



Dao as a Unified Composition or Plurality: A Nihilism Perspective

Rafal Banka¹

Accepted: 30 May 2023
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Abstract

This article departs from a mereological conceptualization of the Daoist metaphysical system in the *Daodejing* 道德經. I discuss what parthood status applies to *dao* 道. Whereas it is quite intuitive that *you* 有—the region of concrete objects—has parthood relationships and compositions (entities made from parts), the other, undifferentiated region, *dao*, poses a considerable problem. This problem can be characterized in the following way: (a) *dao* cannot be characterized as a particular composition, which entails that it does not include parts. However, (b) *dao* underpins compositions in *you*, which entails that it contains compositions or at least parts that make compositions in *you*. This generates a problem of how compositions are possible with an undifferentiated ontological foundation. I focus on one possible approach to this problem—mereological nihilism, according to which no composition is possible. Assuming nihilism entails *dao* composed of mereological simples—fundamental entities, which are not parts.

Keywords Daoist metaphysics · Mereology · Composition · Mereological nihilism

1 Introduction

This article analyzes *dao* 道 from the angle of mereology—the study of relationships between parts and the wholes that are made from them. My discussion is based on a mereological interpretation of the relation between *dao* and *you* 有 that constitutes a pivotal role in, if not a foundation of, the Daoist metaphysics in the *Daodejing* 道德經. In my article, Banka 2018, I propose to conceptualize *dao* and *you* as two metaphysical regions—of unrestricted and restricted composition respectively. What differentiates these two regions is how parts combine into wholes. According to unrestricted composition, for any two entities there is a composition, of which

✉ Rafal Banka
rafal.bank@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

¹ Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford, Radcliffe Observatory Quarter 555, Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6GG, UK

these entities are parts. Restricted composition is determined by specific rules, for instance, physical adherence, forming a system, or even forming life.¹ Roughly speaking, composition rules can be understood as arrangements of parts. I claim that interrelation between these two regions can be conceptualized as an overlap, which consists in sharing parts in the way that the whole of *you* overlaps at least a portion of *dao*.² The aim of proposing this particular conceptualization is to further explore the Daoist metaphysical system by means of formal tools and provide integration between Daoist and Western contemporary metaphysics, especially on the analytic front.

In this article, I focus on what parthood status applies to the *dao* region. Whereas it is quite intuitive that *you*—otherwise the region of things or what we usually refer to as concrete objects—has parthood relationships and compositions (which include objects mapped by language, but not only),³ the other region, *dao*, poses a considerable problem. This problem can be mereologically characterized in the following way:

(a) *dao* cannot be characterized in terms of a particular composition (or compositions), which entails that it does not include parts.

However,

(b) *dao* necessarily underpins any composition in *you*, which entails that it is either a composition (or compositions) or at least contains parts that make compositions in *you*.

Considering that (a) and (b) in the Daoist metaphysical system should have a monistic interpretation, the following problem arises: how are compositions possible with an undifferentiated ontological foundation? As already mentioned, I conceptualize *dao* in terms of unrestricted composition. In unrestricted composition, there can be an infinite number of composition rules. On the contrary, *you* is the region of restricted composition, where the composition is determined in accordance with a composition rule (or some finite composition rules). Compositions in *you* are part of *dao*. Considering the ontological dependence of *you* from *dao*, this overlap consists in *you* entirely overlapping a portion of *dao*. In other words, any part of a composition in *you* is also part of *dao*.

However, it can be argued that despite this parthood relationship with *you*, *dao* still remains indescribable in terms of composition determined by a particular composition rule. This generates alternative interpretations of *dao*, which even

¹ For instance, the Solar System is a composition according to the rule of forming a system, but not physical adherence, whereas an analog watch movement complies with both composition rules. Forming life as a composition rule is proposed by Peter van Inwagen (van Inwagen 1990: 81–97).

² For details, see Banka 2018, 2022.

³ Roughly speaking, language covers what we usually conceptualize as objects. However, in *you*, there are or can be compositions which exist beyond language by virtue of being counterintuitive, for instance, a composition made from the oldest tree in Italy and the pencil that I am holding now.

involve questioning its status of composition. This problem hinges upon determining whether it holds that both in *you* and *dao* there are parts, and if this is the case, whether parthood in the two regions is of the same type.

