

Effable and Ineffable in Early Chinese Discourse on *Dào*

Chris Fraser

Vice-Chancellor Visiting Professor

Chinese University of Hong Kong

August 2023

1. Introduction

A basic implication of the hermeneutic circle is that our understanding of claims about ineffability in some discourse must be predicated on an understanding of claims about effability. To interpret assertions we find in the *Zhuāngzǐ* that, for instance, “*dào* cannot be spoken” (道不可言, 22/62), we need to first grasp the significance of the claim that *dào* can be spoken. In this talk, I’ll first sketch some widely shared views in pre-Hàn thought according to which speech can indeed guide us in following *dào*, understood as the apt way or path of life or the concrete performance of such a way. I’ll then examine a series of pericopes from the *Zhuāngzǐ* that reject these views and present various reasons why *dào* cannot be articulated in speech. Finally, I’ll consider Daoist explanations of how, despite the supposed ineffability of *dào*, it is still possible to talk about it. What we will find is that, against the backdrop of prevailing pre-Hàn explanations of the functioning of “names” (*míng* 名) and “speech” (*yán* 言), apparently paradoxical formulations such as “an unspoken teaching” (不言之教) or “speech that doesn’t speak” (不言之言) are in fact readily intelligible.

2. Effable *Dào*

A widespread outlook in pre-Hàn thought—reflected especially in the *Mòzǐ*, but also in sections of *Xúnzǐ*, *Guānzǐ*, and *Lǚ’s Annals*, for example—assumes that we can follow the *dào* only by actively taking the initiative to do so according to explicit guidance, which can be provided through instructions and standards articulated in speech. Consistent with the non-representational orientation of early Chinese thought, the crux of this general outlook is not that *dào* can be captured or described in the principles of some theory, but that “names” (*míng* 名) and “speech” or “statements” (*yán* 言) can be used to give instructions or benchmarks by which to signpost and measure the performance of *dào*.

One example of this outlook is the Mohists’ emphasis on the role of speech (*yán*) in guiding conduct. The Mohists saw appropriate speech or statements as a reliable guide or signpost to following *dào*. Consequently, they were concerned to promulgate and make “regular” (*cháng* 常) speech or statements that brought conduct into line with the *dào* and to rebut speech or statements that, if applied to guide action, would lead people away from the *dào*. Their plan for educating the population to practice unified norms of judgment and conduct asks people to emulate not only moral leaders’ actions

but their speech, particularly how they draw action-guiding distinctions between what is *shì* 是 (this, right) and *fēi* 非 (not, wrong). Because of the role of speech (*yán*) in guiding conduct, it was assumed that, except in cases of insincerity, people's conduct (*xíng* 行) will align with their speech and so reforming speech is part of and a prerequisite for reforming conduct. How we distinguish *shì* from *fēi* in speech also expresses the norms of judgment we follow, so speech itself can be considered part of the performance of *dào*. To follow *dào* appropriately, one must speak appropriately.

Other examples of the action-guiding role of names and speech can be found in the discourse on “correct names” (*zhèng míng* 正名) that dominates early Chinese discussions of language. As the *Guānzǐ* “Prince and Ministers I” text says, “if names are correct and parts are clearly divided, the people are not confused about *dào*” (名正分明，則民不惑於道). Names—including common nouns, job titles, and “title” to goods—can be used to guide the practice of *dào* by clearly marking out “parts” or “divisions” (*fēn* 分、份) between objects, roles and responsibilities, allocations of privileges and goods, and so on. As long as names are reliably used to refer to the correct objects, speech in the form of maxims, instructions, laws, and edicts guides people in following *dào*. When names fail to be correct, one result is that, as the *Analects* famously says, penalties for straying from *dào* are no longer on target. In such circumstances, “the people have no place to put hand or foot” (民無所措手足, 13.3), as laws and commands no longer clearly mark out what is to be done or avoided.

