

# Inversions, Leftovers, and Hazy, Indistinct Stuff

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## I. Introduction

Let me thank David Chai for organizing and Brook Ziporyn and the other speakers for contributing to this very stimulating workshop. Personally, I think that despite having studied the *Dàodéjīng* for about 40 years, I don’t understand it very well at all. So I’m extremely pleased to hear and learn from other colleagues’ interpretations and honored to have the opportunity to contribute a few thoughts of my own.

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To prepare for this roundtable, I began reading an essay that billed itself as interpreting a “minimally discernible position” found in the *Dàodéjīng*.<sup>1</sup> I expected a quick read, after which I’d type up a few remarks in response.

It turns out that the “minimal” interpretation Brook presents is extensive, nuanced, and complex enough that it could probably constitute the backbone of its own book. What’s more, its substance is nearly as elusive as that of the *Dàodéjīng* itself. I started wondering if I’d misunderstood the title. Perhaps “minimally discernible” didn’t mean “simple and relatively clear,” but something more like, paraphrasing *Dàodéjīng* 14 and 21, “Hazy! Obscure! There are signs in there, but of no thing in particular!”

Brook’s essay adopts a modest tone—as befits any approach to the *Dàodéjīng*, the most recondite of subjects—yet is in fact deeply ambitious, as it subtly develops a wide-ranging and not at all minimalist interpretation of this wonderfully vague, shifting album of writings. Given the project’s ambitious aims, a critical response should focus on the big picture, I suggest, and avoid quibbling with the details. This broader framing seems especially called for given the nature of Brook’s essay as I understand it. I see him as examining the *Dàodéjīng* here through what I think of as a Cubist approach, like that of an artist who perceives a profusion of dimensions and relations in his subject and tries to fit them all into a single view at once. It runs against the spirit of the project to pick out a brush stroke here or there and complain that they don’t line up with each other.

What’s more, in attending to points of disagreement, we inevitably divert our gaze from what may actually be extensive underlying agreement. This feature of critical discussion is another instance of the contrastive relation between our purposive focus and the neglected remainder to which Brook calls attention. The positive side of such critical engagement, of course, is that each discussant’s

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<sup>1</sup> Brook Ziporyn, “Interpreting the Daodejing: “The Minimally Discernible Position.” Downloaded from <https://voices.uchicago.edu/ziporyn/interpreting-the-daodejing-the-minimally-discernible-position-supplement-to-liveright-edition-2023/>.

perspective may offer more of the unnoticed, leftover side of things and so may enrich our overall understanding.

In this modest spirit, then, I'll tentatively suggest what seem to be a few points of divergence in our approaches to the *Dàodéjīng* that perhaps might help us clarify different ways of reading or approaching this deceptively brief, deeply manifold ancient collection of remarks and ruminations.

I'll offer two main points.

First, I'll raise some concerns about how Brook relates contrastive valued/unvalued "A-B" pairings to the concept of *dào* and suggest a different way of tying them together, on which *dào* doesn't correspond to the unvalued, "B" term in exactly the way Brook proposes.

Second, I'll suggest that ultimately the *Dàodéjīng* does posit the existence of an underlying master *dào* or "great *dào*" that explains the reversion or inversion of value distinctions, although this *dào* does not and cannot provide any specific guidance.

## 2. "Reversal is the Movement of *Dào*"

The trailhead from which Brook sets off is the *Dàodéjīng*'s familiar reversal or inversion of values. As he points out, this is a salient, recurring structural feature of many passages in the text. Given the collage-like nature of this "masters" text, the plurality of the threads of thought it presents, and the likely diversity of its sources, we need not assume that this feature reflects a unique, coherent, tightly formulated position to be ascribed to all parts of it. But it is certainly a prominent motif in many parts.

By my count, there are easily over two dozen sections of the *Dàodéjīng* that play in some way on the themes that opposites arise together, and so in a sense to pursue some value is at the same time to produce its opposite (§§2, 13); or that the apt course may sometimes be the reverse of received, prevailing values (§§19, 20); or that, since pursuing some aim to excess can result in an inverse outcome (§§9, 29, 57), the way to achieve some positive outcome may be to temporarily take up a reverse course (§§7, 66). Some *Dàodéjīng* passages imply that a judicious path may be to balance two contrasting features against each other. Some perhaps imply that giving up an original contrastive pairing opens up a richer source of value.

These passages call attention to how any way of framing values or ends contrasts with some disvalue and creates a reciprocal, conceptual dependence on it. As Brook says, "wherever something is foregrounded," being singled out as an object of value or desire, "something else is neglected, becoming background" (p. 2). To focus on some value is inevitably to leave behind a remainder that might itself be said to have value as well, insofar as it delineates and sustains what is taken as valuable. At the same time, any such focus leaves open other perspectives that may, in their own way, present alternative values.

