

Can Something Come from Nothing?

Existence and Nonexistence in Ancient and Medieval Daoism

Chris Fraser

Lee Chair in Chinese Thought and Culture
University of Toronto
cjfraser.net

Introduction

Perhaps the most prominent discourse on existence and nonexistence in the Chinese philosophical tradition originates in classical Daoist anthologies such as the *Dàodéjīng* and *Zhuāngzǐ* and is elaborated and developed in the writings of early medieval thinkers such as Hé Yàn, Wáng Bì, and Guō Xiàng. This discourse explores the relationship between *yǒu* 有 and *wú* 無—existence and nonexistence, presence and absence, being and nonbeing—and can be read as a series of contributions to a metaphysical debate or debates about the primordial source or cause of what exists. A prominent stance in this discourse was that something can indeed come from nothing, as several thinkers and texts held that, in some sense, existence arises from nonexistence. I will sketch some key moves in this discourse and then show how the final figure I cover, Guō Xiàng, resolves—or rather dissolves—his predecessors’ questions about the origin of existence in an intriguing way that is relevant to contemporary conceptions of causality. Guō wholly rejects the idea that something can come from nothing.

Historically, the motivation driving this discourse is not merely curiosity about the fundamental cause of the world. It is also ethical and metaethical. *Dào* 道 is the core architectonic concept in early and medieval Chinese thought. The basic meaning of “*dào*” is a path, in many philosophical contexts referring to the path of the apt, good, or virtuous personal and social life. Concrete paths as we find them are inevitably shaped at least partly by the natural environment. Early Ruist and Mohist thinkers had suggested that the apt path for us to follow was in some sense endorsed or exemplified by Nature or Heaven (*tiān* 天), a quasi-personal nature- or sky-deity. Daoist thinkers and texts pursued this idea in what to them was an inherently

plausible direction. Whatever *dào* is, it is in some sense explained by, immanent in, shaped by, or manifested through natural features. As *Dàodéjīng* 32 says, “To give an analogy for how *dào* is in the world, it’s like the relation of streams and valleys to rivers and seas.” It is something akin to a path-like structure or relation, which guides the flow of activity in a certain way, without actually intervening to direct the flow. Obvious questions to ask, then, are: How do such structures or relations come to exist? Is there a pattern or process of nature that produces them? If so, that pattern or process would be the fundamental *dào*, and by extension the basis—directly or indirectly—for the apt ethical and political *dào*. If we can understand how what exists comes to exist—the source from or patterns by which things arise—then we have a route to understanding *dào*, including both the *dào* of the natural world and the ethical *dào* to follow. As we will see, the ethical implications of the concern with existence and nonexistence become explicit in the views of Guō Xiàng.

Dàodéjīng and *Huáinánzǐ*: Existence from Nonexistence

One passage in the early Daoist anthology *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 (4th century BC) states that “all things arise from existence (*yǒu*); existence arises from nonexistence (*wú*)” (40). Another section states that the *dào* (way) “produces ‘one,’ one produces two, two produces three, and three produces the myriad things” (42). *Dào* itself is described as lacking any determinate form, confused and indistinct (14), and extending everywhere (34). It is “a thing formed of chaos,” “the mother of the world” (25). It is nameless (32), although we can “style” it a *dào* (25) and if forced, name it “vast” (25). (In early Chinese texts, naming requires that we distinguish the object named from other things. Since nonexistence cannot be distinguished from anything, it is “nameless.”) It is “formless and solitary, standing alone without changing, proceeding everywhere without becoming exhausted.”

These statements do not cohere tightly into a clear or precise position. They hint at the view that *dào* is a nonexistence, in the sense not of nothingness or a void, but an absence of any determinate features. This nonexistence either is (25) or produces (42) a totality out of which determinate things divide. So parts of the anthology hint at a view by which existence arises from nonexistence.