This approach to the use of names to guide action rests on several presuppositions. One is that conduct can be guided—and thus *dào* can be signposted—through “constant” (*cháng* 常) or standing verbal maxims or guidelines, which apply consistently or regularly in different contexts. Accordingly, *dào* can be distinguished from non-*dào* in some “fixed” (*dìng* 定) or “constant” (*cháng*) way. Objects are distinguished from each other by such features as whether they share a similarity (*ruò* 若) or sameness (*tóng* 同) in their “shape” or “form” (*xíng* 形, *zhuàng* 狀) and their “looks” or “features” (*mào* 貌). By extension, even abstract notions such as “not doing” (不為) and being “unable” (不能) may be regarded as having a “shape” or “form” that distinguishes them. (See *Mencius* 1A:7 for an example.)

The relevant relations of sameness or difference are recognized through “distinguishing” (*biàn* 辨) and “distinction-drawing” (*biàn* 辯), two overlapping terms that cover judgment, assessment, and reasoning concerning what does or does not take some name. Objects and situations are “distinguished” as similar or different by comparing them to fixed, publicly recognized and promulgated “standards” or “models” (*fǎ* 法). Such standards improve the “constancy” (*cháng*) or consistency with which we distinguish the referents of names and thus follow *dào*. Knowledge lies in competence in drawing distinctions and on that basis using names correctly and following *dào* reliably.

Given these widespread background views, we can see a cluster of reasons why a text or thinker might have grounds for claiming that *dào* is ineffable. Doubts about whether *dào* has a determinate “form,” is constant and unchanging, is readily distinguishable from other, dissimilar things, or can be benchmarked by clear, fixed

standards may all provide reasons to hold that *dào* falls under no name or cannot be spoken. Unsurprisingly, these and related grounds turn up repeatedly in stories and conversations in the *Zhuāngzǐ* that unpack claims that *dào* cannot be articulated in speech. Section 3 considers pericopes that focus on the formlessness and indeterminacy of *dào*. Section 4 considers passages that focus on its resistance to explicit formulation and its protean, unfixed direction.

3. “*Dào* Can’t Be Spoken”

The allegorical story about Knowledge that opens “Knowledge Wandered North,” book 22 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, offers a relatively straightforward explanation of the claim that *dào* cannot be communicated, or as the text says, “presented” as an answer to inquiries (道不可致, 22/7). In the story, Knowledge asks three questions: What should we think in order to know *dào*, what practices should we pursue in order to settle in it, and what guidance can we follow to attain it? (22/2) The Yellow Emperor explains that sages grasp that *dào* cannot be communicated and so practice “an unspoken teaching” (不言之教). Accordingly, his response to the three questions is purely apophatic:

無思無慮始知道，無處無服始安道，無從無道始得道。

Have no thoughts, no deliberation, and you’ll start to know *dào*. Dwell nowhere, pursue no practices, and you’ll start to settle in *dào*. Follow nothing, take nothing as guidance, and you’ll start to attain *dào*. (22/5)

The reasoning behind this response seems to run roughly as follows. A widespread assumption in pre-Hàn thought was that any justifiable understanding of the *dào* of humanity will in some respect ground it in nature. For texts such as the Knowledge story, human life is already inherently part of the flow of nature. Indeed, as the Yellow Emperor explains, “all the world is connected into a single, unified vital breath” (通天下一氣耳, 22/13), and it is through the accumulation and dispersal of this “vital breath” (*qì* 氣) that we live and die. Sages value this “one” or “unity” (22/13) as *dào*, the “root” (根, 22/10) of all natural processes. So, for texts such as the Knowledge story, to follow *dào* just is to fall in with the overall course of the “one” or “totality” of the natural world. Accordingly, contrary to the views sketched in section 2, to follow *dào* there is literally nothing to do, and no explicit guidance is needed or can be given. Any attempt to articulate or delineate the “one” as a specific path or guideline falls short, for the unity excludes nothing and so cannot be specified as any particular set of guidelines or practices. *Dào* cannot be distinguished from other things. Consequently, the story suggests, we most closely approach *dào* when we are wholly unknowing of it and so do not attempt to formulate it in speech or to guide ourselves in deliberately following it. Grasping such points is to be genuinely “knowledgeable about speech” (知言, 22/16).

