The Metaphysics of Creation in the *Daodejing*

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Abstract. This paper offers an original interpretation of the *Daodejing* 道德經 as containing a distinctive account of creation. In my reading, the *Daodejing* envisions the creation of the cosmos by Dao (1) as a movement from the absence of phenomenal forms to phenomenal forms and (2) as a movement from nothingness to existence. I interpret creation as a unique metaphysical operation that explains how (1) and (2) are possible. The paper is organized into two sections. First, I introduce the distinctions between the lack and presence of phenomenal forms (§1.1) and between nothingness and existence (§1.2), using them to map the distinction between Dao and the created world. Then, I propose my account of the *Daodejing*'s metaphysics of creation (§2.1) and elaborate on its connection with the previously drawn distinctions while answering a potential objection (§2.2). I conclude with some considerations about the connections between the *Daodejing*'s view of creation and its soteriology.

Many religious traditions share a commitment to some ultimate reality of spiritual significance: a personal God for Abrahamic religions, Brahman in Hinduism, and Suchness in some forms of Buddhism.[1] In this paper, I understand the term "creation" minimally: a metaphysics of creation is any theory that explains how ultimate reality is responsible for the existence of the cosmos. Of course, different traditions develop different versions of such a theory. For example, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* adopted by personalistic theists differs from that of creation as emanation. According to the former, an omnipotent personal God creates the cosmos by bringing it into existence out of sheer nothing (Copan and Craig 2004: ch. 4; Swinburne 2004: 49-50). According to the latter, the cosmos flows out of divine reality (Oakes 1992; see also Longenecker 2022).

Scholarly language to talk about creation is far from being fixed. Lloyd Gerson (1993), asking whether the doctrine advocated by Plotinus—commonly described as a theory of emanation (Armstrong 1937)—is, in fact, a theory of creation at all, seems to be using "creation" as a synonym for "*creatio ex nihilo*" (see also Zimmerman 2013). Moreover, the very notion of *creatio ex nihilo* has been conceived in a variety of ways (see Burrell et al. 2010; esp. Fatoorchi 2010), and to complicate things further, some people take the doctrines of *creatio ex nihilo* and emanation to be compatible (e.g., Soars 2021). What matters for us is that there are different options when it comes

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[1] For a general treatment of the concept of ultimate reality, see Schellenberg (2016) and Diller (2021). For references to treatments of God, Brahman, and Suchness as ultimate reality, see Leftow (2012), Gupta (2020), and Zappulli (2023).

to theorizing the relation of metaphysical dependence of the cosmos on ultimate reality, and in my use of the term these are all creation theories.

The reason why I employ such a thin definition of "creation" is that we need more inclusive terms to foster inter-religious dialogue and comparative work on religion. For the debate in the global philosophy of religion to flourish, we need to compare and contrast how religious doctrines differ. However, the comparison needs to stand on some shared ground. Making terms like "creation" theoretically thinner helps provide such common ground.[2] Others might prefer a thicker definition of "creation" that involves, for example, personal agency. I have no principled objection to that, but my point is that that still leaves us with the need for a term to refer to what, say, *creatio ex nihilo* and emanation have in common. Which term one chooses will be somewhat a matter of preference, and my preference goes for "creation." If your preference favors a different term, you can read this paper while substituting all instances of "creation" with your favorite term, and nothing will be lost.[3]

Of course, to compare and contrast different doctrines, we first need to provide precise accounts of each of them. The goal of this paper is to present an original interpretation of the *Daodejing* 道德經 or *Laozi* 老子 as containing a distinctive metaphysics of creation.[4] Accordingly, this paper aims to expand our understanding of Daoist philosophy and to broaden our inventory of available creation theories. Moreover, insofar as I interpret the *Daodejing*'s theory of creation in terms of a novel metaphysical operation, the paper also hopes to offer a contribution to analytic metaphysics at large.

This paper follows a research project initiated by Robert Neville (1980), who has been pioneering in tackling the issue of creation in the *Daodejing*. He was perhaps too pioneering, given that, at the time, the idea of working on metaphysical issues in early Chinese philosophy faced strong opponents. Angus Graham claimed that early Chinese philosophy is completely devoid of cosmological speculation (1989: 12), while David Hall and Roger Ames described the Chinese philosophical tradition as "acosmotic" (1995: 184). Insofar as these arguments have now encountered various objections (Ge 2018; Goldin 2008; see also Tu 1984), and research on early Chinese metaphysics has been flourishing (Bai 2008; Banka 2018; 2022; Berger 2014; Chai 2014; 2018; Hansen 2017; Hong 2019; Liu 2017; Michael 2005; Yu 2015; Zheng 2020), the project can now be pursued further.

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[2] For a discussion on the globalization of the philosophy of religion, see Harrison (2020) and Nagasawa (2017).

[3] Notice that, for example, in denying that there is a notion of creation in Chinese cosmology, Liu (2015) gives the term "creation" a narrower meaning than I do.

[4] I am going to follow the convention of talking about "the authors" of the *Daodejing* in the plural. However, when it comes to early Chinese texts like the *Daodejing*, there is often a question regarding who the author or authors of the text were (see Liu 2015). Given the philosophical orientation and goal of this paper, I do not intend to take a stance on this debate. Following the methodology of Valmisa (2021), I treat argumentative and theoretical coherence—rather than authorship—as the relevant unit of analysis.