In this article, I tackle one such possible explanatory variant—mereological nihilism, according to which no composition is possible. Nihilism is formulated in the following way:

$$Pxy \leftrightarrow x = y^4$$

It can be seen that in nihilism parthood collapses into identity (Varzi 2019) and does not leave space for compositions of more than one part. On assuming nihilism, *dao* is composed of simples—ultimate entities that are not parts themselves, and that cannot be subdivided into parts. This bears consequences for *you*, which requires parthood for its compositions.

The question of parthood status in *dao* has at least a threefold implication for the Daoist metaphysical system in the *Daodejing*. First, from an inventory perspective, it allows the structure of the metaphysical region of *dao* to be understood: whether it is characterizable by unity, plurality, or some hybrid form of these two. Second, parthood status in *dao* is a cornerstone for describing the relationship between *dao* and *you*. Assuming that the *you* region is characterizable by composition, one would expect that the relationship with the *dao* region is of parthood character, and therefore it presupposes parthood in *dao*. However, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the difference between the two realms may consist in some parthood status differences, including the very existence of parts. Third, entertaining a case in which the *dao* region has no parts implies very important consequences for *you*. Considering that the two regions overlap, the lack of parts in *dao* would question the ontological standing of any composition in *you*. Consequently, the whole metaphysical universe would be reduced to, for instance, a collection of simples and the entities that we usually refer to as complex objects (compositions) would be delusive.

Apart from focusing on the parthood characteristic of *dao*, my discussion can also contribute to the discussion of the Composition as Identity thesis, according to which a composition is nothing over and above the parts that constitute it.⁵ Considering the assumptions of the Daoist metaphysical model, this seems to be a both relevant and challenging issue. I start my discussion by explaining nihilism and showing the reasons for considering a nihilist perspective. Next, I will proceed to analyzing the arguments for and against nihilism. Finally, I will assess the argumentation and show how it matters for the Composition as Identity problem.

⁴ “*x* is part of *y* if and only if *x* is *y*.”

⁵ For instance, according to Composition as Identity, a house made from Lego blocks is nothing over and above than the blocks of which it is made.

2 The Eligibility of Nihilism

Should *dao* be viewed in terms of mereological nihilism? On face value, this seems counterintuitive, but at a closer look, this option cannot be automatically dismissed and needs a thorough consideration.

The nature of mereological nihilism is opposite to unrestricted composition, otherwise known as mereological universalism. As already mentioned in the Introduction, nihilism claims that all entities are singles—entities that are not parts and cannot be decomposed into multiple parts. Hence, composition is impossible because there are no singles that enjoy the proper parthood status, which is indispensable for what we normally regard as composition. Proper parthood (PP) is defined in the following way:

$$PPxy := \forall x \forall y (Pxy \wedge x \neq y) = y^6$$

Proper parts overlap our common intuitions regarding what parts are—they are present in compositions where it is impossible for a part to form a composition exclusively by itself. Thus, a metaphysical universe in which nihilism prevails has no parts and parthood relations. However, it should be noticed that the problem is not viewed in terms of parthood existence but differentiation in its status. Apart from the intuitive, “compositional” proper parthood, mereology also distinguishes the so-called improper parthood (P). In addition to embracing proper parthood, improper parthood also includes a special case, when a composition consists of only one part:

$$Pxy \rightarrow PPx \vee x = y^7$$

This extends parthood over simples—entities that can only be parts of themselves. It should also be noted that this parthood complies with reflexivity, a mereological axiom, according to which anything is part of itself. Thus, in a sense, a composition with a unique part is plausible. However, the composition at issue in this article is the proper part-based one.

One may have the intuition that nihilism presupposes metaphysical models with plurality of simples. However, we can and should also consider a case in which there is only one simple that does not enjoy the proper parthood status by virtue of exhausting the metaphysical universe in its singleness. As will be shown, this variant, combined with improper parthood, matters significantly in discussing the ontological status of *dao*. However, at this moment, let us only recapitulate that *dao* can be considered in the nihilist model as a plurality of simples or oneness that is not a unity.