In another conversation in book 22, a character named Beginningless directly states that *dào* is ineffable:

道不可聞，聞而非也；道不可見，見而非也；道不可言，言而非也。知形形之不形乎？道不當名。

Dào can't be heard; what's heard isn't it. *Dào* can't be seen; what's seen isn't it. *Dào* can't be spoken; what's spoken isn't it. Do you know that what forms forms has no form? *Dào* fits no name. (22/62)

Complementing the Knowledge story, this conversation suggests that we “know” *dào* through “the knowing that doesn't know” (不知之知, 22/61). Unlike the views on names, speech, and *dào* surveyed in section 2, *dào* here is not a specified set of practices or norms but a fundamental source, process, or pattern that produces things with form while itself remaining formless. Since it is formless, it takes no name and cannot be spoken, as it cannot be distinguished by similarities or differences between its form and those of other things. The text goes on to explain that those who have an overview of the cosmos and grasp the “supreme beginning” (泰初) understand that *dào* is beyond the limit of questioning and that questions about it have no answers (22/64).

Another pericope in “Knowledge Wandered North,” a conversation between Confucius and Lǎo Dān, indicates that we can discuss how the unformed takes on form or the formed returns to the unformed, but such discussion does not reach to the underlying *dào*—the deeper cosmic process. With respect to *dào*, silence gets us closer than drawing distinctions or listening for guidance.

明見無值，辯不若默。道不可聞，聞不若塞。

Looking clearly, one will not encounter it, so silence is better than drawing distinctions. *Dào* can't be heard, so blocking the ears is better than listening. (22/41–43)

The thesis that discussion is confined within certain conceptual limits is elaborated further in a passage in the “Autumn Waters” dialogue. The dialogue critiques two metaphysical claims it attributes to inquirers of the time regarding what is absolutely small or large:

至精無形，至大不可圍。

The most minute has no form; the largest cannot be encompassed. (17/20–21)

The text contends that distinctions such as minute versus large are contextual, rather than absolute, and that both specify only things that “have form” (有形). The absolutely minute and the absolutely large would be formless (無形), such that they could not be “divided and counted” or “encompassed and enumerated” (17/23), presumably because they could not be picked out and distinguished from other objects. (If they could, then they would not be the absolutely smallest or largest things after all.) They thus exceed the limits of speech and thought:

可以言論者，物之粗也；可以意致者，物之精也；言之所不能論，意之所不能察致者，不期精粗焉。

What can be discussed in speech is the more sizeable among things; what

thought can reach is the more minute among things. What speech can't discuss and thought can't discern isn't specified as either minute or sizeable. (17/23–24)

To sum up, a common thread running through these contributions to early discourse on what can or cannot be spoken is that anything without a determinate, distinguishable form that marks it as distinct from other things is thereby beyond naming and speech. Since *dào* is either formless or is a totality that subsumes everything and so cannot be distinguished from things, it cannot be named or spoken.

These contentions about speech and *dào* support parallel claims about knowledge and *dào*. The mainstream pre-Hàn conception of knowledge is intertwined with explanations of the correct use of names. A prominent manifestation of knowledge is competence in consistently distinguishing which objects fall within the extension of which names. Since kinds of objects are typically recognized by their similar form (形) and other features (貌), there is a clear sense in which something without determinate form or features cannot be “known.” Presumably, however, one could still be aware of it and able to interact with it without knowing how to name it by picking out its form and features. So there is an unmysterious explanation of how the *dào* adept could be said to know *dào* by means of a kind of knowing that “doesn't know,” as conventionally construed.

4. Effable Tracks, Ineffable *Dào*

A further explanation for the ineffability of *dào* stems from the distinction between the living performance of *dào* and marks, records, or tracks of this performance. The mainstream view treats this distinction as insignificant. On the one hand, some proponents of the mainstream view may regard the use of spoken guidance and explicit standards (法) as part of the performance of *dào*. On the other, even if speech and other standards are merely aids to performing *dào*, the mainstream view deems them effective in guiding us to follow it. By contrast, for some *Zhuāngzǐ* texts, the gap between such indicators of *dào* and *dào* itself is critical. Marks or records of *dào* as performed by others are inadequate to prompt apt performance of *dào*. Even worse, they may be downright misleading, as they may have been responses to contextual factors that are no longer applicable. The *dào* itself may shift and turn as it proceeds.

