5. Interpreting *Dao* (道) between 'Way-making' and '*Be-wëgen*'

Massimiliano Lacertosa

Abstract

This chapter is part of a wider research on Daoism in general, and the *Daodejing* (道德經, c. 300 BCE) in particular,[1] which is, most broadly, attempting to establish a philosophy of comparison.[2] The thesis of this chapter is that philosophy ought always to proceed through comparisons. This is both a theoretical hypothesis and a methodological *praxis* (πρᾶξις, 'practice'). These two aspects need to be conceived as a singular and yet multifarious movement of thoughts. It is, in fact, only in virtue of this philosophical process of comparisons that one can determine the reference systems that are necessary for the evaluation of one's own pre-assumptions. The scope, therefore, is not to find equivalences between concepts, as

1   Xiaogan Liu explains that 'Daoism is a complex term and difficult to define clearly. The Anglicized term was coined in the 1830s by Western scholars working from the pronunciation of the Chinese word *dao* [or *tao*] 道, which literally suggests a path or road, and is extended to indicate approaches, methods, and principles; *dao* has been used this way since antiquity in Chinese political and moral discourse. Aside from these common meanings, the word's most striking early appearance is in the *Laozi* [老子] (or *Lao-tzu, Lao-tze*) or *Daodejing* (or *Tao-te-ching*) [...] Through this work it became a new philosophical term and the seed of a new intellectual and cultural tradition. Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-86 BCE), drawing on some version of this tradition, invented a new term, *Daojia* [道家] (literally "*dao*-family," indicating one of six schools of thought in early Han Dynasty), which first appeared in his *Historical Record*. The *Laozi* and a later work entitled *Zhuangzi* [莊子] are conventionally understood to be the most representative texts of Daoism—Daoist philosophy in particular. Thereafter, texts, authors, and ideas similar or related to these two texts, or elements within them, are commonly labelled Daoist. In modern academic discourse, we find that certain ideas have become recognized as standards of Daoism' (Liu 2015b: 1-2). For further analysis and bibliography of Daoism and *Daodejing,* see Liu's edited book *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy* (Liu (2015a)) and D.C. Lau (1989). Regarding the *Daodejing* and the new documents found in Guodian (郭店) in 1993, along with the relative problems of authorship and periodisation, see Henricks (2000).
2   For more details on this, see Lacertosa (2017).

comparative studies traditionally do; instead, the intention is to posit, each and every time, a theoretical and methodological framework that allows for the interpretation of the comparisons. In other words, the purpose of such a philosophy is not to find equivalences or differences, but to see how equivalences and differences can stimulate each other towards other meanings. Thus the configurations of comparisons become maps of philosophical processes and vice versa, in a constant exchange of positions. Moreover, conceiving comparisons in such a fashion means to have ethical stances towards oneself, the world, and others. That is to say, one can practice care of the self only through dialogues, by comparing oneself with the world and others. This is what I try to demonstrate in this chapter. In particular, I consider the concept of *dao* (or *tao,* 道) and its formulation in the first line of the *Daodejing*. First, I analyse some of the most common—and misleading—translations of this line into English. Then I compare the concepts of way-making and *be-wëgen* in, respectively, Ames/Hall and Heidegger. Finally, I propose a different approach to understanding *dao*.

Keywords: *Daodejing* (道德經), philosophy of comparison, Heidegger, *invenìre*

Some preliminary remarks

How can *dao* (道) be translated? This is not a dull question. Quite the reverse: here lies one of the most difficult tasks in the study of Chinese philosophy.[3] Different translations of this term describe different visions of the world.

In general, the most common English translation is 'way' and German translation is '*Weg*'. The first problem with English translations is the common capitalisation of the term 'Way'—in German this problem is not so

---

3   This is not only a problem for Western scholars, but also concerns Chinese philosophers. Lai Chen expresses this position stating that '[u]nder the assaults of the introduction of Western thought, and with the sharp turn that resulted from the domination of the whole of writing by colloquial Chinese, all traditional discourse—which embodied the sense of Chinese philosophical questions in classical Chinese categories—dissolved almost completely. This has led to a philosophical "aphasia" in some areas. The language that twentieth-century Chinese philosophers employ is all translated from Western philosophical concepts. Thus, to express a classical Chinese philosophical concept in modern Chinese is itself tantamount to translation: More accurately, it is tantamount to translation into Western philosophical discourse. In this sense, it is not surprising that we Chinese scholars may sometimes find ourselves in the same predicament as our Western colleagues. Obviously, scholars from the East and the West have to face the same challenge of "translation"' (Chen 1999: 11).

apparent because the language capitalises all nouns. This practice has an historical motivation. In fact, the *Daodejing* (道德經) has been interpreted for long time in a theological and metaphysical sense. As stated by Lin Ma:

> One limitation of the early translators [...] is that they have heavily as-similated Asian ideas to Western religious conceptions. For instance, in their respective versions of the *Daodejing*, Richard Wilhelm translated *Dao* as *Sinn*, which insinuated the *logos* in The Gospel of Saint John; and Victor von Strauss directly rendered *Dao* as *Gott* (2016: 84).