The *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 (139 BC), a considerably later text, echoes these ideas. Its opening paragraph (Hnz 1) describes *dào* as the all-encompassing ground or source of everything, containing and filling the cosmos, without ends or boundaries, constantly cycling between opposites. Later it explains that the formless is the “great ancestor” of things. The “formless” refers to “the one,” which stands alone, with nothing distinguished from it. What has form is produced from the formless, and so, “existence is produced from nonexistence.” The import of this claim is clear: it is not that something comes from nothing, but that discrete objects with “form” are divided

out of a formless totality that originally exists.

Another *Huáinánzǐ* essay contends that things are created by being divided out of the “supreme unity” (Hnz 14). Hence if we examine the supreme origin of things, “humanity arises from nonexistence and takes form in existence.” Again, however, it is clear that the “nonexistence” in question is the absence of discrete things, because all the world is fused into a “one” or totality. It is not a void or nothingness.

Here it is worth sketching two points to clarify why this idea of existent things arising out of an undifferentiated, formless totality would have seemed plausible. First, early Chinese metaphysics is mereological. The cosmos is understood as a unified whole out of which discrete things are divided. Second, everything is regarded as constituted by dynamic, flowing stuff called *qì* 氣, which is understood by analogy to water and water vapour. The formation of discrete things from a totality of nonexistence, then, is conceptualized roughly like the condensation of water from vapour and solidification of water into ice.

Zhuāngzǐ: A Plurality of Views

Different sections of the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (3rd century BC) present several distinct outlooks on existence, nonexistence, and their relation to *dào*, suggesting that a plurality of views were in play during the late classical period.

One intriguing passage (12.8) contends that in the “supreme beginning,” there was nonexistence, which neither existed nor could be named. From this nonexistence arose a “one” or “unity,” which was yet unformed, without determinate features. From the unity formed various things, with agentive powers, conditions of life, and norms that determine their inherent nature or dispositions. The passage suggests an ethical connection to the original beginning: by cultivating our nature, we are able to return to the agentive powers bestowed on us from the “one” and attain identity with the “beginning,” thus coming to “merge with heaven and earth” and flow along with them. The *dào* then lies in merging with the process by which nonexistence gave rise to the “one.”

A related view contends that “There is something from which things are born, into which they die, from which they emerge, into which they enter,” which is nonexistence. In a view presaging the stance of Wáng Bì several hundred years later, the text claims that existence cannot produce itself. “The myriad things emerge from nonexistence. Existence cannot become existence by means of existence; it must issue from nonexistence, while nonexistence is always nonexistence” (23.3d).

Not all sections of the *Zhuāngzǐ* present the primordial *dào* this way. One prominent description (6.3) does not mention the issue of existence versus nonexistence at all. *Dào* is said to be formless and non-acting and not something that can be explicitly displayed or seen. It is described as “its own basis, its own root.” The

implication is that it does not depend on or emerge from anything else. “Before there were heaven and earth, since antiquity it has inherently been present...it produces heaven and earth.”

Another conversation contends that “The emergence of things cannot occur prior to things, because there are things they come from, and there being things they come from goes on without end” (22.10). So it seems that things do not emerge from nonexistence, nor from some sort of inchoate or unformed existence. The causal chains by which they are produced go back without end. The text claims that “what things things” (makes them the things they are) is itself “not a thing.” Insofar as we can speak of a source, guide, or driver of things, then, it will not be a thing itself (as DDJ 25 says the *dào* is), nor nonexistence, nor bare, undifferentiated existence. Perhaps, it could be a pattern or norm of some kind.

Hé Yàn: Nonexistence as Primordial Totality

We jump forward now several centuries, to the first half of the 3rd century CE and one of the founders of the “Profound Learning” movement of the Wèi-Jìn period (220–420), Hé Yàn 何晏 (193–249). Hé’s claims were responsible for establishing the issue of how existence relates to nonexistence as a central concern of Wèi-Jìn discourse.

