



Dao 道

(Way or the way things are; ultimate reality or the ultimate).

One primary, and non-mystical, understanding of *dao* in classical Chinese philosophy is that the *dao* is the way things are, no matter how a thinker or a school of thought understands the way things are and how he or she elaborates such an understanding. The notion of *dao* is one fundamental, across-the-board reflective category in classical Chinese philosophy; a variety of schools of thought take the pursuit of the *dao* as one fundamental task or mission in their understanding and capturing the way things are. One classical and representative, reflective understanding of *dao* is given in the Daoist classical text, Lao Zi's *Dao-De-Jing* where the *dao* is understood primarily as the metaphysical *dao*: it is the ultimate source, unifying power, and fundamental principle of nature and the universe; it manifests itself through particular individual things. When the *dao* is possessed or manifested by individual things, it becomes its manifested character, i.e., what '*de*' (德) means in its broad sense in the *Dao-De-Jing*. As highlighted in the opening passage of the *Dao-De-Jing*, on the one hand, the *dao* is not absolutely beyond language delivery; rather, the *dao* can be talked about and captured in language, as Lao Zi's own linguistic practice in the *Dao-De-Jing* shows. On the other hand, the *dao* that has been characterized in finite descriptions is not identical with, or does not exhaust, the eternal *dao*.

One extension of the metaphysical *dao* in the human society is the human being's performance following the way of the metaphysical *dao* ('performance *dao*' for short). Human virtue, i.e., what '*de*' (德) means in its narrow sense in the *Dao-De-Jing*, is considered the manifestation of the metaphysical *dao* in human beings regarding morality. It is *de* as human virtue in this sense that endows human beings with the power that distinguishes them from other things. The *dao* in human society is also understood as the way that things in general get to some goal, concretely as a road or a path construed normatively or as a recommendation or guide, in the spirit of *wu-wei* (i.e., doing things in a natural or un-excessive way). Ways can be added to

each other so we have ways of a person, a family, a community, and a species. The human being's pursuit of (or her performance following) the *dao* does not necessarily imply conforming to a pre-fixed path; the point is that any path *per se* that the *dao*-pursuing agent is currently paving is expected to be in accordance with, or capture, the way things are in nature. Daoism takes pursuing, modeling on, and performing the *dao* as the fundamental mission of the human being in their reflective inquiry.

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