Although the direct reference to God has been abandoned, the problem of the capitalisation of the noun remains. We need to remember that in Chinese nouns have neither capitalisation nor number nor gender. Consequently, *dao* can be translated as 'the Way', 'the way', 'the ways', and 'a way'. The problem does not change through use of the character's *pinyin* (Romanization), which is often rendered as 'the Dao'. To complicate things, we must consider that Chinese nouns can also have a verbal function depending on their position in the sentence.[4] We can easily understand this if we analyse the first sentence of the *Daodejing* from the most common version of Wang Bi (王弼 226–249) (Lau 1989: 2): *'dao ke dao, fei chang dao'* (道可道，非常道). Here, common interpretations consider the first *dao* as a noun; the second *dao* as a verb attached to the modal verb *ke* (可), which implies possibility (can, may, etc.); and the third *dao* as a noun again. The other two characters, *fei* (非) and *chang* (常), have the function of defining *dao*: *fei* negates the sentence, and *chang* means 'constant' or, more rarely, 'common' or 'everyday'. Let us consider some of the most common translations of this line.

'Dao ke dao, fei chang dao' (道可道，非常道) in translation

It is not my intention here to delineate a historical, chronological or, even less, complete reconstruction of how the *Daodejing* has been translated into English. Instead, I use a few samples to underline the philosophical—or, in many cases, the onto-theo-logical—implications embedded in different translations.

---

4   'With respect to its etymology, *dao*, as a noun, originally meant "way leading in a direction"; as a verb, *dao* means "guiding to go," consisting of the dual meaning of "guidance" and "move." Obviously, "guidance" has certain direction. "Move" means "march" or "go forward"' (Chen 1999: 13).

Arthur Waley, in his 'attempt to discover what the book meant when it was first written', renders the first line thus: 'The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way' (Waley 2005: 13). Here, not only is the concept of *dao* singularized and capitalized as 'the Way' but *fei chang* is also translated with the capitalization of 'Unvarying'. These choices clearly point in a metaphysical direction. In fact, even if it were possible to accept the capitalisation of 'Way' as a conventional form for the discussion of abstract concepts, the decision to use a capital letter for interpreting and translating *fei chang* seems to be too arbitrary. It is clear that Waley considers *dao* to be a nominal concept defined by eternal and absolute attributes.

This vision resonates in many other translations, such as those by Yutang Lin and Wing-tsit Chan. Although both of them avoid the problem of translating *dao* (道) by using its Romanization, they remain totally inscribed in an onto-theo-logical mind-set. Lin's version (1942) abandons any precautions and defines *dao* as 'Absolute' in what we can consider the climax of the metaphysical interpretations of the *Daodejing*.[5] He translates the first line as: 'The Tao that can be told of is not the Absolute Tao'. In *The Way of Lao Tzu* (1963b), Chan follows the same idea: 'The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao'.[6] While it would be possible to multiply these examples almost *ad infinitum*, so to speak, we would not be able to get deeper via this line of thought. Yet, a couple of examples can be analysed to understand the verbal function of *dao*.

5   This choice is even more striking if we consider that Lin is against the metaphysical interpretation of early Chinese thought. He clearly writes in the same introduction to his translation: 'For what is the Chinese philosophy, and does China have a philosophy, say, like that of Descartes or Kant, a logically built and cogently reasoned philosophy of knowledge or of reality or of the universe? The answer is proudly "No." That is the whole point. So far as any systematic epistemology or metaphysics is concerned, China had to import it from India. The temperament for systematic philosophy simply wasn't there, and will not be there so long as the Chinese remain Chinese' (Lin 1942: XIV). For a critique of the metaphysical implication in the translation of *chang* as 'Absolute', see Liu (1999: 6).

6   Keping Wang justifies the translation of *chang* as 'eternal' by stating that in 'the original text the expression *chang dao* (constant *Dao*) is changed to be *heng dao* [恆道] (eternal *Dao*) on the basis of the two copies of *The Book of Lao Zi* written on silk and unearthed in 1973 from an ancient tomb at Mawangdui 馬王堆, which dates back to the early Han Dynasty (c. 206 B.C.-180 B.C.) [...] However, both *chang* and *heng* mean the same in Chinese and they can therefore be translated into English as either "constant" or "eternal"' (Wang 2010: 26). It seems to me that 'constant' and 'eternal' are very different concepts and not necessarily the one can be inscribed in the other. Moreover, as Coutinho specifies, *chang* 'did not take on the sense of "eternal" until the introduction of Buddhist philosophy into China several centuries later, when it was adopted to express the concept of "permanence"' (Coutinho 2014: 198).