On this view, in a sense, nothing is always or ultimately of value in and of itself, as value is always contrastive. Value is also contextual, since contrastive values will shape action differently from context to context.

### 3. The Leftover and the Unhewn

Brook refers to the recurring valued/unvalued or wanted/neglected contrast as “A” versus “B.” Since a value is conceptualized as a favored “A” picked out of a whole and distinguished from the remainder, “B,” he suggests that the inversion of received values amounts to a process of prompting us to attend to the neglected, leftover portion.

This category of “the leftover” is constantly present. It amounts to an indeterminate, undivided background from which we pick out the objects of value. It is also the conceptual category to which everything returns when it slips from our attention. In the context of classical Daoist thought, these three roles resemble that of the raw or unhewn material (*pú* 樸) from which we “carve out” the implements (*qì* 器) we use in purposive activity. Some *Dàodéjīng* passages either identify or closely associate the unhewn with *dào*. As Brook develops the contrast motif, then, the unvalued side, “B,” exemplifies features associated with *dào*. Specifically, he proposes that the conception of “B-as-the-leftover” corresponds to the notion of the unhewn and accordingly to *dào*. On this interpretation, the *dào* of the *Dàodéjīng* is precisely the non-*dào* that is left over or excluded from any purposive *dào* in the prevailing, conventional sense of a course of activity agents undertake to follow, expressing and realizing values and ends that they affirm.

I want to resist this move to identify the leftover with the unhewn and with *dào*.

It’s uncontroversial, I think, that the *Dàodéjīng* is critiquing the stance that *dào* can be fixed in a “constant” form as the “A” side of any “A” versus “non-A” dichotomy. No “A” is a constant *dào*—either “B” is sometimes also *dào* in turn, or “B” is a source of “A,” or “B” is sometimes a means of “A,” and so on.

Brook moves from this uncontroversial observation to the suggestion that the non-“A” side, “B,” is the unhewn, or *dào* in the sense of the original, uncarved un-thing. He slides subtly from (i) the analogy that “B” is the part of the undifferentiated whole left over when agents carve out what they take to be of value to (ii) speaking of “B” itself as the “unhewn” and thus identifying it with the underlying, undifferentiated *dào*.

Let me suggest instead that both “A” and “B” are jointly the product of agents’ purposive differentiation of things. When the *Dàodéjīng* calls attention to the reciprocal, unvalued side of action-guiding distinctions, the point is not that the “B” side is *dào* in a sense that “A” is not. It is to prompt us to notice the three-way relation between the favored “A” side, the leftover “non-A,” and the original, unformed unity out which both are carved. We are to notice that both the “A” and “non-A” categories are constructed through our purposive activity. Neither is fixed by the undifferentiated, pre-purposive world.

Consider the analogy of a drawing. If the valued “A” aspect is the figure and “B” is the ground, Brook is calling attention to the role of the ground, pointing out that without the ground, there is no figure. He then further suggests that the ground is *dào*.

My alternative view is that the ground is just as much a product of our purposive action as the figure is. What I see as the unhewn *dào*-source isn’t the

ground against which we recognize the figure. It's the blank canvas underlying both. *Dào* isn't the leftover but the whole—the result of dissolving both “A” and “B” back into whatever undivided, indeterminate stuff was there prior to any distinction being drawn between them. It encompasses not only the negative space in the picture but all the space.

This different view of the unhewn is why I eschew certain implications Brook draws from the reciprocal A/B structure.

When he suggests that *dào* is the glorification of the “B” side of things, of the non-valued or of purposelessness (p. 6), I suggest that the text probably isn't glorifying “B,” since to do so would simply be to promote whatever is “B” to the valued, “A” status.

The gist of the reversals, I think, isn't so much to promote “B” as an alternative to “A” but to underscore that there is no “constant” *dào*. Whatever *dào* we start off by affirming, there will be circumstances in which the apt path may run contrary to it. The crux—about which I think we agree—is that the recurring A/B structure expresses the *Dàodéjīng*'s critique of what Brook calls “the exclusive structure of purpose,” the fact that any defined purpose inevitably excludes some leftover “B” (p. 27). The critique is that this structure generates a defective conception of *dào*. Because of what it excludes from the picture, any exclusivist pursuit of “A” is incomplete and likely to fare less well than a path discovered through a broader view of how “A” and “B” jointly arise out of, interact with, and eventually merge back into the unhewn. Accordingly, in practice, the judicious course may be to notice the interplay between opposing values and to remain open to finding our way along by reversing or inverting our path. As Brook says, “The real way to attain value is through what we don't value, the real way is an anti-way, the real fulfillment of purpose lies in letting go of purpose” (p. 3).