Having said that, it is worth clarifying one last point that—though perhaps obvious to some readers—is important enough to deserve explicit mention: the claim that there is metaphysical thought in early Chinese sources does not imply for a second that any particular assumption generally taken on board in Western metaphysics (to the extent that such a broad category makes sense) would also be part of the Chinese background (see Perkins 2019; Wang 2015; Zheng 2020).

One key claim that I take to be assumed by the authors of the *Daodejing* is that there are no such things as abstract entities or properties (Hansen 1983: ch. 3; see also Perkins 2018). Pre-Han Chinese philosophers widely assumed that reality is constituted of a variety of concrete entities (*wu* 物) and that terms in our language (*ming* 名) never refer to abstract stuff but only to those concrete entities and their particular properties. The mind (*xin* 心) is, in turn, not understood as operating through a set of internal mental representations but as a faculty that identifies things and properties by—depending on one's view—drawing or identifying boundaries between them. It will thus be important to keep in mind that all the talk about entities and properties in what follows should be understood in terms of *concrete* entities and *particular* properties.

1. The Metaphysics of the *Daodejing*

The first thing to do is identify the key terms of the theory of creation in the context we are analyzing. What creates what? *Daodejing* 4 and 42 make these terms clear:

> Dao is empty: it is used but not filled. Such abyss is the progenitor of the myriad things.[5]

> 道沖而用之或不盈。淵兮似萬物之宗。

> Dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, three generates the myriad things.

> 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

The text identifies Dao 道 as the creator and the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) as the created. The term "*wan* 萬" literally means ten thousand, but it is employed metaphorically to convey the idea that the created world contains a multitude of entities: tables, chairs, trees, etc. As for Dao, *Daodejing* 4 characterizes it as the progenitor (*zong* 宗) of the myriad things,[6] suggesting its role as originator, and as various scholars pointed out (Chang 2011: 82; Micheal 2005: 56; Zheng 2021: 127), *Daodejing* 42 goes further in describing the cosmogonic process leading to the generation of the myriad things, that is, the process of creation itself.[7]

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[5] All translations in the paper are mine. To check a different translation, see Lynn (1999).

[6] Other chapters use the terms "mother" (*mu* 母; see *Daodejing* 1, 20, 25, 52), "father" (*fu* 甫; see *Daodejing* 21), or simply "origin" (*shi* 始; see *Daodejing* 1, 14, 32, 52).

[7] A worry one might have is that in early Chinese philosophy there is no clear distinction between ontology and cosmology when it comes to the creation of the cosmos, where cosmogony answers the *scientific* question about *how* the cosmos came to its present state, while a theory of creation answers the distinctively philosophical question of why there is a

What theory of creation a text or author comes up with is something that will be informed by the metaphysical character of the creator and the created and by their metaphysical relation. For instance, understanding the creator as an anthropomorphic figure will make available ways of understanding creation in terms of craft and agency plausibly unavailable in a context in which ultimate reality is not taken to be a personal agent. Accordingly, now that we have identified the key terms of the discussion, we need to inquire into their metaphysical character. In this section, I will argue that the distinction between Dao and the myriad things is mapped onto two others: the distinction between presence and absence of phenomenal form, and the distinction between nothingness and existence.

1.1. Presence and Absence of Phenomenal Forms

For an entity to have phenomenal form is for it to have some perceivable properties that identify it in contrast to other entities. These properties do not have to be perceivable by any particular agent at any particular time, but they have to be, in principle, perceivable by *some* agent. One of the ways in which the *Daodejing* sets the distinction between Dao and the myriad things is in terms of phenomenal forms: the myriad things have it, and Dao does not. Consider *Daodejing* 14:

> One looks for it but does not see it, so we name it "invisible." One listens for it but does not hear it, so we name it "inaudible." One grasps for it but does not get it, so we name it "intangible." These three are impossible to probe; therefore, it is amorphous and a single unity. Its rising does not shine, and its setting does not bring obscurity. Unnamable proceeds, returning to and restarting from no-thing. This is what we call the form of the formless, the image of no-thing. This is what we call the hazy murk.

> 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。

Dao is described as beyond the reach of our perceptual faculties: it is invisible (*yi* 夷), inaudible (*xi* 希), and intangible (*wei* 微). The most philosophically coherent way of understanding these claims is as implying that Dao is completely beyond perception: Dao is not just impossible to see with the eyes, hear with the ears, or touch with the hands—it altogether transcends the capacities of the senses.[8] In fact, there is no cogent reason to take these claims as focusing on the human senses specifically: were we to use a bat's sonar or some other possible alien perceptual faculty, in trying

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cosmos in the first place, that is, why there is something rather than nothing. Certain terms used in the *Daodejing* (such as the "*you* 有" – "*wu* 無" pair, which we will discuss in detail later) suggest that the authors of the text were explicitly interested in ontology. Moreover, even for someone committed to arguing that the text does not explicitly draw the distinction between the two, it should remain a viable option to interpret it in one way or the other depending on *our* theoretical interests. Since the theoretical interests motivating this paper are philosophical, I am going to give an ontological interpretation of the text. On this point, see Bai (2008).

[8] See also Wang Bi's *Laozi Weizhi Lilue* 老子微旨例略 ("The Structure of Laozi's Subtle Pointers") in Lynn (1999: 30).

to access Dao they would not do either. In sum, the claim is that Dao does not have a phenomenal form (see also Hong 2019: §3.1).