These three translations consider the second *dao* as related to the verb 'to speak', 'to tell'. Thus, *ke dao* (可道) becomes 'can be told'. In his translation (1891), James Legge prefers to emphasize on the procedural aspect of *dao* by keeping the verbal meaning closer to the concept of 'way': 'The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao'. Unfortunately, this laudable effort to conceive *dao* as an action, something that needs to be performed, is only speciously used to affirm its opposite, namely 'the' *dao*, the 'One' that is enduring and unchanging.[7] Consequently, the verbal aspect of *dao* is dissolved in order to increase the nominal, normative, permanent interpretation of the character. It is the same in the even more cryptic and esoteric reading of Holmes Welch (1965: 55), who translates: 'The Tao that can be Tao'd is not the Absolute Tao'.[8] In a line like this, nothing is said about *dao*. There is only a vague idea of something acted, something 'Dao'd', although it is not clear what this action means. Nevertheless, one thing becomes evident: once again, the verbal, procedural aspect of *dao* is presented, only to be negated by the idea of highest permanence. Moreover, in the absence of any other reference, the 'Absolute' almost becomes the subject of the sentence and, in any case, it represents its focal point.[9]

---

7   Chad Hansen clarifies that 'nothing in the Chinese corresponds to the definite article *the*. Translators conform to their own community practice of always putting *the* before *dao*. We could, in principle, take as interpretive hypotheses that the subject was *a dao* or *any dao*, or simply *Daos*. The translating convention embodies an ancient interpretive hypothesis that all Daoists must worship a mystical godlike *dao*. Thus they presume in translation what they cannot find in the original: assertion of the existence of a single, ineffable *dao*. It all seems so innocent. How can such a little, *nothing* word matter so much? The answer has been familiar to students of philosophy since Bertrand Russell. The usual effect of a definite article in English is to make a general noun, in this case the term *dao,* into a logically singular noun-phrase: *the* + general noun-phrase = a phrase that entails the existence of a unique object answering the description. Capitalization, on analogy with God (as against gods), has the same implication. It makes a general term a proper noun. Remember that previous thinkers have used *dao* as a general term of Chinese, not as a proper name' (Hansen 1992: 215).
8   In other parts of his book, Welch follows the version by Waley (Welch 1965: 7) and the one by Lin (Welch 1965: 51). It is worth noting that Welch uses Lin's translation to 'illustrate the ease of parallels between Christianity and Taoism' (Welch 1965: 16).
9   As with many missionaries before him, the only scope for Welch is to find God through the mystical experience described in the *Daodejing*. He himself defines the nature of his endeavour, stating that: '[w]e embarked on this discussion of miracles and magic to find out how Lao Tzu supported his claims to valid trance experience, how he knew that it was anything more than imagination' (Welch 1965: 79). And yet, after his quest, he controversially admits that it 'might be said that to the extent Tao is considered divine, the metaphysics becomes a theology and Taoism a religion. In that case it is a very curious religion. It is not based on faith, but on direct experience of God. It has no place for ritual or priests or church. It promises no response to

All of these examples give a taste of how their authors speak the language of metaphysics in translating the *Daodejing*. Still, are we entitled to use this language? Is the translation of *chang* as 'Absolute' a real option? Is there any other possibility outside onto-theo-logical language? A sign in this direction is offered by D.C. Lau, who proposes a more poised and soberer version (1989) of the Wang Bi text:

> The way that can be spoken of
> Is not the constant way.[10]

It is not difficult to see how Lau tries to convey a different interpretation based on an immanent understanding of *dao*: no longer capitalized, the 'way' drops any transcendent inclination and points to a more worldly meaning. This is mirrored by the choice of translating *chang* as 'constant', which keeps open the possibility of a way that can be acted in our everyday life, in opposition to the simpler and more restrictive way that is spoken and defined by language.

It is not by chance that Lau's study is also at the heart of the Roger Ames and David Hall version, as they themselves openly declare (Ames and Hall 2003: 76). Their 'philosophical translation' of the *Daodejing* offers many opportunities for reflection, and for this reason it is the focus for the rest of my analysis.

Dao (道) as 'way-making'

As we have seen, Chinese nouns can have a verbal function depending on their position in the sentence. Ames and Hall solve the problem of the nominal and verbal function of *dao* by using the concept of 'way-making'. Their translation of the first line goes: 'Way-making that can be put into

---

prayer while we are in this world, and as to the next world, that does not exist—unless it be the state of non-being, which does not sound particularly lively. It vigorously attacks morality and government, two institutions that religion generally supports. And most curious of all, the mystical experience it offers is not ecstatic, but dark, neutral, and uncertain. For these reasons Taoism as a religion was no success at all. Or rather the highly successful religion which came to be called Taoism has almost nothing to do with the *Tao Te Ching*' (Welch 1965: 87). Whilst many of these observations are questionable, it seems to me difficult to disagree with the last statement.

10   Angus Graham considers the 'scrupulously scholarly version by D.C. Lau' close 'not only to the sense of the original but to its skeletal poetry' (2003: 136).

words is not really way-making'.[11] The two authors describe their motivation behind this choice thus:

> Taking the verbal *dao* as primary, its several derived meanings emerge rather naturally: 'to lead through,' and hence: 'road, path, way, method, to put into words, to explain, teachings, doctrines, art.' At its most fundamental level, *dao* seems to denote the active project of 'moving ahead in the world,' of 'forging a way forward,' of 'road building.' Hence, our neologism: 'way-making.' By extension, *dao* comes to connote a pathway that has been made, and hence can be traveled. (Ames and Hall 2003: 57)

