difficulty of Shendao’s, and also Laozi’s, monistic view that dao includes everything but itself cannot be distinguished. Zhuangzi’s point is that you claim that dao cannot be distinguished but actually you make the distinction—dao is one. Once you make the distinction that dao is one, the original one and the one you talk about become two. However, Zhuangzi does not say that we should stop speaking completely. Rather, he discloses that whether dao is one or not is really a way of talking about things. Since the distinction of dao as one is none other than a way of talking about things, it is in the chain of substitution and interrelation. In this sense Zhuangzi talks about the relation among one, two and three. It seems like a direct commentary on

the first line of chapter 42 in the Dao De Jing. That line goes as follows: “Dao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to ten thousand things.”<sup>[30]</sup> Zhuangzi suggests that we cannot justify such a theory of dao as origin. It is nothing but a human calculation or fabrication that comes out of the privileging mind. It does not represent any reality. Zhuangzi urges us to use such “final vocabularies” no more!

- ¶11. This is not yet the end of Zhuangzi’s deconstruction. Zhuangzi does two more things to dismantle the preference for oneness. First, contrary to the monist’s claim that many are one, Zhuangzi sometimes emphasizes that one is many. For instance, Zhuangzi insists: “Dao has no boundaries.”<sup>[31]</sup> “Dao is everywhere. . . . It is in the ant . . . in the panic grass . . . in the tiles and shards . . . even in the piss and shit.”<sup>[32]</sup> If dao is the chain of infinite transformations, it does not claim its own existence. It de-centers itself and becomes inseparable from all things. On the other hand, no thing can escape from this chain. Thus everything can have its own dao. Various daos are the same of difference, the same of no self-identity. Dao is the presence of absence. It is not a closure but an open chain—the crucial point that let us distinguish Zhuangzi’s dao from any monism.
- ¶12. However, as we can see now, Zhuangzi privileges neither one nor many. An essential step that Zhuangzi takes to distinguish himself from both monism and, may I call, blind pluralism is to see the whole as perspective only. In other words, while we disagree with monism, we do not have to utterly abandon the perspective of whole, or to avoid addressing issues such as the condition of the possibilities of things. Zhuangzi emphasizes that we can look at things “from the point of view of their differences,” but we can also look at them “from the point of view of their sameness.”<sup>[33]</sup> It is in this perspectival context that Zhuangzi talks about oneness or wholeness. However, this oneness or wholeness is only one perspective among many. We can have this perspective of oneness just as we can have other perspectives. This does not mean that all perspectives have equal use. The perspective of wholeness has its unique use in liberating people from their limited views or perspectives, in making them open to limitless changes. It is a kind of soteriological or therapeutic use. In this aspect, Zhuangzi shares nothing with some contemporary Western philosophers, such as postmodernists. He would probably criticize the latter’s view as one-sided, namely, as privileging many over one.

END NOTES

1. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press (1992), 208, 211, 230.
2. Deconstruction here is regarded as a contextual strategy or a situational operation of overturning oppositional hierarchies with the characteristic of self-subverting. Its main target is reification or substantialization. This is my definition of deconstruction from which I will start to examine Zhuangzi's deconstructive operation demonstrated in the book *Zhuangzi*. Obviously, this broad meaning of deconstruction is not limited to Derridean deconstruction.
3. Dao De Jing, chapter 1. The original Chinese text is in Chen Guying, *Laozi Zhu yi Ji Pingjie*, Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju (1987). Translation is mine.
4. *ibid.*, Chapter 2.
5. *ibid.*, Chapter 40.
6. *ibid.*, Chapter 1.
7. *ibid.*, Chapter 14. This translation is from Charles W. Fu's and Sandra Wawrytko's unpublished manuscript. I have made a minor change.
8. Unless otherwise indicated, the original Chinese text of the *Zhuangzi* used for this study is presented in *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20*, Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center (1966), 5/49-51. I indicate the page and line numbers here and throughout the paper from the original text. For the English translation see Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 43.

9. My use of the term logocentric is based on Rorty's distinguishing of a broad sense of logocentrism from a narrow use of the term. According to Rorty, in the wide sense, logocentrism includes all the invidious binary oppositions. These binary oppositions or distinctions are merely the ordinary strains that appear in any and every vocabulary (scientific, political, technical, or whatever) . . . [See Richard Rorty, Two Meanings of 'Logocentrism': A Reply to Norris, in his Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991), 109. Rorty is arguing that logocentrism can be applied to various discourses outside Western philosophy, the tradition of metaphysics to which only a narrow sense of the term can be applied. I therefore define the broad sense of logocentrism or the logocentric as an intellectual maneuver to establish a fixed binary opposition, a hierarchy, a system of privileged concepts, and the like.
10. Cf. A. C. Graham's interpretation for this paragraph: [I]f we negate the negation we do not return to the affirmation, but arrive at a third possibility . . . This brings us nearer to what the two alternatives left out. See his A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal*, *History of Religions*, 9(2) 1969, 145-6.
11. *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20*, Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center (1966), 73/79-80. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 293. I have made minor changes.
12. *ibid.*, 7/92, 3/4, 6/62, 5/40, 4/31..
13. Chapter 39. My translation. Cf. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by D Lau, London: Penguin Books (1963), 100.
14. *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20*, Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center (1966), 93/56. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 372.
15. *ibid.*, 92/44-45. Translation is from Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press (1992), 206.

- [16.](#) Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press (1992), 285.
- [17.](#) *ibid.*, 230.
- [18.](#) Chen Guying, *Laozi Zhuyi Ji Pingjie*, Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju (1987), Chapter 4. The translation is from Charles W. Fu's and Sandra Wawrytko's unpublished manuscript.
- [19.](#) *ibid.*, Chapter 21.
- [20.](#) *ibid.*, Chapter 25. I have made a minor change.
- [21.](#) See, for instance, Charles W. Fu, "[Creative Hermeneutics: Taoist Metaphysics and Heidegger](#)", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 3(2) 1976, , 134.
- [22.](#) I say that it is not purely metaphysical, not only because the context of Laozi's discussion of dao is prescriptive and pragmatic, but also because the distinctions of sensible and intelligible, essence and phenomena, substance and attributes, etc., that characterize Western metaphysics, are missing in Laozi's philosophy. Moreover, as I have mentioned, Laozi maintains some trans-metaphysical views that ultimately privilege neither being nor nothingness.
- [23.](#) Chen Guying, *Laozi Zhuyi Ji Pingjie*, Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju (1987), Chapter 34. The translation is from Charles W. Fu's and Sandra Wawrytko's unpublished manuscript. I have made a minor change.
- [24.](#) *ibid.*, Chapter 32.
- [25.](#) *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20*, Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center (1966), 59/50. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 241.
- [26.](#) *ibid.*, 44/45. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 182.

- [27.](#) *ibid.*, 60/75-76. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 246.
- [28.](#) A. C. Graham might be the first person to note this point and carefully distinguish Zhuangzi's position from Hui Shi's saying that heaven and earth are one unit. See A.C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters*, translated by A.C. Graham, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. (1981), 56.
- [29.](#) *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20*, Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center (1966), 5/53-55. For the English translation see *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Victor Mair, New York: Bantam Books (1994), 18-19.
- [30.](#) Cf. Charles W. Fu's and Sandra Wawrytko's unpublished manuscript, and Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by D Lau, London: Penguin Books (1963), 103.
- [31.](#) *A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20*, Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center (1966), 5/55. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 43.
- [32.](#) *ibid.*, 59/44-45. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 240-241.
- [33.](#) *ibid.*, 12/7. Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 69.

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