Daodejing 14 does not explicitly contrast Dao's lack of phenomenal form with the phenomenal forms of created things. However, we can reconstruct the contrast with a bit of careful reasoning. The passage says that Dao is a single unity. It seems then reasonable to contrast the *unity* of Dao with the *multiplicity* of the myriad things, and we can see the appropriateness of this contrast by reflecting on the implications of Dao's lack of phenomenal form. *Daodejing* 14 takes the oneness of Dao to *follow* from the fact that it does not have phenomenal form, for it claims that "these three are impossible to probe" and, "*therefore (gu* 故), it remains a single unity." Why so?

The oneness of Dao is not entailed by its lack of phenomenal form alone. Therefore, the question is what hidden premise the authors of the *Daodejing* are assuming that allows them to make the inference. I propose that the *Daodejing* authors are implicitly assuming a version of the principle of the identity of the indiscernibles: if x and y have the same phenomenal form, then x is identical to y (cf. Forrest 2020). This principle allows us to see why the inference from Dao's lack of phenomenal form to its oneness works: since for any x and y to be distinct, they must have different phenomenal forms, Dao, lacking phenomenal form, cannot possess any multiplicity. Conversely, the myriad things—being multiple and so distinct from one another—must have phenomenal form. We can thus conclude that the distinction between Dao and the myriad things is mapped onto the distinction between the presence and absence of phenomenal form.

As it happens, things get more complicated. At the end of the passage, the metaphysical condition of Dao is described as the *form* (*zhuang* 狀) of the formless (*wuzhuang* 無狀) and as the *image* (*xiang* 象) of the no-thing (*wuwu* 無物). In other words, the authors of the *Daodejing* seem to claim that Dao at once does and does not possess a phenomenal form. How can we make sense of these claims? This is an instance of a rather widespread strategy consisting of describing ultimate reality as an oxymoronic "vacuum-plenum" (see Roth 2021: 280; Stace 1987: §3.5). The question is what is the point of advancing such a seemingly contradictory description, and this is an issue that we will discuss extensively in the second section. Before getting there, there is another claim made in *Daodejing* 14 that merits our attention: the remark that Dao is not a thing.

1.2. Existence and Nothingness

As the world is made of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物), the implication of referring to Dao as "no-thing" (*wuwu* 無物) is that Dao stands on a different metaphysical level than the entities constituting the world, like tables and chairs, or for that matter planets and stars. Consider *Daodejing* 40:

The myriad things in the world are generated in existence. Existence is generated in nothingness.[9]

天下萬物生於有。有生於無。

Edward Slingerland (2003: 85) notices that facing the claims that the myriad things come from Dao, like the ones considered above, side-by-side the claim that the myriad things come from nothingness in *Daodejing* 40, we should conclude that nothingness and Dao are the same. I endorse a more moderate claim and follow the direction of other interpreters who see nothingness not as strictly speaking identical to Dao but as one of its attributes (e.g., Chai 2014: 663; Zheng 2021: 12).[10]

What does it mean to say that Dao is nothingness? One might be tempted to read the claim as saying that Dao simply does not exist. According to this reading, in claiming that existence, and in turn the myriad things, come from nothingness, the authors of the *Daodejing* would be rejecting the principle that from nothing, nothing comes, which in the Western tradition can be traced back at least to Parmenides. Is this what is happening here? I don't think so.

Pang Pu (2009) distinguishes between three senses of the term "*wu*" (i.e., "nothingness") in classical Chinese thought: (A) *wu* as the absence of something; (B) *wu* as absolute nothing; (C) *wu* as the presence of the invisible. (A) is the sense of "nothing" that we use when we say that there is no beer in the fridge. What we mean is that some specific entity or set of entities is absent. (B) is the nothing of the philosophers—the absence of *all* entities. Imagine having a big book containing a list of all existing entities and to eliminate them one by one: absolute nothing is the state that one gets when all entities have been eliminated.[11]

If what we mean by "nothingness" is either (A) or (B), it seems correct to say that from nothing, nothing comes. In fact, (B) is the sense of "nothingness" employed in the Parmenidean principle. It is impossible for something to originate from the mere absence of something else, let alone from the absence of everything. The same reasoning, however, does not apply to (C). If we use "nothingness" to refer not to some kind of mere absence but to a presence that, for reasons to

[9] Bai (2008) discusses that differences in the Chinese found in the Guodian excavated versions of the text brought some interpreters to argue that *Daodejing* 40 does not say that existence is generated in nothingness but that things are generated in existence *and* nothingness, thereby containing a "horizontal" reading of the two terms like the one we find in *Daodejing* 2. On this point, I follow Bai in saying that (1) whether the horizontal reading should be preferred is a controversial point, and even in light of the Guodian findings, one could argue the other direction; (2) even if the "original" *Daodejing* contained a different metaphysics than the received text, that would not constitute a reason not to study the metaphysics of the latter, which anyway is the one that has been read for most of Chinese history. See also Berger (2014).

[10] Among those who can be read as taking "*wu* 無" to be an attribute of Dao, there are differences in what aspect is emphasized: Chai interprets nothingness as "the ontological facilitator for Dao's creativity" (2014: 663), while Zheng reads it as an "umbrella attribute" encompassing many others, such as formlessness (*wuxing* 無形) and namelessness (*wuming* 無名). Notice that the reading of nothingness as an attribute of Dao extends to Wang Bi's interpretation of the *Daodejing* as well (Hong 2019: §5; Wagner 2003b: 123).