This interpretation of *dao* as 'primarily gerundive, processional, and dynamic: "a leading forth"' (Ames and Hall 2003: 57) has interesting consequences, including overturning the common metaphysical approach. This translation precisely opposes the absolutization of *dao* that is imposed by transcendent perspectives, which implies that as soon as we define *dao* we stop experiencing and acting it. In other words, the determination of one single way as absolute misses the procedural aspect that the verbal meaning of the character entails. Against this essentialisation, Ames and Hall also coherently eliminate capitalisations. Moreover, 'way-making' is not determined by any article: there is no 'the' for way-making, which therefore suggests not only a constant action, but also a plurality of possibilities. The translation of *dao* as way-making therefore has the great advantage of getting rid of the prevailing metaphysical interpretations.[12] And yet, we

11   The reference text for the translation by Ames and Hall is not Wang Bi but the Mawangdui version, which reads: 道，可道也，非恆道也. For a detailed analysis of the Mawangdui *Laozi*, see Henricks (1989). In this context, only one remark is necessary: the Mawangdui texts 'do not differ in any *radical* way from later version of the text' (Henricks 1989: XV italics in original) and there is nothing in these texts 'that would lead us to understand the philosophy of the text in a radical new way' (Henricks 1989: XV). Philip Ivanhoe shares the same opinion (2001: XVI). For a comparison and an appraisal of the different versions of the *Daodejing,* see Liu (2006).

12   In fact, it is increasingly acknowledged that the worldview of ancient China was not based on metaphysical categories. Graham, for instance, states that '[i]n Indo-European languages a thing simply *is,* without implying anything outside it, and it is the most abstract entities which the Platonic tradition most willingly credits with being. In Chinese, on the other hand, one approaches the thing from outside, from the world which "has" it, in which "there is" it. From this point of view, the more concrete a thing is, the more plainly the world has it; for example, one can emphasize the absolute non-existence of X by saying 天下無 [*tian xia wu*] X "The world does not have X" (more literally, "There is no X under the sky"). In this respect, as in the absence of the copulative functions of "to be", *yu* [有] is like "exist", which also implies a concrete thing with a background from which it stands out (*exsistit*). But there remains the difference that "exists", like "is", is attached to a subject and not to an object' (Graham 1990: 343). This very difference

cannot adopt this translation without some serious precautions. We have two reasons to be cautious: first, it is impossible not to consider the affinity of 'way-making' with Nelson Goodman's concept of 'worldmaking';[13] and second, the term 'way-making' has a direct connection with Heidegger's *be-wëgen*. These concepts refer to different perspectives that need to be briefly analysed. Let us consider the notion of 'worldmaking' first.

In *Ways of Worldmaking,* Nelson Goodman faces the question of 'how worlds are made, tested, and known' (1978: 7). In trying to escape from an essentialist perspective, Goodman proposes a theory that envisages a plurality of worlds fabricated by human beings.[14] If we consider the concept of 'way-making' as 'forging a way forward' or 'road building', the affinity between 'worldmaking' and 'way-making' becomes evident. These two concepts both emphasize the procedural aspect of the human relationship with the world, overcoming in this way its essentialist and nominalist interpretation. The problem is that, in doing so, they seem to put the entire weight on the human being, reducing the world to a simple object that is ready-at-hand. This is not far from the modern Western understanding of the subject as *subiectum*, which in turn is the grounding substance (*sub-stare*, 'to stand under') that objectifies the world. In fact, although Goodman is against this objectification as the 'One' reality and is in favour of a plurality of productions, he nevertheless considers humanity the *subject* in this process. Therefore, the concepts of both 'worldmaking' and 'way-making' are too close to the modern assumption of the *creative mind*. This idea clashes with the concept of *dao*, which is not simply a production of humans. If we

---

makes the translation of Chinese thought with metaphysical concepts extremely problematic. In fact, in 'Chinese one approaches existence from something outside, usually undefined, which has, in which there is, the thing in question […] Western philosophy, grounded in Greek and Latin rather than in ordinary modern speech, has generally approached the question from the opposite direction, from the thing which "is" or "exists". The object of *yu* is the subject of "is"' (Graham 1990: 328). This does not mean that early Chinese thought could not conceive of any metaphysical perspective. It only means that metaphysics was not the main focus of classical Chinese language and thought. As clearly asserted by Ames, '[o]ne cannot state the Ontological Argument in Chinese because the language lacks the construction involving the verb "to be" in asserting existence. Still one can use Chinese as a metalanguage in explaining how the Ontological Argument is something that can be stated in an Indo-European Language' (Ames 1991: XII).

13   Ames asserts that '*dao* references the human sojourn through the life experience and might alternatively be translated as "world-making" with the understanding that the etymology of the term "world" is literally "the age of man"' (Ames 2015b: 264).

14   In *Languages of Art*, Goodman openly states: 'My aim has been to take some steps toward a systematic study of symbols and symbol systems and the ways they function in our perceptions and actions and arts and sciences, and thus in the creation and comprehension of our worlds' (1976: 265).

consider what is said in the *Xici* (繫辭)—also called *Dazhuan* (大傳), the *Great Commentary* of the *Yijing* (易經): *'yi yin yi yang zhi wei dao'* (一陰一陽之謂道) (A5.1) 'The reciprocal process of yin and yang is called the Dao' (Lynn 1994a: 53),[15] we can easily assume that, although *dao* is a process, it does not pertain exclusively to human beings.[16] This means that *dao* as 'way-making'—and, by extension, as 'worldmaking'—is not simply produced by a grounding *subiectum,* but is also a process stemming from and depending on the relationships between different aspects of the world, in which humankind is only *one* of manifold components.