As mentioned in the Introduction, there are strong reasons to presuppose composition in the Daoist metaphysical universe. Evidence for the existence of what is usually referred to as objects can be supported by the usage of *wu* 物 to describe what

⁶ “For any x and any y , x is part of y and x is not y .”

⁷ “ x is proper part of y or x is y .”

is produced and complemented by *dao*. For instance, in Chapter 1 of the *Daodejing* one reads that:

The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the mother of all things. (Chan 1969: 139)

Leaving aside the nature of origination, what is produced from *dao* is the metaphysical region of things *wu* 物. This region can be conceived as a realm of concrete entities. It should be remarked that these entities do not entirely comply with our notion of everyday life objects. *Wu* should be understood more broadly as compositions. Additionally, the fact that not all compositions are expressed by language is not related to the idea that some of them are undifferentiated entities. The lack of linguistic tagging results from practice that has shaped language. This can be illustrated by compositions such as galaxies about whose existence we are unaware.⁸

The concreteness of *wu*, which allows them to be qualified as compositions, is amplified by the fact that they are countable. It can already be seen in the above quotation, where “all things” are *wanwu* 萬物, literally “ten thousand things” (Rao 2007: 2). Although the usage of *wan* 萬 in this fragment and generally in classical Chinese does not necessarily denote an exact number, it does suggest the plurality of entities and their discreteness revealed by countability.⁹

It can also be found that *wu* are understood as complex objects that break down into parts. In Chapter 11, which underscores the utility of *dao* within *you*, Laozi describes a cartwheel in the following way:

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel. (Chan 1969: 144)

Obviously, the fragment is not particularly or deliberately mereologically oriented—for instance, it does not determine a particular composition rule or a parthood status that holds for *wu*-compositions.¹⁰ However, the description directly testifies that things in the *you* region are analyzable in terms of compositions that are distinct entities and can be subdivided into smaller building units.

Following the above interpretation and assuming that composition, and concurrently parthood, prevail in the *you* region, one can express doubts about accepting nihilism, an ontological foundation that is quite the opposite. By far, from the perspective of *you*, nihilism is counterintuitive. However, this very fact does not rule out confronting the difference between *dao* and *you*, which is pivotal in Daoist metaphysics. For instance, its indispensable significance as an ontological and cosmological foundation is mentioned, among others, in Chapter 25:

⁸ For a different illustration, see note 3.

⁹ This interpretation can be indirectly supported by a linguistic interpretation by Dan Robins, who shows that analogous phrases such as *wan min* 萬民 refer to individuals rather than kinds (Robins 2000: 165).

¹⁰ Roughly speaking, the example, along with the following ones on bowl and house, illustrate the utility of *dao* within *you* (Chan 1969: 145). Although the function of compositions can be at stake in mereology (for instance, as a composition rule issue), it does not affect the mereological fundamentals of parthood relations.

There was something undifferentiated yet complete,
Which existed before heaven and earth. (Chan 1969: 152)

Clearly, temporal antecedence is paired with a material difference—especially due to being undifferentiated, *dao* is likely to be juxtaposed with *you* conceived as compositions. The undifferentiated character of *dao*—*hun* 混 (Rao 2007: 63)—suggests a chaotic arrangement, which can be tentatively conceptualized as a state of non-composition that can be explained by nihilism.

Additionally, methodologically speaking, assuming the principle of charity, the reconstruction should be consistent throughout the whole Daoist metaphysical universe. Thus, from the outset, a difference in parthood status in the *dao* region should be considered, which makes nihilism an eligible option.

In the following two sections of the article, I will analyze arguments for and against the nihilist structure of the *dao* region. I believe that these arguments offer a wide analytical spectrum that assures the inclusion of all relevant assumptions and features concerning *dao*.

3 Arguments for Mereological Nihilism

I start with arguing for nihilism. I believe that supporting the nihilist mereology in the *dao* region can be presented from several angles, as the below arguments (a) to (d).

To begin contrastively, let us consider an argument that follows on from the definition of unrestricted composition:

(a) In the *dao* region, there are no compositions that fall under a specific composition rule (or a finite number of determined rules). Without a particular rule, we cannot talk about compositions and, consequently, how they decompose into their proper parts.