[11] For an alternative characterization, see Priest (2014: §6.13).

specify, conceals itself, we have a sense of the term that is perfectly compatible with the claim that existing entities come from it, for the mere fact that such a presence is not accessible does not force us to conclude that it cannot be productive.

Pang thinks that the nothingness discussed in the *Daodejing* is precisely (C), and as the next question naturally arises—the question being what in the world might be meant by the "presence of the invisible"—we already have the answer: the invisible is Dao as lacking phenomenal form. The invisibility that Pang finds to be contained in the *Daodejing*'s notion of *wu* lies simply in the fact that Dao, unlike the myriad things, does not have a phenomenal form (see Chai 2014a; 2014b; Hong 2019: §5; Kong 1979: 52; Wagner 2003b: ch. 2; Zheng 2021: 14).[12]

One might then be tempted to think that the distinction between nothingness (*wu* 無) and existence (*you* 有) is a mere repetition of the point that Dao, in contrast to the myriad things, lacks phenomenal form. This seems to be the move that, for instance, Hong Hao makes in saying that "relating Dao to *wu* is just another way to express Dao's featurelessness" (2019: 232). My view is that such a reading does not take the *Daodejing*'s view radically enough. Instead, I propose that a rather strong claim is being made here: that *to exist is to have a phenomenal form* (see Gu 2009: 160). This reading *does* imply the non-existence of Dao, but such non-existence is not equal to absolute nothing in the sense described above because non-existence is here the complement of existence *as possessing phenomenal form*.

This point can be interpreted by appealing to the notion of ontological difference, which Martin Heidegger introduced in his 1927 lectures *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Heidegger 1988). The ontological difference is the distinction between entities as particulars and Being as the condition of possibility of the manifestation of all entities.[13] According to Yao Zhihua (2010)—who in his interpretation draws from the work of Pang Pu—the notion of nothingness that we find in the *Daodejing* can be interpreted precisely as Being in Heidegger's sense.[14] Since Dao lacks a phenomenal form, it cannot have any multiplicity, and since the multiplicity of phenomenal forms is a necessary condition for there to be things, Dao is not a thing; it is nothingness. At the same time, Dao is metaphysically responsible for the existence of all things—Dao, while not itself a particular, is that by which all particulars are what they are, which is precisely Being.[15] In fact, the philosophical literature abounds with works analyzing the similarities between Daoist and Heideggerian thought, interpreting either through the lens of the other (e.g., Chai 2022; Chang 2013; Ma 2006; Nelson 2023; Parkes 1987; Wang 2016).

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[12] For an overview of the notion of nothingness in Asian philosophy, see Liu and Berger (2014).
[13] See Käufer (2005) and Nicholson (1996) for a detailed explanation.
[14] On the relation between nothingness and Being, see also Shien Gi-Ming (1951). For further discussion on nothingness being prior to existing things in the *Daodejing*, see Chen (1973).
[15] In this context, being is not to be contrasted with becoming. In fact, process metaphysics is arguably the default assumption in Chinese metaphysics.

Going a step further, we can elaborate this distinction with the tools of contemporary analytic metaphysics. In those terms, the distinction between nothingness (that is, Being) and particular entities can be characterized as a meta-ontological distinction. While ontology is concerned with answering the question "What exists?" (Quine 1948), meta-ontology is the enterprise of specifying and articulating the very terms of ontological discourse (Berto and Plebani 2015), and the distinction between nothingness and particular entities amounts precisely to such a specification. In particular, it amounts to a rejection of one of the central claims of Quinean meta-ontology, according to which there is no distinction between being and existence (van Inwagen 1998). The Quinean metaphysician wants to say that the two terms should be treated as equivalent. Instead, the meta-ontology of the *Daodejing* understands existence as pertaining to the level of particular entities and conceives of nothingness, which is Dao, as the ultimate ground of all particulars that is metaphysically prior to them.[16]

A piece of regimentation will make the point more precise. Kris McDaniel (2017) makes the case that if a meta-ontology distinguishes between ways of being, the language that we use to articulate this meta-ontology should contain restricted quantifiers that capture these distinctions. Since the distinction between different ways of being will plausibly be understood as perfectly natural—that is, such that it captures fundamental and theorizer-independent distinctions in the way of reality—we will say that the quantifiers restricted to capture these distinctions are joint-carving (see Sider 2011).

The Daoist distinction between Dao and particular entities can also be captured by introducing a restricted quantifier. Since the claim is that to exist (i.e., *you* 有) is to have phenomenal form, the restricted quantifier contains in its range everything that has phenomenal form and only that. Let "$\exists_{有}$" be such a quantifier and "$\forall_{有}$" be the corresponding universal quantifier. This does not prevent us from using the unrestricted quantifier "$\exists$," which might be taken to include Dao in its domain of quantification. However, given the metaphysics of the *Daodejing*, "$\exists_{有}$" is perfectly natural while "$\exists$" is not. Notice also that it is a different and independent question which quantifier correctly captures the meaning of the English "to exist," and the answer might be that it is the unrestricted one. However, since I am here interpreting the metaphysics of the *Daodejing*, I will use the English "to exist" as synonymous with "$\exists_{有}$." This leads us to:

Wu-You Creationism (WYC): $\forall_{有}x$ Dao creates x.