In a recent article, Ames, drawing from Tang Junyi, expresses more attentively this aspect of the classical Chinese thought:

> Tang Junyi suggests that in Chinese natural cosmology, there is 'no appeal to a fixed substratum (*wudingtiguan* 無定體觀).' Of course this proposition is a rejection of the relevance of ontological disparity – the familiar reality and appearance distinction – in the Chinese cosmological sensibility [...] This commitment to an inherent, emergent sense of order rather than assumptions about an underlying permanent order might be

---

15   Guying Chen states that this thought has its origin precisely in the *Daodejing* (Chen 2008: 46). In the translation by Graham we read 'The alternation of Yin and Yang is what is meant by the "Way"' (1990: 58). Chan Wing-tsit translates 'The successive movement of *yin* and *yang* constitutes the Way' (Chan 1963a: 266). The version by Cheng Chung-ying reads 'It is the exchange of one yin and one yang which is called the Way' (Cheng 1991: 363). Cary F. Baynes, in his translation from Richard Wilhelm—'Was einmal das Dunkle und einmal das Lichte hervortreten läßt, das ist der SINN' (Wilhelm 1924: 225)—renders: 'That which lets now the dark, now the light appear is tao' (Wilhelm and Baynes 1967: 587). Wilhelm, and consequently Baynes, consider *yin* (陰) to be *Dunkle* ('dark') and *yang* (陽) to be *Lichte* ('light')—for a critique of the Wilhelm/Baynes translation, see Ho (1991). These are possible meanings for the two characters, which in general function as complementary: night and day, moon and sun, female and male, etc. Cheng states, 'The socalled *yinyang* represents two moments or two aspects of the process of transformation or change, which are to be understood in an extensive context of contrastive and correlative understandings of qualities and movements of things and their relationships – qualities and movements such as feminine and masculine, dark and bright, closed and open, coming and going. To generalize over these qualities and movements we reach the *yinyang* polarity of transformation that could be said to be both the moving process and the resulting phase of transformation in things' (Cheng 1991: 363). Unfortunately, it is not possible within the scope of this chapter to further develop the concepts of *yin* and *yang,* or the complexity of the *Yijing*. For further analysis, see Lynn (1994b) and Ames (2015a).

16   For an extensive interpretation of the *Daodejing* as an exposition of process, see Barbalet's assertion that the 'significance given to action in *Daodejing* means that the understanding of process never lapses into metaphysical or mystical reflection. The significance given to process means that the understanding of action never lapses into voluntarism or methodological individualism' (Barbalet 2014: 21).

restated positively as the perceived interdependence of 'reforming and functioning (*tiyong* [体用])' or alternatively, as the primacy of process and change over form and stasis. This contrast between a substance and a process sensibility can be captured in the difference between 'metaphysics' as the discovery of unchanging first principles on the one hand, and on the other, 'the mapping out and forging a way forward in the world (*dao* 道)' ubiquitous in the Chinese philosophical texts. In this Chinese cosmology, order is not superordinate, standing independent of the world that it orders. Rather, the coherence of our experience emerges within the transformations occurring in the world around us (Ames 2015a: 8).

We can conclude that humankind, as part of the world, participates in its order and disorder without being an autonomous *subiectum*. I come back to this in more detail soon. For now, it is necessary to balance the concept of 'worldmaking' and its subjective humanism. To do so, it is useful to turn to Heidegger and his idea of *dao*.

Dao (道) as *'be-wëgen'*

It is true that Heidegger refers to *dao* as *'Weg'* ('way'). However, his interpretation of the Chinese character lies in the concept of *'be-wëgen'*. In 'The nature of Language' (1971) he expressly states that

> The key word in Laotse's poetic thinking is *Tao*, which 'properly speaking' means way. But because we are prone to think of 'way' superficially, as a stretch connecting two places, our word 'way' has all too rashly been considered unfit to name what *Tao* says. *Tao* is then translated as reason, mind, *raison*, meaning, *logos* (Heidegger 1971: 92).

Heidegger therefore considers *dao* not as a mere 'way', but rather as what

> gives way, moves us. We hear the words 'give way' in this sense: to be the original giver and founder of ways (Heidegger 1971: 92).

> *Sie be-wëgt. Wir hören das Wort Be-wëgung im Sinne von: Wege allererst ergeben und stiften* (Heidegger 1985: 186).

For Heidegger, *dao* is the origin and founder of ways insofar as it *be-wëgt*, as it gives way. Immediately afterwards, Heidegger mentions that, in the

Alemannic-Swabian dialect, the etymology of *be-wëgen* and *Be-wëgung* is the verb *wëgen*, which means 'to clear a way', for instance across a snow-covered field. Heidegger clarifies that

> This verb, used transitively, means: to form a way and, forming it, to keep it ready. Way-making [*Be-wëgen*] understood in this sense no longer means to move something up or down a path that is already there. It means to bring the way […] forth first of all, and thus to *be* the way (Heidegger 1971: 130).