Whether *dao* is a realm of composition at all may indeed be questioned. In Chapter 14, *dao* is referred to as impossible to be named and reverting “to nothingness” (Chan 1969: 146), not ontological one, but literally “no-thingness” (*wuwu* 無物) (Rao 2007: 34). This depiction should be complemented with a fragment from Chapter 25, where *dao* is described as “something undifferentiated yet complete” (Chan 1969: 152). *Dao* is here understood in terms of a thing (or things) (*wu* 物), whose difference from *you* hinges on undifferentiation. This shows that the two juxtaposed regions are furnished with entities of the same kind. What makes a difference is that *you* is a world of differentiated and discrete objects that can be qualified as compositions.

The above dissimilarity with the *you* region should not disqualify *dao* from a mereological conceptualization. This can be argued for by referring to the notion that *dao* is related to *you* by ontological priority, for instance in Chapter 1, where it is stated that everything within *wu* originated from *dao* (Chan 1969: 139). Furthermore, a fragment from Chapter 28 provides a metaphor of *dao* as an uncarved

wooden block that is “turned into concrete things [*qi* 器] (... transformed into the myriad of things)” (Chan 1969: 154; Rao 2007: 71). It implies that the qualitative difference (or transformation) consists in assuming the features associated with what is commonly considered to be objecthood or “thingness.” The difference not only accentuates the priority of *dao* but also suggests that the difference can be attributed to composition—not necessarily in the sense that *you* is the only region where it holds but that a compositional difference is in question.¹¹

However, this model leaves space for a nihilist doubt, which can be formulated in the following way: considering that *dao* can be mereologically accommodated and cannot be identified with any particular composition, is such a metaphysical model necessarily characterizable in terms of composition? It ought to be remarked that nihilism does not exclude reflexivity, which can be understood as a special type of composition with improper parthood, so the doubt specifically applies to whether parthood prevails “without,” not “within” simples. Nevertheless, the nihilist doubt is of a very fundamental nature, as it questions the plausibility of unrestricted composition for *dao*.

Let us consider the nihilism claim that *dao* can be characterized by “reflexivity parthood only”—things are only parts of themselves. Accordingly, the lack of proper part-based composition in *dao* complies with its being beyond cognition, as this, according to the *Daodejing*, operates with differentiation. This can be showcased by descriptions of *dao* as empty and formless.¹² In this sense, nihilism would be compatible with the presumed lack of “internal structure”—specifically composition—in *dao*. It should also be noted that the quasientropic characteristic of *dao* remains consistent with nihilism. In fact, nihilism advocates a metaphysical model in which we can talk about a myriad of entities mereologically unrelated to one another.

A claim that would strongly fit the above nihilist arguments would be that the two metaphysical regions are disjunct. This can be supported by the tension between *dao*, where composition is impossible, and *you*, where it can be regarded as a generic feature. However, this disjunction would remain inconsistent with the fundamentals of Daoist metaphysics, where the two regions are necessarily interrelated. Nevertheless, assuming nihilism should not necessarily entail disconnecting the two regions. In fact, nihilism is important for the interrelation as the parthood overlap requires further investigation—the two regions sharing proper parts are ruled out. What overlap now are the proper parts in *you*, which in *dao* are improper ones. This asymmetry, however, concurrently establishes a linkage between the two regions that remains conceptualized in mereological terms. Thus, nihilism confined to *dao* is plausible on the condition of a further investigation of the twofold parthood status in *dao* and *you*.

¹¹ This particular character of ontological priority invites an interpretation that *dao* is a reservoir of any composition that has been and can be actualized in *you*. As this ontological priority is conceptualized as parthood relationship between the two regions, the mereological analysis should also be applied to *dao*. Accordingly, what makes *dao* different from *you* is that as unrestricted composition, *dao* cannot be accommodated with any particular, or a finite number of particular composition rules.

¹² For instance, in relevant fragments in Chapters 14 and 35 (Chan 1969: 146, 157).