WYC is a concise formulation of the claim that Dao creates the myriad things that remains faithful to the meta-ontology of the *Daodejing*. Notice that this formulation highlights a contrast

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[16] Notice that this way of rejecting the thesis that there is no distinction between being and existence differs from the Meinongian way (see Reicher 2022). The Quinean idea that there is no distinction between being and existence aims at rejecting the thesis that *there are things that do not exist* (Quine 1948). The *Daodejing* agrees with that claim because it accepts the thesis that all particular things pertain to the same metaphysical category, namely existence. While the Meinongian distinction between being and existence operates within the realm of particulars, the Daoist distinction between Being (= nothingness) and existence opposes the particular to that which has no multiplicity.

between the doctrine of the *Daodejing* and accounts of *creatio ex nihilo* proposed by personalistic theists. According to them, God creates everything *apart from himself*—i.e., $\forall x \sim God(x) \rightarrow$ God creates x (e.g., Copan and Craig 2004: 25; Swinburne 1993: 129). In other words, the mainstream theist seems to be fine using a quantifier that keeps both God and created beings in its range. This contrast stems from an important difference between the two metaphysical views: while personalistic theists see God as *a* being (which, of course, is greater than all others), the *Daodejing*'s view of Dao is to be classified as a "ground of being" metaphysics (see Hart 2013; Neville 2012; Tillich 2000).

Accordingly, in what follows, the question of how creation happens will not be a question of how a maximally powerful being creates all other entities in the cosmos but rather the question of how an ultimate reality that is metaphysically orthogonal to particular beings generates those. Keeping this in mind, our goal in the next section will be to explain how WYC can be satisfied— that is, to explain how Dao can be the creator of all existing things.

2. *Creatio Ex Wu* 無

As mentioned in the introduction, Robert Neville (1980) has done pioneering work on the theory of creation in the *Daodejing*, which he compares to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In my view, classifying the *Daodejing*'s creation theory as a kind of *creatio ex nihilo* would be problematic. Following a traditional understanding of the doctrine, *creatio ex nihilo* envisions the cosmos as created out of sheer nothing—that is, putting the point in Aristotelian terms, as created in the absence of a material cause. However, in the previous section we have seen that *wu* 無 in the *Daodejing* is more plausibly understood as Being than as mere absence, which shows that the authors of the text are not relying on the *ex nihilo* notion of nothing in elaborating their doctrine of creation (see Michael 2005: 26).

Admittedly, as Yonghua Ge (2018: 353) discusses extensively, Neville's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* departs from the traditional account. For Neville, *ex nihilo* conceptions are those that claim that "God is the creative act that gives rise to the world, and also in so doing gives rise to the divine nature as creator" (Neville 2012: 192). Still, this view does not seem to be the correct interpretation of what is going on in the *Daodejing*. According to Neville's *ex nihilo* theory, we cannot predicate anything of ultimate reality except in relation to its role as a creator (202-203). However, as May Sim (2012) has argued, this does not seem to be true of Dao, and the foregoing discussion about Dao's metaphysical character constitutes further evidence in this direction.

Another hypothesis suggested by Yonghua Ge (2018: 360) is that the doctrine of creation in the *Daodejing* bears more similarity with the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation. This is an issue that we will touch upon in the following discussion. In what follows, I will rely on textual evidence to argue that the *Daodejing* contains a distinctive metaphysics of creation according to which Dao created the myriad things through an operation that I call "metaphysical de-merging." I will also offer a formalization of this operation, which aims both at advancing a more analytically detailed

explanation than what is currently available in the literature and at formulating the doctrine of creation in the *Daodejing* in a way that makes it suitable to offer a contribution to analytic metaphysics at large. It will turn out that my interpretation will seemingly imply a rejection of the claim that Dao lacks a phenomenal form. I will argue that that is not the case in the last subsection.

2.1. From Things to the Essence and from the Essence to Things

We noticed in the first section that the *Daodejing* describes Dao in an oxymoronic way by characterizing it as the form (*zhuang* 狀) of the formless (*wuzhuang* 無狀) and as the image (*xiang* 象) of the no-thing (*wuwu* 無物). The idea seems that while there is a sense in which Dao does not have a phenomenal form, there is also a sense in which Dao does possess phenomenality. Consider *Daodejing* 21:

> Dao in its becoming things is murk, is haze. Murk! Haze! Within it there are images. Haze! Murk! Within it there are things. Obscure! Tenebrous! Within it is the essence.

> 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。

This brief passage contains various interesting points for us. The expression "Dao *in its becoming things*" shows that *Daodejing* 21 is concerned with the process of creation and also highlights a crucial feature of the doctrine of creation contained in the text: creation here is seen as a process through which ultimate reality *becomes* its creation. This claim not only sets the *Daodejing*'s doctrine further apart from *creatio ex nihilo* but also highlights an important difference with Neoplatonic emanation. It is true that the doctrine of emanation comes with a stronger ontological continuity between the creator and the created than *creatio ex nihilo*. In this sense, Yonghua Ge is correct in pointing out that emanation is closer to the picture of the *Daodejing*, which definitely stresses such continuity (see Tu 1984). However, emanation is still understood as a process through which the creator generates *external* things—that is, *other than itself* (see Kalligas 2024: §5)—rather than becoming its creation.[17]

In addition, *Daodejing* 21 points to an important requirement that the operation through which Dao creates the cosmos has to satisfy: given that Dao in itself has no multiplicity, that the myriad things are multiple, and that Dao creates them by transforming itself into the myriad things, creation has to be an operation that explains how can the one turn into the many.[18] In other words, such an operation needs to go together with an explanation of how the one relates to the many, and if there is an explanation of how the one relates to the many, there is also an explanation of how the many

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[17] In this sense, this theory of creation shares similarities with some Hindu traditions, such as the one expounded in the Pratyabhijñā tradition (see Zappulli 2024). My guess is that further differences between the Shaivist doctrine of creation and the *Daodejing* one come out of the Daoist process metaphysics. However, in this paper I do not have the space to explore this further.