> *Dieses transitiv gebrauchte Zeitwort besagt: einen Weg bilden, bildend ihn bereit halten. Be-wëgen (Be-wëgung) heißt, so gedacht, nicht mehr: etwas nur auf einem schon vorhandenen Weg hin- und herschaffen, sondern: den Weg zu […] allererst erbringen und so der Weg 'sein'* (Heidegger 1985: 249).

It is interesting that Peter Hertz translates *be-wëgen* as 'way-making'. Ames and Hall do not refer to Heidegger anywhere in their translation, but it is unlikely that they were unaware of this important Heideggerian passage. Be that as it may, we need to consider an important aspect of this verb.

Gail Stenstad—one of the few scholars who acknowledges the importance of the concept of *be-wëgen* in Heidegger's philosophy—analyses the term, stating that it is not

> a standard German word; it is not just 'movement' (*Bewegung*). The unusual hyphen and umlaut tell us to be attentive for something different, something more […] There is no way already *there* somewhere just waiting to be discovered and followed. Way-making movement gives and makes ways *in* way making. The way becomes way only as it opens and is thought or followed, in the same moving, at the same time. The hyphen in *Be-wëgung* and *be-wëgen* puts special emphasis on the prefix, which often turns transitive verbs into intransitive verbs. By emphasizing the prefix Heidegger may be suggesting that we are not to understand *be-wëgen* as a transitive verb in some typical subject-object structure. Way is not some object. Way-making makes way in such a way that 'it is' the way, that is, all there 'is' is way-making movement. The movement moves, and that is all. It gives way in self-withdrawing, in yielding way. Such giving way clears the way for saying, for the self-showing of whatever is freed into the clearing or opening of the way (Stenstad 2006: 80-81).

I completely agree with Stenstad's analysis. However, there is a problem that needs to be addressed. If there is no 'way' already *there* somewhere, just waiting

to be discovered and followed; if *be-wëgen* is a verb without a subject-object structure, thereby denying any subjective grounding; and if all there 'is' is way-making movement, the question becomes: who or what is responsible for this movement, who or what *gives* way? Stenstad suggests that *be-wëgen* 'gives way in self-withdrawing'. Still, if we equate *be-wëgen* with self-withdrawing, we equate it with the ontological difference and, therefore, with *Sein* ('being'). And yet Stenstad seems to be right: this is the direction in which Heidegger is pointing. It is not by chance that Heidegger emphasises the word '*sein*' at the end of the aforementioned passage. Here lies an important aspect of Heideggerian philosophy that, unfortunately, goes beyond the remit of this paper, and which I can only briefly mention in this context.

In his attempt to reduce the subjectivist interpretation of *Dasein* (literally, "being there"), Heidegger conceives being as *es gibt* ('there is', literally 'it gives'). In 'Letter on "Humanism"', he openly asserts that we can grasp the ontological difference only if we comprehend that '*es gibt das Sein*' ('there is / it gives being'), provided that 'the "it" that here "gives" is being itself' (Heidegger 1998: 254-255) ('*das "es", was hier "gibt", ist das Sein selbst*' (Heidegger 1976: 334)). In trying to escape the metaphysical danger of the rational mind that grounds itself and reduces the world to an object present-at-hand, Heidegger falls into the trap of another metaphysical assumption. As Robert Neville holds:

> Heidegger's metaphysics of substance, repeated despite his best efforts in the notion of *Dasein*, frustrated his approach to the ontological question. While attractive to some and the source of his early influence (even among Buddhists), Heidegger's existential individualism was a direct impediment to his philosophical intentions as expressed in his phrase, 'being in the world.' He abandoned that impediment in his later writings (Neville 1991: 144).

This becomes even more evident in relation to *dao* when Heidegger affirms that 'Tao could be the way that gives all ways' (Heidegger 1971: 92) ('*könnte der Tao der alles be-wëgende Weg sein*' (Heidegger 1985: 187)). Katrin Froese interprets the passage as 'the Dao may be the all-moving way' (2006: 46), which gives to the sentence an even more marked nuance of *primum movens* ("prime mover"). We are then back to square one: *dao* is equated with *Sein*.[17] I believe that this vision of *dao* as a self-withdrawing being is as misleading as the concept of worldmaking.

---

17   Chung-Ying Cheng also affirms that 'Heidegger himself tried to understand the *tao* in terms of Being or vice versa in his later years' (Cheng 1991: 368).

Conclusions

As a consequence of this analysis, we can conclude that if we want to consider *dao* as either 'way-making' or *be-wëgen*, we need to search for a compromise between the subjective creation of 'worldmaking' and the impersonal self-withdrawing of *es gibt*. It is well known that the conception of the world in ancient China was based on a balanced harmony of all of its components, including humankind. In this view, we are not just in-the-world, but instead *part* of the world, arising *with* it. Warren Frisina observes that

> The sage can form one body with all things because his own existence is also a pattern of *yin/yang* alternations. The boundaries that divide the world into discrete entities are overcome by the sage who recognizes his continuity with all things and adjusts his own *yin/yang* patterns in ways that maximize their potential for harmonic integration. These patterns, therefore, are not preexisting or permanent. They are created within concrete situations (2002: 82).