One can conclude that the eligibility of (a) hinges upon whether the abovementioned twofold parthood status can be mereologically accommodated within the Daoist metaphysics framework. One option to be considered may be, for instance, the possibility of abandoning proper parthood for the whole metaphysical universe, which would enable conceptualizing the improper parthood overlap between *dao* and *you*.¹³ Improper parthood includes proper parthood but also allows for the parthood with identity of the only part and a whole. Consequently, parthood sharing would be saved. However, the question of the relation between improper parthood and proper parthood in the overlapped part would require further investigation.

Another argument is focused on the *you* region:

(b) Composition in *you* does not necessitate composition in *dao*.

Dao underpins anything in *you*, which is explicitly expressed in the opening lines of Chapter 42 (Chan 1969: 160). One can state that assuming simples in the former must exclude composition in the latter. This statement remains consistent with the parthood transitivity axiom, which says that if *x* is part of *y*, and *y* is part of *z*, then *x* is part of *z*. Accordingly, considering that composition would hold for *you*, and *you* is part of *dao*, any parts in *you* are parts of *dao*. But this is implausible because in *dao*, there is nothing apart from simples. Nihilism extending over the whole metaphysical universe can also be viewed from the other side: simples in *dao* cannot compose, and therefore, by virtue of sharing simples, *you* cannot have compositions.

Considering that nihilism in *dao* prevents parthood transitivity, and that the *Daodejing* presupposes composition in *you*, one can consider a different ontological standing of parthood for the two regions. This does not have to be tantamount to the “*dao* level” parthood relations being “true,” whereas the “*you* level” are conventional. This problem can be approached by, for instance, attributing nomological laws to the *you* region.¹⁴ As Daoism, and large parts of Chinese metaphysics, do not presuppose externality of laws (e.g., Cheng 1976), one requires an additional assumption that the nomological laws are understood as inherent in the entities.

The appropriacy of mapping nomological laws onto *you* can be supported by the *Daodejing*, which suggests the quasi-“natural” or “physical”¹⁵ character of *you*, as opposed to *dao*. Apart from *you* being a differentiated product of *dao*,¹⁶ *dao* is the cause that underpins *you* in any space-time, whereas the development of *you* is understood intrinsically. A fragment from Chapter 51 illustrates this interrelation:

Tao produces them (the ten thousand things).

Virtue [*de* 德] fosters them.

¹³ I discuss this issue in Banka 2022.

¹⁴ The necessity of these laws accords from metaphysical laws but is weaker at the same time (Kment 2021).

¹⁵ My describing these laws as “natural” and “physical” does not imply that *you* is necessarily describable by physics. In general, the laws can be understood as those that characterize the material world of discrete entities.

¹⁶ For instance, in Chapter 1 (Chan 1969: 139).

Matter [*wu* 物] gives them physical form [*xing* 刑].

The circumstances and tendencies [*qi* 器] complete them. (Chan 1969: 163; Rao 2007: 123)

The metaphysical causation is complemented by what can be attributed to the processes that apply exclusively to *you*, constituted of physical objects with forms. This region can be conceptualized as the one in which nomological laws apply. Thus, both *dao* and *you* would agree in terms of metaphysical laws but *you* additionally would have intrinsic natural laws about composition.

The nomological character of composition would entail two important things for the *you* region. First, composition is not conventional due to being inherent in the entities that constitute the *you* region. Second, composition is not accidental in the sense of consistently operating in a finite number of actual entities or temporally; it must also extend over past and future, as well as any possible objects that can be originated.¹⁷

Introducing nomological necessity helps accommodate the standing of composition as part and parcel of the *you* region. Composition thus conceived, by virtue of being nomological, does not necessitate composition in *dao*, where only metaphysical laws hold. Possible objections would address how *you* would concurrently agree composition and non-composition. Some kind of solution would have to consist in weakening nihilism. For instance, *dao* could be described as improper parthood, which would allow for possible worlds with nomological nihilism. In this weak sense, the nihilism of *dao* could be preserved.

Another argument is also based on the relation between *dao* and *you*, and it concerns causation:

(c) Assuming internal causation in *dao*,¹⁸ its simples have the potential for any composition. But this is not tantamount to proper parthood status in *dao* as there are no parts prior to compositions.