The story of Wheelwright Biǎn distinguishes between the actual “art” (*shù* 術) manifested in apt performance and verbal records of or instructions about the performance. The story is introduced by a prelude that distinguishes between “form and appearance, names and sounds,” which can be expressed in speech, and the “facts” or “genuine character” (*qíng* 情) of things, which go beyond “form and appearance” and thus cannot be spoken.

語之所貴者，意也，意有所隨。意之所隨者，不可以言傳也....視而可見者，形與色也；聽而可聞者，名與聲也。悲夫！世人以形色名聲為足以得彼之情！

What is valuable in speech is thoughts. Thoughts have something they follow.

What thoughts follow cannot be transmitted in speech....What's visible when we

look is forms and appearances; what's audible when we listen is names and sounds. How sad, that people of the world take forms and appearances, names and sounds, to be enough to grasp the genuine character of things! (13/65–68)

The implication seems to be that names and speech are based on only selected features—form and appearance, for example—which are at most only part of the “facts” or “genuine character” of things. Through speech, then, we can never fully grasp the “facts” or “genuine character” of things. (This contention too is consistent with the mainstream views of naming sketched in section 2, which base the use of names on selected, shared features of objects, not on claims about their “genuine character.”) These remarks introduce the wheelwright story, in which Biǎn rudely dismisses the book his ruler, Duke Huán, is reading as merely “the dregs of ancient people.” Outraged at Biǎn’s impudence, Duke Huán demands that he either justify his comment or face execution. Biǎn responds that, just as in his own work, the crux of the ancients’ wisdom must have lay in practical arts that defy verbal communication.

臣也，以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣。

I look at it from my work. In chipping wheels, if you go too wide, it's too loose and not strong enough; too narrow, and it's too tight and won't fit. Not too wide, not too narrow—you feel it in the hand and respond from the heart. The mouth can't put it into speech; there's an art to it. I can't express it to my son, and my son can't receive it from me. (13/71–73)

The editorial conjunction of these passages suggests that among the underlying “facts” that go beyond “forms and appearances, names and sounds” include such things as the “art” (*shù* 術) of expertly performing some *dào*, such as crafting carriage wheels. For this reason, the wheelwright claims, the books of the sages that his master is reading are mere “dregs.” For “the people of antiquity are dead, along with what they could not transmit” (13/74).

The difference between the art, or expert performance itself, and what can be transmitted in speech is reflected again in a dialogue between Confucius and Lǎozǐ that distinguishes between the performance of *dào* and the “tracks” it leaves behind. Confucius complains to Lǎozǐ that despite his efforts to promulgate the *dào* of the former kings as recorded in the six classics, no ruler has adopted his teachings. Lǎozǐ responds that this outcome is fortunate, since following the six classics in the present circumstances would in fact be a mistake. The classics are merely the “worn tracks” of the sages, not the *dào* itself.

夫六經，先王之陳跡也，豈其所以跡哉！今子之所言，猶迹也。夫迹，履之所出，而迹豈履哉！

The six classics are the worn tracks of the former kings. How could they be what made the tracks? ...Tracks are produced by steps, but how could the tracks be

the steps? (14/77–78)

The practice of *dào* is a performance, the actual steps the sages took. The tracks left by the performance are not the performance itself. An implication is that *dào* cannot be recorded and transmitted in speech, as the resulting words will always be mere tracks of *dào*, not *dào* itself. In another Confucius-Lǎozǐ dialogue, Lǎozǐ explains that *dào* cannot be offered, presented, told, or given to others, because those who do not already grasp it simply cannot retain or practice it (14/47–50). Ethical norms such as benevolence and righteousness are mere “grass huts,” makeshift, temporary lodgings in which one might camp for a night but cannot dwell permanently (14/50–51). These norms at best mark out only the course the sages happened to take in some particular context in the past, not the underlying *dào* that led them to adopt that course, which might be manifested differently in a different context. The *dào* itself is a matter of “wandering in meandering emptiness” (14/52), being wholly responsive to the context without pursuing any fixed direction in particular.