Although it can be difficult for a mindset trained in the tradition of Descartes, Locke, Kant, and so on, to conceive such a perspective,[18] I believe there is a space in one's own vision of the world that opens this possibility. I propose to consider a passage from Paul Ricœur's *The Rule of Metaphor* in order to properly illuminate this position. In trying to answer the question 'do we know what is meant by world, truth, reality?' (Ricœur 1978: 305), Ricœur asserts that

> We must [...] dismantle the reign of objects in order to let be, and to allow to be uttered, our primordial belonging to a world which we inhabit, that is to say, which at once precedes us and receives the imprint of our works. In short, we must restore to the fine word *invent* its twofold sense of both discovery and creation (Ricœur 1978: 306, italics in original).

'Invent', from Latin *invèntus*, the past participle of *invenìre*, means 'to find', 'to discover while searching', but also 'to arrive somewhere'. In fact, *invenìre*

18   Jacques Gernet points to this historical difficulty when he asserts: 'Believing that the universe possesses within itself its own organisational principles and its own creative energy, the Chinese maintained something that was quite scandalous from the point of view of scholastic reason, namely that "matter" itself is intelligent—not, clearly enough, with a conscious and reflective intelligence as we usually conceive it, but with a spontaneous intelligence which makes it possible for the *yin* and the *yang* to come together and guides the infinite combinations of these two opposite sources of energy' (Gernet 1985: 204).

is composed of *in* and *venìre*, literally 'to come in (a place)'. Ricœur's words help clarify that, in dealing with the world, one is constantly mutually entailing with it: the world always precedes and conditions humans, and at the same time humans discover and make sense of the world in many different ways.

If we regard the concepts of 'way-making' and *be-wëgen* not as creation or *Sein* but as invention, we reintroduce the relational aspect of the term, by which it is implied that we neither create a world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) nor are we totally determined by it. Quite the reverse: we walk in the middle of these two extremes; we discover a place by making space for it in our conceptions. *Dao* as 'way-making'/*be-wëgen* ought to be conceived as this discovering process. However, what is discovered is not an objective place but something in constant transformation, which constantly needs to be reshaped and simultaneously reshapes us. We find a space in the world by making a space for this process as part of the world, which in turn opens and limits this space with and within us. Therefore, *dao* is not something inside or outside humankind; it can neither be created nor be given. *Dao* is closer to becoming than any foundational substance, *subiectum,* or *Sein* and humankind participates in it as any other part of the world.[19]

If we embrace this perspective, we can better understand the joke of Ames and Hall when they assert:

> As a parody on Parmenides, who claimed that 'only Being is,' we might say that for the Daoist, 'only *beings* are,' or taking one step further in underscoring the reality of the process of change itself, 'only *becomings* are' (Ames and Hall 2003: 14).

I am not sure that 'only *beings* are', and I am not convinced that any 'only' can define what should exist. But this is a parody and ought to be considered as such. Sure enough, it does not mean that everything goes—on the contrary,

---

19   Wei-Ming Tu reminds us something similar when he declares that in classical Chinese thought the 'motif of wholeness is directly derived from the idea of continuity as all-encompassing. If the world were created by an intelligence higher than and external to the great transformation, it would, by definition, fall short of a manifestation of holism [...] Traditional Chinese thinkers, of course, did not philosophize in those terms. They used different conceptual apparatuses to convey their thought. To them, the appropriate metaphor for understanding the universe was biology rather than physics. At issue was not the eternal, static structure but the dynamic process of growth and transformation. To say that the cosmos is a continuum and that all of its components are internally connected is also to say that it is an organismic unity, holistically integrated at each level of complexity' (Tu 1985: 38-39).

conceiving a world of becoming implies that it itself needs to be acted while it simultaneously affects us, constantly. The process metaphor of *dao* needs such a relation. This suggests that we participate in this process with the world and the others, but also through them. In this sense, care of the self can only be practiced through care of the world and of others. In fact, we *are* the world and we are *others*. No imposition or restriction ought to be allowed to 'the others', as the price would be an imposition on ourselves. The second line of the *Daodejing* affirms: 'a name that can be named is not constant naming' ('*ming ke ming, fei chang ming*' 名可名，非常名). And yet only through names can we participate in this process. We just need to see this naming as constantly *in-venìre*, which implies a mutually entailing relation between the self and the other. The result is a reciprocal transformation that *calls* the others while it replies to their summons. *Dao*, therefore, is not a normative principle that can be defined and followed, because this would not be the constant process of *dao*. If one accepts this interpretation of the first line of the *Daodejing*, it becomes evident that, more than any substance or entity, *dao* indicates the possibility of always *inventing* anew the relations between the self, the other, and the world at large—thus opening a space for a comprehensive dialogue that goes beyond the anthropocentric perspective without transcending to metaphysical hypostases.

Bibliography

Ames, Roger T. 2015a. 'The Great Commentary (Dazhuan (大傳)) and Chinese natural cosmology'. *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 2(1): 1-18.