[18] The *Daodejing*'s metaphysics of creation is thus also a way of dealing with the fundamental metaphysical problem of the one and the many. Wang Bi deals with the issue explicitly in his commentary to the *Yi Jing* 易經, see Lynn (1994: 25).

relate to the one. Beginning with an analysis of the latter will help to get to a formulation of the former.

Like *Daodejing* 14, *Daodejing* 21 also makes the twofold claim that Dao cannot be perceived—which seems to be the point of the attributes "haze" (*hu* 惚) and "murk" (*huang* 恍) and implies the lack of phenomenal form—and that Dao contains things (*wu* 物) and images (*xiang* 象)—which in turn seems to imply the presence of phenomenal forms in Dao. Putting the two together, the claim becomes that Dao contains phenomenal forms while not itself having phenomenal form. If that is correct, we should expect that the way in which Dao contains phenomenal forms is different from the way in which created objects possess it, for the latter comes with perceivability. How do we spell out this distinction?

The notion of essence (*jing* 精) mentioned at the end of the passage can do some work here. "Essence" is a standard way of translating "*jing* 精" into English. However, the sense of "essence" employed here is not that of essence as a definitory or necessary property of something (e.g., my essence is to be a human). Rather, essence is to be pre-theoretically understood as a state of utmost purity, intensity, and concentration. I propose to read the claim that Dao contains the essence as saying that Dao contains phenomenal forms in a maximally intense and concentrated state and that such a state is different from that in which phenomenal forms are possessed by the myriad things.

What does it mean to say that Dao contains phenomenal forms in a maximally intense state? To see that, consider another of the terms used in the *Daodejing* to describe Dao: "*hun* 混. " This term occurs three times in the text:

> […] therefore, it is amorphous and a single unity 故混而為一 (*Daodejing* 14).

> […] amorphous! It is like blurred 混兮其若濁 (*Daodejing* 15).

> There is something amorphous and complete […] 有物混成 (*Daodejing* 25).

"*Hun* 混" can be rendered in English as "amorphous," but it could also be translated as "merged" or "mixed together." I propose that what it means for phenomenal forms to be present in Dao in a maximally concentrated state is for all phenomenal forms (i.e., *xiang* 象; *zhuang* 狀) to be present in Dao in a *mixed* or *merged* way.[19] Given that here we are talking about how phenomenal things relate to that which does not have phenomenal form, we cannot fully explain this relation by

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[19] This interpretation also seems to make sense in light of arguments that have been given for the connection between the *Daodejing* doctrine and the creation account contained in the Guodian excavated text *Taiyi Sheng Shui* 太一生水 (i.e., "The Great One Generates Water"). According to this text, the creation process begins with the Great One (which, the argument goes, corresponds to Dao) giving birth to or transforming itself into a formless mass of water from which everything else is then created. Arguably, the water metaphors contained in the *Taiyi Sheng Shui* square well with my interpretation of *hun* as a state in which phenomenal forms are originally present in Dao in a *merged* or *mixed* way. For a discussion of the relations between the *Daodejing* and the *Taiyi Sheng Shui*, see Allan (2003).

appealing to our ordinary experiences because those only tell us what happens at the level of phenomenal forms. However, our experience can still serve an *analogical* explanatory role.[20]

One helpful analogy appeals to colors. Purple can be thought of as a combination of other colors: blue and red. We can think about the process of putting together two colors to create a third one to be a *merging* of those. The result of merging them will have a couple of interesting characteristics: (1) it fully contains in itself the initial two colors, and (2) it does not display any of them (i.e., purple is neither blue nor red). A second useful analogy can be drawn from imagining a beam of white light refracting into a prism and generating a multiplicity of colored lights. Again, white light can be thought of as containing all the colored lights in itself, but it does not display any of them.

Let metaphysical merging be an operation that applies to sets of phenomenal properties. For any given set of phenomenal properties, the result of merging them will be a property that, as the analogies just expounded suggest, has two characteristics: (1) it fully contains in itself all the properties in the original set—call this condition "plenitude" —and (2) it is qualitatively simple so as not to exhibit the multiplicity of the original set of properties—call this condition "simplicity."[21] We can make the formulation of the principle more precise with a piece of formal notation. Let "$\otimes$" stand for metaphysical merging. Given a set of phenomenal properties $\{F_1, F_2, \ldots, F_n\}$ we will write "$\otimes\{F_1, F_2, \ldots, F_n\} = G$," where G is a property that satisfies plenitude and simplicity with respect to the set $\{F_1, F_2, \ldots, F_n\}$.

Now, let "*wanxiang* 萬象" (i.e., "the myriad images") be a term standing for *all* phenomenal properties. This term does not occur in the *Daodejing*, so using it to name the set of all phenomenal properties is somewhat a matter of preference. However, in light of all the considerations we have been making, it is clear that the term is faithful to the content of the text. We can now define the notion of essence as follows:

Dao's Essence (DE): $\otimes\{$*wanxiang* 萬象$\}$ = *Jing* 精

DE spells out the sense in which Dao can be said to contain phenomenality. According to this reading, phenomenal properties *are* present in Dao. However, they are present in a state in which their multiplicity is not retained because they have been merged into a single state of maximal concentration. We can now use DE to spell out the *Daodejing*'s metaphysics of creation. Consider again *Daodejing* 41:

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[20] Using analogies to talk about divine reality has a long tradition in the philosophy of religion. See White (2021).