These considerations suggest a further reason that *dào* might be considered ineffable: it is constantly shifting and changing without fixed boundaries. This factor is reflected in a conversation between Yì'érzǐ and Xǔ Yóu in *Zhuāngzǐ* book 6, “The Great Ancestral Master.” Yì'érzǐ reports to Xǔ Yóu that the sage-king Yáo instructed him to “devote yourself to benevolence and righteousness while clearly stating (*yán*) what is right and wrong” (6/83). Xǔ Yóu rejects this guidance as in effect mutilating our ability to follow *dào*, which is an “aimless and wild, unbound and uninhibited, turning and shifting path” (6/84), not a fixed, determinate course that can be “clearly stated.” The practice of *dào* is a matter of “wandering” along a meandering path, not deliberately pursuing an explicit, determinate course. As Xǔ Yóu explains, *dào* fulfills ethical ends such as “coordinating the myriad things” and “nourishing a myriad ages” (6/88–89), but it does so without explicitly “deeming” its actions “benevolent” or “righteous.” *Dào* is thus ineffable insofar as it cannot be “clearly stated” and its practice is not a matter of following fixed, explicit norms.

5. Speech that Doesn't Speak

If *dào* is ineffable, how do these *Zhuāngzǐ* writings manage to say so much about it? The sources present several explanations of how we can talk about an unspeakable *dào*. Indeed, they even introduce labels for the “teachings” of an ineffable *dào*. It is “a *dào* that doesn't *dào*” (不道之道)—a way that is not declared and does not guide or instruct—about which there is nevertheless “an unspoken teaching” (不言之教), dealing in “unspoken distinctions” (不言之辯). We can gesture toward these through “speech that doesn't speak” (不言之言) and grasp them through “knowing that doesn't know” (不知之知), alternative ways of indicating and understanding things that do not rest on the prevailing model of distinguishing and naming them.

How, then, can we speak of a *dào* that “fits no name”? The idea seems to be that we can talk about it through various nicknames, allusions, or indirect descriptions, provided that in doing so we do not purport to be naming it according to the standard

understanding of how names work. In other words, we mustn't purport to distinguish *dào* as a determinate object of some sort on the basis of fixed features that mark it as similar to other objects in some respects and different in others, which would allow us to pick it out in some "constant" or "regular" way. On this approach, even though we may speak of the *dào* of nature, it is understood that "*dào* 道" is not the name (*míng* 名) of this indeterminate, obscure, and chaotic source, process, or flow that drives everything along and from which everything arises. As *Dàodéjīng* section 25 famously says, we do not actually know the name of this formless, hazy, indistinct thing (see too DDJ 14 and 21). If forced, we can "style" it "*dào*," as the idea of a "way" reflects its workings. But the best we can do by way of giving it a name is to call it "the vastness" or "the totality."

有物混成，先天地生，寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天地母。吾不知其名，強字之曰道，強為之名曰大。

There is a thing formed of a fusion that arose before heaven and earth. Silent! Unformed! Independent of everything, it doesn't alter; proceeding everywhere, it never ceases; it can be taken as the mother of heaven and earth. We don't know its name; forced to style it, we say "*dào*"; forced to give a name for it, we say "the vastness." (DDJ 25)

The theme that "*dào*" is merely a convenient label for an indeterminably vast totality is explored at length in a *Zhuāngzǐ* dialogue between two figures named Know-Little and Great Impartial Accord. This use of "*dào*" is an instance of what the text calls "the doctrine of community," by which "we join different things to make something in which they're the same" (25/60). *Dào* includes everything impartially, and so, being distinct from nothing, it itself takes no name: "The myriad things have different patterns, but the *dào* is not partial to one or the other, and so it is nameless" (25/63). The *dào* of nature joins everything together into an unbounded vastness. "It is like a great forest in which a hundred kinds of timber all have their place" (25/65). We can use "*dào*" as a label for this vastness, much as we use "myriad things" (萬物) as a label for all the objects in the world. But just as the use of the arbitrarily large number "myriad" (ten thousand) does not imply there are exactly ten thousand objects in the world, the use of "*dào*" as a label implies nothing specific about the features of the totality (25/67).