#### 4. “As a Thing, *Dào* is Hazy and Indistinct”

Building on this remark, a question I want to probe further is: what makes the anti-way the “real” way? Is there a conception of an underlying, authoritative *dào* in play here? Does the *Dàodéjīng* posit a master *dào* that is “the” *dào*, rather than merely some *dào* or other?

Considering these questions may lead to a different perspective on the interplay of positive and negative values. Brook's discussion frames the issues mainly as an examination of the structure of value and purpose. This is one defensible approach. However, I propose an alternative angle that frames the issues specifically in terms of the concept of *dào*. This framing focuses on relations, analogies, and metaphors tied to the notion of a way, course, or path. In the context of pre-Han thought, I suggest, value distinctions are articulations of particular *dào* that agents follow. To affirm a value is to proceed along a certain *dào*, going one way rather than another. Values are by-products of and ways of articulating paths: go *this* way, not *that* way. Value distinctions are formed through the expression of agency in undertaking paths. The reversal or inversion of values, then, is produced by shifting among or weaving back and forth along paths.

The *Dàodéjīng*'s exploration of the nature of value distinctions and of how they

can be inverted arises in the context of what we might call “*dào* discourse,” in which various thinkers and texts address questions about the nature of *dào*, what the appropriate *dào* is, how to justify it, how to follow it, and so on. In this context, the *Dàodéjīng* can be interpreted as presenting a critique of prevailing conceptions of *dào*—and thus values and norms—while offering an alternative approach to *dào*. We can think of this alternative approach as a critically aware, second-order *dào* of *dào*—a way of constructing and following ways, or perhaps a way that shapes and sustains other ways.

As Brook’s discussion reflects, because of the critical, reflective nature of this discourse, different contributions to it may use the word “*dào*” in multiple ways. In some contexts, for example, “*dào*” seems to refer to *dào*-as-followed-in-one-instance-or-another. In others, it may be, roughly, *dào*-as-a-whole, in its ultimate generality, as all paths or any path one might take or as the process of following any path. In still others, such as the cosmogenic remarks in *Dàodéjīng* 25, perhaps it refers to a reified conception of the actual, overall course of the world as a whole. There may be other uses as well. Moreover, in some contexts “*dào*” may be used normatively, rather than descriptively, as the apt path to follow rather than merely some actual path.

On this *dào*-focused approach, both the valued and the unvalued—any purposive path and the surrounding landscape—are divided out of what we can think of as a non-purposive “*dào*-field,” corresponding to the “unhewn,” to the hazy, obscure “thing” that is *dào* in §21, and to the unnamed, “muddled,” omnipresent thing that is “styled” “*dào*” in §25, and the “great” *dào* of §34. I suggest that various passages ascribe to this underlying *dào*-field an authoritative status as a general, ultimate path. This authoritative status explains why, as Brook says, “the real way is an anti-way.” The explanation is that through an anti-way, we most fully merge with, respond to, or draw on this authoritative *dào*.

How? Although it is unhewn, and thus not carved up into specific paths to follow, the *dào*-field apparently presents various channels or directions of flow. This claim seems implied by a line in §32, among other passages:

譬道之在天下，猶川谷之於江海。

*Ziporyn*: “The course is present throughout the world, / just as the stream’s surge to the valley / is there / in the river’s surge to the sea.”

*Fraser*: *Dào* is present in the world analogous to how streams and valleys flow into rivers and seas.

Although Brook and I interpret it somewhat differently, on both of our readings, this passage implies that *dào* is present in the world as a kind of flow relation, “like the relation of streams and valleys to rivers and seas.”

Let me tentatively label this flow relation the “pathfulness” of the world. I take the pathfulness to be the underlying, unnamed, whatever-it-is that sustains various particular paths we might follow. What I earlier called the *dào*-field is characterized by its pathfulness.

The distinctive place of the *Dàodéjīng* in the history of thought may lie in how it reifies this pathfulness into a hazy, indistinct “unthing”—in effect a *dào* of *dào*, or the

underlying, nonpurposive “flow-field” out of which particular *dào*-paths are formed.

Like a landscape with various ridges and channels, watersheds and basins, subject to changes of weather and seasons, this field may support an indeterminately large range of paths. As Brook remarks, “The opposite of a world dominated by a single purpose is...not a world with no purpose, but a world manifesting the coexistence of many purposes” (p. 27). Just as in a physical landscape, however, some paths or channels may flow more smoothly than others.