Ames, Roger T. 2015b. ""Knowing" as the "Realizing of Happiness" Here, on the Bridge, over the River Hao." In *Zhuangzi and the happy fish*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Takahiro Nakajima, 261-290. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Ames, Roger T. 1991. Introduction to *Interpreting Culture Through Translation: A Festschrift for D.C. Lau*, edited by Roger T. Ames et al. IX-XXVII. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall. 2003. *Daodejing: 'Making This Life Significant': A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Barbalet, Jack. 2014. 'Laozi's Daodejing (6th Century BC)' in *The Oxford Handbook of Process Philosophy and Organization Studies*, edited by Jenny Helin et al. 17-31. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chan, Wing-tsit. 1963a. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chan, Wing-tsit. 1963b. *The way of Lao Tzu*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Chen, Guying 陳鼓應. 2008. *Laozhuang xin lun* 老莊新論. Beijing 北京: Shangwu Yinshuguan 商務印書館.

Chen, Lai. 1999. 'The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song-Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy'. *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 30(4): 9-24.

Cheng, Chung-Ying. 1991. *New Dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian Philosophy.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Coutinho, Steve. 2014. *An introduction to Daoist philosophies*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Frisina, Warren G. 2002. *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Froese, Katrin. 2006. *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Daoist Thought: Crossing Paths In-between*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Gernet, Jacques. 1985. *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures,* translated by Janet Lloyd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodman, Nelson. 1978. *Ways of Worldmaking.* Indianapolis: Hackett.

Goodman, Nelson. 1976. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols.* Indianapolis: Hackett.

Graham, A.C. 2003. 'Two Notes on the Translation of Taoist Classics', in *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, edited by Harold David Roth. 130-156. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Graham, A.C. 1990. *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Hansen, Chad. 1992. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1998. 'Letter on "Humanism"', in *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill, translated by Frank Capuzzi. 239-276. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1985. *Gesamtausgabe I Abt, Veröffentlichte Schriften, 1910-1976, Band 12, Unterwegs zur Sprache.* Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 1976. *Gesamtausgabe I Abt, Veröffentlichte Schriften, 1910-1976, Band 9, Vegmarken*. Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. 'The Nature of Language', in *On the Way to Language*. 57-108. New York: Harper & Row.

Henricks, Robert G. 2000. *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Henricks, Robert G. 1989. *Lao-tzu: Te-tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Ho, Richard M.W. 1991. 'Where Cross-fertilization Fails: A Short Critique of the Wilhelm/Baynes Translation of the Book of Changes', in *Interpreting Culture Through Translation: A Festschrift for D.C. Lau*, edited by Roger T. Ames et al. 145-153. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2002. *The Daodejing of Laozi*. New York: Seven Bridges Press.

Lacertosa, Massimiliano. 2017. "For a philosophy of comparisons: the problems of comparative studies in relation with Daoism." *Asian Philosophy* 27 (4): 324-339.

Lau, D.C. 1989. *Tao Te Ching: Chinese Classics*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Legge, James. 1891. *The Sacred books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, 2 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lin, Yutang. 1942. *The Wisdom of China and India*. New York: Random House.

Liu, Fuzeng 劉福增 1999. *Laozi zhe xue xin lun* 老子哲學新論. Taipei 臺北: Dongda tushu gongsi 東大圖書公司.

Liu, Xiaogan, ed. 2015a. *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Liu, Xiaogan. 2015b. 'Introduction: Difficulties and Orientations in the Study of Chinese Philosophy', in *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*, edited by Xiaogan Liu. 1-22. Dordrecht: Springer.

Liu, Xiaogan 劉笑敢. 2006. *Laozi gujin: Wu zhong duikan yu xiping yinlun* 老子古今: 五種對勘與析評引論. Beijing 北京: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社.

Lynn, Richard John. 1994a. *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lynn, Richard John. 1994b. Introduction to *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ma, Lin. 2016. 'On the Paradigm Shift of Comparative Studies of Heidegger and Chinese Philosophy'. *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies* (4): 81-98.

Neville, Robert C. 1991. *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 1978. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, translated by Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello. London: Routledge.

Stenstad, Gail. 2006. *Transformations: Thinking after Heidegger*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Tu, Wei-Ming. 1985. *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Waley, Arthur. 2005. *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought.* London: Routledge.

Wang, Keping. 1998. *The classic of the Dao: a new investigation.* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

Welch, Holmes. 1965. *Taoism: The Parting of the Way.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Wilhelm, Richard. 1924. *I Ging. Das Buch der Wandlungen, Vols. 1-2.* Jena: E. Diederichs.

Wilhelm, Richard, and Cary F. Baynes. 1967. *The I Ching: or Book of Changes, Bollingen Series.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

About the author

Massimiliano Lacertosa is a PhD candidate in philosophy at SOAS University of London and has just concluded his second year of fieldwork in Beijing at Beijing Normal University. His research revolves around the theory of comparisons and Daoist philosophy. He has recently published the article 'For a philosophy of comparisons: the problems of comparative studies in relation with Daoism' in *Asian Philosophy.*
Email: mlacertosa@me.com