因其大而號以讀之，則可也。已有之矣，乃將得比哉！則若以斯辯，譬猶狗馬，其不及遠矣。

It's acceptable to use this as a label to talk about it on the grounds of its vastness. But once we have the label, how can we take it as a basis for comparisons? For if we take this as a basis for drawing distinctions, analogous to how we distinguish dogs or horses, it falls far short. (25/69–69)

"*Dào*" is thus not a typical name like "dog" or "horse," picking out a kind of object distinguishable from other things. Rather, "the name '*dào*' is something we borrow to

use in practice” (道之為名，所假而行，25/80). (In the Mohist dialectical writings, a “borrowed”—*jiǎ* 假—name is one that is not actually the name of something.) Ordinary speech and knowledge—as understood along the lines of the mainstream model—can reach throughout the realm of “things” (物), but not to the source of things, where there are no things to name. “*Dào*” alludes to this “ultimate limit of things” (物之極), which is not a determinate thing itself and cannot be taken either to exist or not to exist. “Neither speech nor silence is adequate to convey it,” for it exhausts the limits of discussion (25/79–82). As one of the passages treating ineffability in “Knowledge Wandered North” puts it:

視之無形，聽之無聲，於人之論者，謂之冥冥，所以論道而非道也。
 Looked at, it is formless; listened for, it is soundless; those who discuss it with
 people call it dark obscurity—this is how we discuss *dào*, but it is not *dào*.
 (22/56–57)

We can offer various labels by which to discuss *dào*, provided we acknowledge that the labels and the discussion are not *dào* itself—they do not refer to it in the same way that “dog” refers to dogs and “horse” to horses.

Might there nevertheless be a way of conveying *dào* without purporting to pin it down in speech? *Dàodéjīng* sections 2 and 43 both mention the practice of an “unspoken teaching” (不言之教), which both associate with non-action (*wúwéi* 無為). (They thus hint that the sort of “action”—*wéi* 為—rejected by the text may refer specifically to a path directed by distinguishing the referents of names as used in action-guiding speech.) A number of *Zhuāngzǐ* passages also allude to an “unspoken teaching.” Particularly prominent is a section of “Discourse on Evening Things Out,” book 2 of *Zhuāngzǐ*, which remarks that “great *dào* isn’t declared; great distinctions aren’t spoken,” because *dào* that is explicit fails to guide, while distinctions drawn in speech fail to cover all cases (2/59). The text asks, “Who knows distinctions that aren’t spoken and a *dào* that doesn’t instruct as a *dào*?” (2/61) To know this, the text says, is to discover an inexhaustible resource from which to draw, “the treasury of nature” (2/61). Most likely, the implicit claim is that by giving up a particular conception of *dào* as guided by speech, we open ourselves to an endlessly adaptive, contextual source of guidance from nature.

One *Zhuāngzǐ* pericope, the bizarre tale of Confucius’s toast celebrating the sagely statesmen Sūnshú Áo and Shínán Yíliáo, elaborates on the notions of a *dào* that does not guide and distinctions that are unspoken. Confucius travels south to Chǔ, where the king holds a banquet in his honor, attended by Sūnshú Áo and Shínán Yíliáo. (The story is wholly fictional, as historically these figures actually lived in different eras.) Prompted to give a toast, Confucius declares that he will try to do so by speaking speech that does not speak (不言之言, 24/66). Here is the story’s example of such speech:

丘也聞不言之言矣，未之嘗言，於此乎言之。市南宜僚弄丸而兩家之難解，孫叔敖甘寢乘羽而郢人投兵。丘願有喙三尺。
 I have heard of speech that doesn’t speak but have never spoken it, so I’ll try to

speak some here. Shinán Yíliáo juggled balls and the difficulty between two houses was resolved; Sūnshú Áo had a pleasant nap holding a feather fan and the people of Chǔ laid down their arms. I wish I had a mouth that went on and on. (24/66–68)

The text follows these puzzling remarks with the equally puzzling comment that “that there is called a *dào* that does not *dào*; this here is called distinctions that aren’t spoken” (24/68). Although the antecedents of “that” and “this” are not obvious, one plausible interpretation is that “that” refers to the two statesmen, “this” to Confucius’s words. Shinán and Sūnshú are both said to have brought peace to the realm through the influence of their character, rather than by offering explicit teachings. Shinán reportedly resolved a conflict by calmly juggling at a pivotal moment, rather than speaking. Sūnshú is reported to have governed so effectively that he could nap midday without fear of attack from rival states. So a plausible, albeit tentative interpretation is that the two exemplify how to find an apt *dào* without following or promulgating any explicit guidance regarding *dào*. By merely pointing to the pair as exemplars, rather than explicitly commenting on them, Confucius is offering “distinctions that aren’t spoken,” from which we can nevertheless learn about sagely conduct. Confucius wishes he could say more, but to do so would go beyond “distinctions that aren’t spoken.”