According to fragments preserved in the *Jin History*, Hé contended that “existence becomes existence by being produced from nonexistence.” “The *yīn* and *yáng* energies depend on nonexistence to produce life; the myriad things depend on it to take form.” One cannot speak of it, name it, see it, or hear it, because it is an all-encompassing, undifferentiated totality: *dào* is “complete” or “whole” in it. Apparently, nonexistence is the substance or body of *dào*. This stance seems to fuse the idea from *Dàodéjīng* 40 that existence arises from nonexistence with the idea *Dàodéjīng* 25 that *dào* is a chaotic, undifferentiated vastness that is “the mother of all things.”

Hé here seems to interpret nonexistence (*wú*) along lines familiar from *Huáinánzǐ* (Hnz 1): because it is “complete” or “whole,” nonexistence is not nothingness or void but an undifferentiated totality without determinate features, within which no discrete objects exist. Understood as this undifferentiated totality, nonexistence is the source from which things arise. In contending that nonexistence is the source from which things arise, then, Hé does not mean that things somehow arise from a void, from nothing at all. He means that they arise from a totality in which nothing exists or is present insofar as there is nothing there to be named, identified, or picked out from other things. “Nonexistence” (*wú*) is not “nothing” as much as “nothing,” nothing in particular.

Wáng Bì: *Dào* as a Nonexistent Source

Wáng Bì 王弼 (226–49 CE), a protégé of Hé Yàn, agreed that the ultimate *dào* is nonexistent and that existence arises out of it. But Wáng rejected Hé's view that this nonexistence is a formless, undifferentiated totality or “one” on the grounds that an explanation is needed of whence the one itself arises.

Wáng held that “*dào* is the source from which everything emerges” (*Commentary on the Dàodéjīng*, 51). But if the ultimate *dào* is a nameless, formless totality, a “one,” we still must ask whence this one itself arises, and in his view it arises from nonexistence. “The myriad things and myriad forms return to the one; whence do they emerge to arrive at the one? From nonexistence” (42). Commenting on the claim in the *Dàodéjīng* that “existence arises from nonexistence,” he says: “All things in the world arise by means of existence; as to where existence originates, it has nonexistence as its root. To complete existence, we must return to nonexistence” (40).

For Wáng, to say something is a “root” or “basis” is to say it is the source that produces things. Wáng holds that all things have “patterns” (*lǐ* 理) that “make them as they are.” Most likely, for him, these patterns are *dào*. But he sees this *dào* as neither existent nor nonexistent in Hé Yàn's sense of a primordial totality. Instead, for Wáng, “*dào* is a designation for nonexistence” in the sense of an absence or void (*Commentary on Analects* 7.6).

If *dào* is nonexistence—the absence of anything—how can it produce anything? Wáng's view on this question is not entirely clear. My conjecture is that one reason he considers *dào* nonexistent is that (a) he ties existence to the status of being a certain sort of entity, and (b) he regards *dào* not as an entity but as a pattern or the way things work or proceed.

Wáng purportedly said that “nonexistence cannot manifest itself but must rely on existence.” In his commentary on the *Dàodéjīng*, he says that just as what is high or noble is so through its relation to what is low or base, existence functions through its relation to nonexistence (40). The *Dàodéjīng* famously claims that although a vessel is made from clay, its utility as a container is due to the void within it (11). Wáng generalizes this point, claiming that the functioning of existent things depends on nonexistence (11).

Tentatively, then, I suggest that when Wáng says *dào* is nonexistence, he conceives of this nonexistence as providing the potential for use or function. Like other ancient Chinese thinkers, Wáng's conception of the structure of explanation would be in terms of analogical patterns and models, not scientific laws. But for illustration, we can suggest that for him *dào* is roughly like a designation for laws or patterns of nature. It does not exist as an entity—not even as a primordial, undifferentiated ground from which things arise. But it is the “source” of things insofar as it provides an explanation of how they arise and function.

Guō Xiàng: “Things thing themselves”

Guō Xiàng 郭象 (d. 312) introduces a new perspective on these issues. Guō agrees with Wáng that nonexistence (*wú*) simply is absence or nothing. But against Wáng, he contends that it cannot be the source of anything. By its very nature, nonexistence cannot generate existence.