The connection to the reversal of values is that we may sometimes find a way to flow along more smoothly if we refrain from aggressively delineating and pursuing any one path or other and instead open ourselves to letting the pathfulness draw us along what Brook calls an “anti-way.” The winding, meandering nature of the streams and valleys, the cyclical nature of the weather, and other factors exert causal effects entailing that, often, “reversal is the movement of *dào* 反者道之動” (§40). The *dào*-field underlies both of any contrasting “A” and “B,” explaining why “B” may sometimes flow more smoothly than “A,” and why there are probably always alternatives to “A,” “B,” and both “A” and “B.”

In practice, this understanding of the *dào*-field might lead us to adopt a light touch both to any particular value and to its antithesis. We might consider *dào* to be a matter of doing nothing in particular beyond feeling out the direction of flow in particular circumstances. By letting go of specific purposes, we tap back into the raw pathfulness of the *dào*-field and may discover unexpected paths forward, as when an agent committed to some “A” approach unexpectedly discovers themselves instead pursuing “B.”

## 5. “Knowing Constancy” 知常

The *dào*-field is a *dào* in a very general sense, insofar as it sustains various paths, while not being any specific *dào*, insofar as it provides no fixed direction or guidance. We can think of it as what the *Zhuāngzǐ* calls *dào* that doesn’t *dào* (不道之道). I suggest it is also what in *Zhuāngzǐ* is sometimes referred to as the “ancestor-source” (宗). Let’s call a *dào* that doesn’t *dào* an “un-*dào*.” In the dialectic of early Chinese thought, the un-*dào* of the *Dàodéjīng* provided the basis for a sceptical critique of positive, proactive conceptions of *dào*. In the discourse of the time, multiple other schools of thought claimed special authority for their *dào*, typically conceived of as a “constant” or “regular” (*cháng* 常) *dào*. Through its account of how no *dào* is constantly, invariably applicable, such that it can always be followed, the *Dàodéjīng* provides grounds for rejecting all such claims. Only the *dào*-field is “the” *dào*, that of the world itself, but it is a *dào* that cycles and reverses, not something we can signpost and follow as a “constant,” “regular” *dào*. The pathfulness of the world is such that attempts to impose a “constant” *dào* on it collapse, if for no other reason than that agents who proactively attempt to follow a constant *dào* eventually pass away themselves. No determinate, purposive *dào* can amount to a “regular,” invariably or absolutely justified *dào*.

Still, certain *Dàodéjīng* passages do valorize a form of “constancy.” They do not purport to advocate a “constant *Dào*.” But §16 indicates that by “returning to the root” (歸根), we attain a stillness by which we “return to the mandate” (*mìng* 命) and come

to “know constancy.” Knowing constancy then yields “accommodation” (*róng* 容) and “impartiality” (*gōng* 公). §28 ties “constant Virtue” (常德) to returning to being childlike, returning to the “boundless” (無極), and returning to “the unhewn.” A plausible interpretation may be that these remarks characterize a sort of stable, open, responsiveness to the raw pathfulness of the underlying *dào*-field. This orientation toward what I’ve been calling the “un-*dào*” can’t be articulated in “names” (名) or “speech” (言). It can’t be purposively followed by exerting one’s agency (為), applying wisdom or know-how (知、聖), or pursuing desires (欲). It can’t be signposted using fixed, explicit models (法), norms, virtues, and so forth. To the contrary, the *Dàodéjīng* indicates that by exerting agency, applying know-how, or undertaking to follow fixed norms, we lose it. It cannot be formulated as a *dào* to follow.

To orient ourselves to the underlying, ultimate *dào*, then, as Wáng Bì 王弼 says (commentary on §32), one must maintain an unhewn state (*shǒu pú* 守樸). To do so is to pursue no values, neither undertaking, desiring, or knowing anything (*wú wéi* 無為, *wú yù* 無欲, *qì zhì* 棄智). And of course a fundamental tension in the *Dàodéjīng* is that one cannot actively advocate this approach as a *dào*—nor undertake to follow it—because to distinguish any determinate formulation or conception of *dào* whatsoever—even an apophatic one—is already to cut up the *dào*-field and direct us one way rather than another, thus excluding certain possibilities for adapting to shifting contexts or noticing reversals or alternatives. Any path we settle on tends to obscure our connection to the raw, unbounded pathfulness; to undertake any particular *dào* is to obstruct our openness to the “great” *dào* (大道). This is the aporia at the heart of the *Dàodéjīng*, which we are still puzzling over more than two millennia after the text was compiled.