However we interpret these difficult lines, the text goes on to offer grounds to explain the idea of a *dào* that does not guide and distinctions that are unspoken. As in the story of Knowledge wandering north treated in section 3, the crux is that *dào* is an unfathomably vast, boundless unity, which cannot be known in terms of the prevailing conception of knowledge as an ability to pick out and name things.

故德總乎道之所一，而言休乎知之所不知，至矣。道之所一者，德不能(同)[周]也；知之所不能知者，辯不能舉也。名若儒墨而凶矣。

So the ultimate is for Virtue to assimilate to what *dào* unifies as one, while speech stops at what knowing doesn’t know. What *dào* unifies as one, Virtue cannot encompass; what knowing cannot know, distinction-drawing cannot present in speech. To name things as the Ruists and Mohists do is dangerous. (24/68–69)

The text makes the by now familiar point that *dào* is a “comprehensive vastness” (大備者) which is beyond knowing, as conventionally conceived, and so cannot be articulated in speech or identified through distinction-drawing (that is, through cognition, judgment, or reasoning). It is thus a *dào* that can’t be taught and offers no explicit guidance (不道之道). Yet it can be recognized or understood through a kind of tacit, unspoken distinction-drawing (不言之辯), and it can be roughly indicated by alluding to it through examples or analogies, as long as in doing so we do not purport to “mention” (舉) it, or present a model for it in speech. Indicating it in this way is “speaking without speech” (不言之言). Influencing others through one’s own good example of adaptive, contextually fitting conduct, without offering explicit teachings, is “unspoken teaching” (不言之教), which issues from “knowing that doesn’t know” (不知之知). To sum up, each

of these paradoxical sounding phrases can be decoded as alluding to a mode of understanding and indicating *dào* that diverges from prevailing pre-Hàn explanations of knowledge and speech—and so is “unspoken” and beyond “knowledge”—yet is readily comprehensible.

6. Conclusion

If we consider mainstream early Chinese discourse about naming and the role of names and speech in articulating and guiding the performance of *dào*, it is easy to understand why some early texts might claim that *dào* has no name, cannot be spoken, and indeed cannot be “*dào*-ed,” or promulgated and followed as a *dào*. Such claims implicitly allude to a rough, widely shared model of how names and speech function and how they relate to *dào*. Against the backdrop of that model, they contend that *dào* cannot be named or spoken. Two reasons the sources mention repeatedly are that *dào* is formless, and so lacks the basic features needed to name it, and that *dào* is a totality subsuming everything within it, and so cannot be distinguished from other things and compared with them in any way. These contentions leave room for alternative understandings of how we might talk about and indicate *dào*, some of which seem to be adopted in the sources. For example, without implying *dào* has any fixed form and without purporting to specify how it contrasts with other things, we can allude to it roughly or indirectly, in terms of its functions (“root” 根, “source” 宗) or features (“confused and hazy” 恍惚, vast 大), or we can describe it apophatically, indicating how it lacks features associated with mundane objects.

Typically, the underlying point of claims about the ineffability of *dào* is not merely that it cannot be delineated or marked out but that explicit maxims, standards, or descriptions fall short of guiding us to follow or interact with it. This point is clear from the questions considered in the “Knowledge Wandered North” conversation (see section 3 above), which concern what guidance to apply in understanding, practicing, and mastering *dào*. The primary concern is practical, not representational: talking about *dào* cannot lead us to act adeptly. In the end, much Daoist discourse about the ineffability of *dào* comes down to the familiar point that nothing others say can directly convey the path to proceed along or prompt us to undertake it competently. In this respect, the ineffability of *dào* is analogous to that of riding a bicycle. No explicit descriptions of bicycle design or instructions about technique can convey precisely how to do it. Nor can they directly enable a new rider to hop on and pedal away. Each of us must learn the art (*shù* 術) for ourselves.