Since non-existence is indeed non-existence, it cannot produce existence. [But] before existence is produced, nor can it produce anything else either. (Guo 1961, 50)

Looking back to the question raised in my title—can something come from nothing?—Guō’s answer is thus No. Moreover, from his outlook, the very idea that we need to explain the source or ground of existence is misguided. In effect, Guō’s view is that previous thinkers have committed a category mistake by trying to identify the origin of existence in general, let alone appealing to nonexistence to explain it. *Dào* is not nonexistence and is not the master cause of things. It is a mistake to posit any single, general “master” force, principle, process, or entity that causes the generation of things. Instead, the origin of existent things is to be explained on a case by case basis. The *dào* of nature lies in how individual things are produced by virtue of their own features.

So then that which produces production, what is it? Alone, [things] simply are produced of themselves.... So “nature” is a general name for the myriad things; no one thing filling the role of nature, who is the master that things obey? So things are each generated of themselves, without anything they issue from—this is the *dào* of nature. (Guo 1961, 50)

The whole idea of *dào* as a unified source—whether an entity, a causal process, or an abstract pattern—is a mistake, in effect a fallacy of composition. The “*dào* of nature” is simply a label for all the various ways in which things each arise “of themselves.” *Dào* is not something separate from the various things in the world, with special underlying causal powers.

Dào has no capacities. When [the *Zhuangzi*] speaks of getting [an achievement] from *dào*, this is just a means of explaining that [things] get it of themselves....All those who get it neither draw on *dào* as a source outside themselves nor have it come from a self within themselves, [but instead] suddenly independently transform in and of themselves. (251)

The generation or formation of things proceeds from factors inherent in each thing:

No thing things things; rather, things simply thing themselves. (753)

There is no first cause or source, nor any unifying pattern or process, that grounds the various causal chains:

Now we may know the causes of things and affairs proximate to us. But if we trace their origin to the limit, we find that they of themselves are as they are without any cause. Being so of themselves, we can no longer ask what causes them, but should accept them as they are. (496)

Guō is not hastily dismissing the fundamental question that previous thinkers and texts sought to answer about the origin of existence and its relation to *dào*. Rather, he is offering an account of causation to explain why this question is not well formed. When he claims that things are, as he says, “autogenerated” (自生) and “so of themselves” (自然), without any first cause or ultimate causal ground, he is not denying that causal relations obtain between things. He is making two points. First, all causal explanations come to an end, bottoming out in brute facts about how things simply happen to work, in and of themselves, because of their inherent causal powers.

If we seek what they depend on and search for where they come from, then the searching and seeking have no end, until we come to what is non-dependent, and then the patterns of independent transformation become clear. (III)

Second, although events have “proximal causes” (近因) that partly explain how things are as they are, Guō holds that it is only because of “what is so-of-itself of things” or “the master within” that outward “sources” act on things as they do (II2). For example, when a billiard ball moves after being struck, the movement is a “so-of-itself” reaction to being struck, which arises from the inherent features of the struck ball. Things are produced in various ways because of their “inherent nature” (*xìng* 性), which includes their causal dispositions. Guō’s view is that there is no deeper story to tell about the origins of things than that they interact according to their inherent nature. The *dào* of the natural world is just the overall pattern formed by what he calls the “independent transformations” (*dú huà* 獨化) of things, which arise from their inherent, dispositional causal powers.

This point brings us full circle to the ethical implications of questions about the grounds of existence. For Guō, *dào* lies in the “independent transformation” of things as driven by their inherent nature or character (*xìng*), manifested in so-of-itself (*zìrán* 自然) activity according to one’s endowed allotment (*fèn* 份) of abilities (*néng* 能). This account applies directly to human agents. So the ethical end, for him, is to simply to allow our inherent nature to manifest itself, “so-of-itself,” without interference.