This argument is based on the nature of causation in Daoist or, even more generally, a large part of Chinese philosophy. Chung-ying CHENG describes it with three principles: holistic unity, internal life-movements, and organic balance. The second one is particularly relevant here, as it underscores that all things in the metaphysical universe have “intrinsic life-force which moves them in a way in which motion is not imposed from other things or a God but is derived from the inexhaustible source of energy of life, which is the Way” (Cheng 1976: 12). Exclusion of the external laws and locating cause in *dao* complies with a mereological interpretation that causal relations are parthood relations. It departs from that sharing parts between *dao* and compositions in *you* does not require any extrinsic factors; entities in *you* are compositions by virtue of their intrinsic characteristics.¹⁹

¹⁷ This relates to the argument from counterfactual robustness. See, for example, Kment 2021.

¹⁸ For a general model of causation in Chinese metaphysics, which can also be applied to Daoism, see Cheng 1976.

¹⁹ I leave aside the idea that the characteristics apply to a dynamic metaphysical universe, which entails a specific understanding of parthood. This issue is more concerned with the ontological status of parts in general and will not be discussed here.

The above causation model enables the shared parts to be viewed from two sides. Regarding the effect, the parts are proper. However, in terms of *dao*, which is the cause, proper parthood is not necessary. One can interpret *dao* in favor of nihilism by remarking that compositions are only originated in *you*. In this way, simples from *dao* “become” proper parts in *you*. It is left to the specific understanding of the “intrinsic life-force” to solve the very problem of changing parthood status. One of the possible options would be to assume that while constituting composition in *you*, the simples acquire the proper status of parthood.²⁰ This would also comply with nihilism in the *dao* region because the simples cannot be proper parts by virtue of not composing anything there.

Another argument can be based on counting status:

(d) Counting is conventional and bears no ontological commitments for both regions. Therefore, we should abandon it in differentiation of *dao* and *you*. In this way, the numerical disagreement between one *dao* and plural *you* is not metaphysical. This affects the composition status in *you*.

We can assume that counting belongs to a conventional inventory of the world: we count things for practical reasons, but how we count has no ontological commitment. The conventional character of counting can be illustrated by many possible ways of counting compositions. For instance, we can count apples per item or by weight. Part inventories also reveal a considerable variation. Consider counting the parts of a car—it can be dissected into physically separable, functional, or, say, the exterior and interior parts.

Let us assume that counting in *you* is conventional. This means that determining the number of parts in compositions is no longer possible. Does this refute the ontological standing of compositions? One might state that the number of parts in a composition is indeterminate, which does not deny the status of composition. In other words, the possible counting of parts may stretch from one to infinity. In this way, we should also consider an option in which a composition has a unique part, which rules out proper parthood. In such a case, nihilism in *dao* does not cause inconsistency, as proper part-based composition in *you* would only be of a conventional character.

Besides the idea that nihilism would hold for both metaphysical regions, introducing simples in *you* would solve the “linguistic problem” of composition. We tend to assume that naming decides to some extent what is composition and what is not. For instance, it is not problematic to recognize a stone heap as a composition. However, this is not the case if we consider a different candidate for composition, made of, say, three stones located in Australia, on the Moon, and on Mars. We can justify it by saying that there is no name for such a thing. This justification is very weak though; it suffices to consider some compositions that have not been discovered until now, such as some stellar systems. On accepting nihilism, the linguistic mapping of, and more importantly, legitimizing of, the metaphysical universe becomes arbitrary.

²⁰ In this case, proper parthood would be a kind of dispositional property.

4 Arguments against Mereological Nihilism

Now let us see how nihilism in *dao* can be questioned. I believe that the disapproval centers around the main three arguments that I present in this section. It can be roughly said that the arguments against nihilism are more fundamental than those in favor of it in terms of calling for strict consistency with Daoist metaphysical assumptions. The first of them can be formulated in the following way:

(a) *Dao* includes all possible compositions, and therefore nihilism is implausible.

On an unspecified level, whatever originates in *you* comes from *dao*. This is explicitly formulated in, for instance, Chapters 1, 42, and 51 (Chan 1969: 139, 160, 163). Considering that Daoism is a monistic system, it is unlikely that some fundamental ontological transformation, such as new substantial qualities, can emerge from *dao*. This raises a justified doubt concerning composition emerging from nihilism.