[21] My use of these terms differs from other uses found in the literature. Simplicity, when applied to the divine, is usually understood to rule out *any* kind of complexity (see Valicella 2019), but at least for the purposes of this paper, my sense of simplicity only rules out phenomenal complexity. The term 'Plenitude' also finds other uses in the literature, as it is used in the metaphysics of modality to refer to the idea of there being no gaps in the modal space (see Menzel 2023).

Dao generates one, one generates two, two generate three, three generate the myriad things.

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

As noticed above, this chapter offers a picture of the *Daodejing*'s account of creation. In particular, the passage suggests that the operation of creation consists of a progressive generation of multiplicity from an initial state of oneness (see also Chen 1973). The foregoing discussion naturally leads us to identify this oneness with the essence and, consequently, the myriad things as being created from a process of differentiation of the essence. Notice that *Daodejing* 41 presents Dao as more fundamental than the oneness of essence: Dao does not start by generating the two but by generating the one itself. In other words, there is more to Dao than the essence, and I take this idea to be a positive feature of my interpretation. Given that the essence is defined as the merging of all phenomenal properties and that ultimate reality plausibly lies, at least partially, beyond our understanding, it would be odd if that definition fully captured the nature of Dao.[22]

The idea that creation consists of a process of generation of multiplicity from the unity of essence leads to the claim that the process we are considering here is the opposite operation of metaphysical merging: metaphysical *de*-merging. The notion of metaphysical de-merging can be understood quite straightforwardly as the converse of metaphysical merging: by metaphysically de-merging a property G, we obtain a set of properties $\{F_1, F_2, …, F_n\}$ that were present in G in a merged state. Let us use "$\oslash$" as a symbol for the operation of metaphysical de-merging, so that an operation of metaphysical de-merging will be written as "$\oslash G = \{F_1, F_2, …, F_n\}$," where G is the de-merged property and $\{F_1, F_2, …, F_n\}$ the set of properties that result from de-merging G. This leads to:

Dao's Creation (DC): $\oslash$ *jing* 精 = {*wanxiang* 萬象}

Since the essence is defined as the result of merging all phenomenal properties, by de-merging the essence, Dao can create all phenomenal forms. Crucially, creating all phenomenal forms is everything Dao needs to do to create the myriad things. Remember that our talk about properties should always be understood in terms of property-instances. According to the *Daodejing*'s metaphysics, there is no further operation that needs to be done for properties to be instantiated—the Dao's creation of all phenomenal properties is *ipso facto* the creation of their instances. Moreover, since for the *Daodejing* there cannot be two distinct objects with the same phenomenal form—because that would make them the same object—the phenomenal form of an object is all there is to it. In other words, by creating all phenomenal forms (*waxiang* 萬象) Dao creates all existing entities (*wanwu* 萬物). Therefore, DC satisfies WYC.

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[22] This distinction is also supported by *Daodejing* 1, which distinguishes between the nameless origin of the myriad things and the named mother of the myriad things.

2.2. Is Dao Really Without Phenomenal Form?

The account of creation just offered leaves us with the need to explain how Dao can still be said not to have phenomenal form. In fact, DE defines the essence of Dao as containing *all* phenomenal properties, which seems to indicate a state that is the exact opposite of the lack of phenomenal form. How do we make sense of this?

First, if Dao were not to contain phenomenality at all, then it would be impossible for it to generate the myriad things. In a famous paper on the hard problem of consciousness, Galen Strawson (2006) argues that emergence cannot be brute. We can say that the emergence of F-properties from G-properties is brute if and only if there is nothing in G-properties to which the existence of F-properties can be fully traced back. As Strawson points out, brute emergence is by definition a miracle (*ibid*, 18) and—I add—in the negative sense of the term since, by hypothesis, in the brute emergence of F-properties from G-properties there is nothing about G-properties in virtue of which F-properties can emerge. We can thus formulate the following principle:

> **Strawson's Principle:** For F-properties to emerge from G-properties, the full potential of F-properties must be contained in G-properties.

There is no reason why Strawson's Principle should not apply to creation, and that means that if ultimate reality—in this case, Dao—creates the world of phenomenal forms, then the full potential of everything in the world of phenomenal forms must already be contained in ultimate reality. Accordingly, any viable account of the *Daodejing*'s metaphysics of creation needs to make sense of the fact that Dao contains the full potential to generate phenomenal forms, and if one claims that there is no sense in which phenomenal forms are present in Dao, it is hard to see how that would be possible.