On a specific, mereological level, the origination consists in sharing parts between *dao* and *you*, which complies with substantial consistency. A qualitative change of parthood that would entail nihilism in *dao* and construction in *you* verges on aporia, as the overlap would have parts that are proper and nonproper at the same time. The explanation that parts can have a twofold status by virtue of forming a composition or not does not dismiss its being self-contradictory. Additionally, on the metaphysical side, an explanation would have to be offered for how a twofold part, without external forces acting upon it, can concurrently be part of two considerably distinct entities: a collection of simples and composition. This seems extremely challenging, not only in the Daoist context.

In my own interpretation, *dao* is describable by mereological universalism. This does not only provide consistency with *you* completely overlapping part of *dao*. Unrestricted composition accommodates the intrinsic character of causality, since the origination of any composition in *you* takes place “within” *dao*. This is explained by referring to overlap, but in fact, proper extension is clearer for this metaphysical case. According to proper extension, x , that is part of y , is not y in the sense that it does not compose y solely by itself. Substituting x for *you* and y for *dao*, the particular character of the overlap consists in that *you* is entirely part of it. There is no objection that *you* as a particular composition (or compositions) is included in unrestricted composition. However, it seems logically and metaphysically impossible to preserve such an island within a collection of simples.

To sum up briefly, Daoist metaphysics does not seem to presuppose a transformation that allows the status of simples. It claims that some part of *dao* becomes a “natural world” of things, and it is unlikely that these entities no longer follow *dao* in favor of some different “laws” that apply to composition. This is guaranteed by the sameness of parts and the intrinsic causality that holds for the whole metaphysical universe.

An important argument to be considered is strictly connected with one of *dao*'s fundamental characteristics—oneness:

(b) Nihilism would involve the annulment of *dao* with oneness as numerical status, which would change for plurality. Thus achieved noncomposition rules out a plurality-within-oneness solution.

The oneness of *dao* cannot be downplayed as a metaphor—its lack thereof would contradict the cosmological (or protometaphysical) assumption concerning the universe present in almost the whole of classical Chinese philosophy. The oneness cannot be separated from undifferentiation. It is well described in a fragment from Chapter 28, where *dao* is compared to a piece of uncarved wooden block (*pu* 樸). This numerical status is not to be taken for an ultimate singularity, as the block can be cut into separate “concrete things” (*qiju* 器具) (Chan 1969: 154; Rao 2007: 71).²¹ This can also be confirmed by the opening line of Chapter 62, where *dao* is described as “the storehouse of all things” (*dao zhe, wanwu zhi ao* 道者, 萬物之奧) (Chan 1969: 168; Rao 2007: 151).

Moreover, the oneness constituted from plurality cannot be accommodated as a collection or an abstract set of ultimate entities, as their interrelation constitutes a concrete dynamic unity, similar to the cosmos. Following the wooden block analogy, it is a concrete mereological object made of concrete objects rather than an entity of a different ontological status. Although nihilism accords with concreteness, it does not comply with the consolidated aspect of *dao*.

One can argue that the numerical status of *dao* as oneness can be undermined by claiming that cardinality is conventional. Thus, oneness can be disregarded as a nonmetaphysical characteristic. It no longer matters if *dao* is a single entity or a collection of entities. In this respect, nihilism would appear as an option. This argument, however, still misses the unity aspect, which is paired with oneness in Daoist metaphysics. In fact, it is less important if *dao* constitutes oneness in terms of counting. What cannot be dismissed is its functional, organismic oneness, which nihilism would prevent.

The final argument is based on the ontological continuity of the two regions:

(c) Nihilism would call for consistency: in *you*, there would be no compositions either.

There are two foundations for this argument. The first one is metaphysical—the system is monistic. This rules out interpretations similar to Plato's forms and their reflections, which would be more helpful in solving this inconsistency between the two regions. As the metaphysical universe is made from the same elements, it is hardly conceivable how their ontological status would change depending on which

²¹ The literal meaning of “*qiju*” is closer to “utensils.” However, in this context the word meaning is more synecdochic and refers to crafted, or more generally discrete objects.

region they are located in. It may be that some compositions are restricted to a particular region, but this should be accommodated by nomological laws instead.

The other foundation is mereological. The pivotal aspect of the interdependence of the two regions is that they share parts. A given part in a composition can simultaneously be a part of another composition (or even other compositions). However, it is impossible for it to concurrently be a simple, regardless of which region it belongs to.

5 Conclusions

The question of composition in *dao* from the perspective of nihilism leads to two main concluding remarks. First, although *dao* avoids determinacy, nihilism goes too much against the grain of Daoist metaphysics to be accepted. As has been shown, on the metaphysical level, it seems very unlikely to accommodate the option that singles are converted into proper parts. Similarly implausible are entities that assume different compositional statuses depending on the metaphysical region, especially if one considers that the *dao-you* relation is an overlap—the two parthood identities would have to be simultaneous.

Second, subordinating proper parthood under nomological laws that hold in *you* is also a problematic solution. Separating *you* governed by the laws that are particular to this region and consistent with the metaphysical *dao* level appears to be worth considering. However, one has to consider the mereological nature of the relation between the two regions: the overlapped parts would still have to be proper regardless of the region. On the contrary, the nomological character of composition would remain mereologically consistent with *dao* as unrestricted composition—nomological composition would be attributed to a particular composition rule (or rules). The problem also seems interesting in terms of exploring the possible worlds around the *you* region, which stands for actuality.

As mentioned in the Introduction, a substantial motivation for considering a nihilist perspective is the undifferentiated character of *dao* juxtaposed with *you*, which can be largely characterized in terms of composition. The difficulties generated by nihilism lead to the conclusion that the difference has to be attributed to the character of the composition rather than its holding in the *dao* region. As mentioned before, I believe that *dao* is unrestricted composition.

Considering the aporetic character of nihilism revealed by the arguments for and against it, one may question this particular option. As mentioned in the Introduction, there are reasons for considering parthood relations in *dao* and *you* as different. Nihilism is a legitimate candidate due to the introduction of a precompositional foundation. Showing that it fails to meet other fundamentals of Daoist metaphysics also matters in terms of motivating further discussion in the direction of composition.

Apart from the implications relevant to the parthood status in *dao*, analyzing the nihilist variant contributes to other aspects of the Daoist metaphysics. One of them is the question of counting. There are reasons for discussing what particular

counting should be applied to inventories of parts and compositions in *you*. However, it is plausible that inventorying *dao* is irrelevant. It does not imply that *dao* as unrestricted composition has no cardinality; infinite cardinalities would comply with the undifferentiated character of *dao* and underpin inventories in *you*. What is more important is their unification in *dao* as a “generic” mereological composition—oneness.

Nihilism also brings to attention the Composition as Identity principle, according to which a composition is nothing over and above its parts. Considering nihilism introduces an extreme case in which a composition in *you* would in fact be identical with the simples that underpin it. Although nihilism has been ruled out, the example highlights the question how Composition as Identity can be accommodated, if at all, in Daoism.²² Of particular relevance would be the case of *you* overlapping the whole of *dao*. It would be highly counterintuitive to state that *you* as a composition is identical to the “*dao* parts” that it entirely shares.

Another important aspect is the nature of overlap, particularly the implication that the overlap occupies the same part of reality. This case can be viewed against the Extensionality principle, according to which there cannot be two compositions with the same proper parts.²³ There is no problem with extensionality within *you*, where we have proper parts. A possible way to accommodate *dao* would be to endow it with proper parthood, in which case the overlap of the two regions would be one and the same composition. However, this identity seems inconsistent with the interdependence between *dao* and *you*. Although, as has been shown, the overlap of *dao* made of simples and all proper parts from *you* is implausible, nihilism sheds light on an important aspect of the Daoist metaphysics, which perhaps suggests that extensionality should be abandoned.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading, insightful comments, and suggestions concerning the manuscript of this article. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 850593 – Mereodao).

Declaration The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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²² In the case of a positive answer to this question, the problem would center on how strong a form of Composition as Identity can be accepted. For varieties of Composition as Identity, see Cotnoir 2014: 8–11.

²³ “For any x , x is proper part of y and x is proper part of z if and only if y is z .” $\forall x(\text{PP}xy \wedge \text{PP}xz) \leftrightarrow y = z$

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