At the same time, Dao cannot be phenomenal in the same sense in which the myriad things are. This is something that emerges in the interpretation of the *Daodejing* by Wang Bi 王弼. Consider two passages from his commentary on *Daodejing* 35 and *Daodejing* 41 respectively:

> The great image is the mother of the images of heaven. It is not hot, cold, warm, or chill, and therefore it has the ability to embrace and permeate the myriad things.
>
> 大象，天象之母也，不炎不寒不溫不凉，故能包通萬物 […]。

> There being a form implies there being distinctions. There being distinction means that if something is not warm it is chill—that is it cold if it is not hot. Therefore, an image that has form is not the great image.
>
> 有形則亦有分，有分者不溫則凉，不炎則寒。故象而形者，非大象。

First, Wang Bi claims that if Dao had a particular phenomenal form, then it would lack the potential to create all phenomenal forms that constitute the created world. The reason for this is that phenomenal forms imply distinctions—that is, having any phenomenal form implies the exclusion of all phenomenal forms that are incompatible with it (see Neville 2012; Zappulli 2024). Using Wang Bi's example, if Dao were warm, then its phenomenal form would come to the exclusion of coldness, and so Dao would lack the potential to generate the latter property. Accordingly, Dao must be neither cold nor warm. Generalizing, this means that for any n-tuple of mutually exclusive phenomenal properties, Dao cannot instantiate any of them. Therefore, Dao cannot possess a phenomenal form. At the same time, the claim that Dao does not have any form cannot be metaphysically cashed out in a merely subtractive way because that would deprive Dao of the potential to generate phenomenality.

On the basis of this reasoning, Wang Bi draws a crucial distinction between two terms: image (*xiang* 象) and form (*xing* 形). In his reading, the first term does not imply distinctions, and so it can be applied both to Dao and the myriad things. Instead, *xing* does imply distinctions, and therefore it only applies to the myriad things. Going back to the philosophical terminology that we have been using throughout this paper, we can say that Wang Bi is drawing a distinction between phenomenality and phenomenal forms. The myriad things have phenomenal forms (*xing* 形), and since phenomenal form comes with distinctions, Dao does not have it. However, Dao still needs the *potential* to create phenomenal forms, and therefore it must have phenomenality.

The operations of metaphysical merging and de-merging allow us to make perfect sense of the notion of phenomenality without distinctions. The de-merging operation introduces a partial order over phenomenal properties such that $R(F_i, F_j)$ if and only if $\oslash\{F_i\} = \{\Psi, F_j\}$, where "$\Psi$" represents any phenomenal property or properties resulting from the de-merging of F_i apart from F_j. Notice that the order is partial because it is not the case that, for any pair of phenomenal properties F_i and F_j, either $R(F_i, F_j)$ or $R(F_j, F_i)$—for instance, neither the property of sweetness results from de-merging redness nor the property of redness from de-merging sweetness. Accordingly, we can say that a phenomenal property F_j comes with distinctions if and only if there is a phenomenal property F_i such that $R(F_i, F_j)$. In other words, F_j comes with distinctions if and only if there is some phenomenal property from which F_j can be de-merged. However, there is no property F_i such that $R(F_i, jing$ 精$)$ because the essence is at the beginning of the order. Therefore, essence has phenomenality without having distinctions. In Wang Bi's terms, "form" (i.e., *xing* 形) refers only to phenomenal properties that come with distinctions, while "image" (i.e., *xiang* 象) can refer to everything that is phenomenal, whether it comes with distinctions or not. Moreover, the image that is not also a form is what he calls the "great image" (i.e., *daxiang* 大象), which in the terms of the *Daodejing* is nothing but the essence itself. Once more, Dao has phenomenality, but it does not have a phenomenal form.

Conclusion

The default assumption in early Chinese philosophy is process ontology (e.g., Chen 1973; Graham 1989; Hall and Ames 1995; Perkins 2018; Wang 2015), and the *Daodejing* is no exception. The text does not present the creation of all things by Dao as an event that happened in the distant past but as an always ongoing process. Consider this passage from *Daodejing* 45, followed by Wang Bi's commentary:

> Great completion is as if incomplete: its functioning does not get exhausted.

> 大成若缺，其用不弊。

> It completes things along the way, and it never becomes a single image. Therefore [the text says]: "as if incomplete".

> 隨物而成，不為一象，故若缺也。

The completion (*cheng* 成) of all things by Dao—that is, the process of making them what they are—is not something that Dao does once and for all. On the contrary, the functioning (*yong* 用) of Dao is never exhausted. Without ever repleting its creative power, Dao perpetually creates the myriad things that constitute the cosmos. That is why Dao—as that which is maximally complete (*da cheng* 大成)—is in one sense also incomplete. Dao never reaches a point where it has created all that had to be created, and so its creation of the cosmos never results in a single image (*yixiang* 一象), a portrait to which nothing is there to add. According to the *Daodejing*, reality is a flowing canvas that perpetually auto-generates the colors and images filling its space. Reality is the inexhaustible creative process of Dao.

Arguably, this global metaphysical view plays an important role in the soteriology of the *Daodejing*. According to the text, salvation is not attained by transmigrating to some better and transcendent spiritual realm but rather consists of achieving the state of *wuwei* 無為 (Loy 1985; Slingerland 2003). The agent in the state of *wuwei* possesses a perfectly efficacious agency that is subjectively experienced as ecstatic and effortless. According to one reading, attaining the state of *wuwei* consists in merging our acting with the very creative process of Dao. In his commentary to *Daodejing* 38, Wang Bi says:

> By means of what does one attain the power? One derives it from Dao! By means of what does one achieve the power? By means of functioning as nothingness.

> 何以得德，由乎道也，何以盡德，以無為用。

Wuwei is a state in which one's actions (*wei* 為) stem from nothingness itself (*wu* 無)—from that by which all things are what they are, which is Dao. As the movement from nothingness to phenomenality is the very activity of creation, *wuwei* consists of participating in the perpetual

creative activity of Dao. For the *Daodejing*, our soteriological goal is taking part in the never-ending cosmic dance by which the Dao creates the myriad things.

Acknowledgments

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