

Nothingness of *Dao* in the *Daodejing*: A Mereological Interpretation

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Abstract

This article is based on my mereological reconstruction of the Daoist metaphysical system, as presented in the *Daodejing*. I conceptualize the *Dao* and *you* relationship as a relationship between Unrestricted Composition (for any entities, there is a composition that they make) and Restricted Composition (what is an entity is determined by finite composition rules) respectively. This conceptualization, among other things, makes it possible to address the way in which *Dao* is described as *wu*—nothingness or non-being. In this article, I will show that *Dao* as the ultimate reality in Daoist metaphysics is not an ontological nothingness and discuss how this “nothingness characteristic” can be mereologically reconstructed and explained. I will discuss the interpretation of *Dao* in terms of Mereological Nihilism (according to which there are only mereological simples that do not have parts and are not parts of any complex entities), Unrestricted Composition, and consider an option in which mereology is confined exclusively to relationships between parts. I will also discuss how the nothingness aspect of *Dao* can be viewed from a stuff ontology perspective, which questions the ontological standing of parts.

Keywords: nothingness, mereology, Daoist metaphysics, Chinese metaphysics

Ničnost *Dao* v *Daodejing*: mereološka interpretacija

Izvleček

Ta članek temelji na moji mereološki rekonstrukciji daoističnega metafizičnega sistema, kot je predstavljen v *Daodejing*. Razmerje med *Dao* in *you* pojmujem kot razmerje med neomejeno sestavo (za vse entitete obstaja sestava, ki jo tvorijo) in omejeno sestavo (kaj je entiteta, določajo končna pravila sestave). Ta konceptualizacija med drugim omogoča obravnavo načina, na katerega je *Dao* opisan kot *wu* – ničnost ali nebivanje. V svoji predstavitvi pokažem, da *Dao* kot končna realnost v daoistični metafiziki ni ontološka ničnost, ter razpravljam o tem, kako je mogoče to »značilnost ničnosti« mereološko rekonstruirati in pojasniti. Obravnavam interpretacijo *Dao* v smislu mereološkega nihilizma (po katerem obstajajo le mereološke enostavne entitete, ki nimajo delov in niso deli nobenih kompleksnih entitet), neomejene sestave, in razmišljam o

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možnosti, da je mereologija omejena izključno na odnose med deli. Obravnavam tudi, kako je mogoče videti ničnost *Dao* s perspektive ontologije snovi, ki postavlja pod vprašaj ontološki status delov.

Ključne besede: ničnost, mereologija, daoistična metafizika, kitajska metafizika

Introduction

This article discusses how *wu* 無 as described in the *Daodejing*, can be understood in terms of nothingness. This discussion is largely motivated by the juxtaposition of *you* 有 and *wu*, the former usually conceptualized as being or what exists, whereas the latter, partly by way of opposition, is identified with or located in proximity to an ontological nothingness. In my article, I address the nothingness of *wu* from a mereological perspective. I base my discussion on my mereological reconstruction of the Daoist metaphysical system as described in the *Daodejing*. Accordingly, I conceptualize the two subregions that constitute the Daoist metaphysical universe—*Dao* and *you*—as Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Composition, respectively.¹ According to Unrestricted Composition (otherwise known as Unrestricted Fusion or Mereological Universalism), for any entities, there is a composition that they make. In other words, any entities form a complex entity, or a whole, of which they are exclusive parts.² According to Restricted Composition, composition is determined by one or a finite number of composition rules, which determine the way in which parts are arranged.³ For instance, on the physical adherence of entities rule, an analogue watch movement is a composition, whereas the Solar System is a composition according to the rule of gravity relationships. The two complex entities will not be compositions if one swaps the composition rules for each other. However, both these entities, and in fact any arrangement of entities, are compositions according to Unrestricted Composition.

The dynamic character of the Daoist model is located in a relationship between *dao* and *you*. I conceptualize this relationship as a mereological overlap, which consists in sharing parts between entities. In the Daoist model, the whole of *you* overlaps with at least a portion of *Dao*. The dynamic *Dao*'s production of *you*,

1 A detailed account of this reconstruction can be found in Banka (2018).

2 A similar definition can be found in Lewis (1991, 7, 74). For formal versions see, for instance Varzi (2019; 2007, 24).

3 Composition rules are formulated as an answer to the “Special Composition Question” proposed by Peter van Inwagen: “What necessary and jointly sufficient conditions must any *xs* satisfy for it to be the case that there is an object composed of those *xs*?” (Markosian 2008, 342). For the discussion about formulating the question and a formal version of the question, see van Inwagen (1990, 21–31).

as well as the persistence and cessation of *you* are reflected as the volume of the overlap, which ranges from zero to complete.⁴

I believe that this mereological framework for Daoist metaphysics offers a fine-grained insight into the characteristics of the Daoist metaphysical model.⁵ This also helps in examining how *wu* is related to an ontological nothingness, or the reason for associating *wu* with a more broadly construed nothingness or its aspects. I believe that viewing this characteristic of *dao* in terms of parthood relationships can offer some plausible solutions to be considered.

I begin my discussion with an analysis of the metaphysical characteristics of *wu*, to form an intermediate interpretation of how *wu* can be situated in relation to the ontological nothingness. In the next section, I will demonstrate how *wu* can be viewed in a mereological way. I will show that we can entertain three possible scenarios: (a) Mereological Nihilism, (b) Unrestricted Composition, and (c) a mereology without upper bounds. Additionally, I will consider a case in which the ultimate reality is ontological matter, which might serve to explain the nothingness of *wu*. In the final remarks, apart from conclusion, I will mention what other aspects of Daoist metaphysics can be mereologically explored.

The Metaphysical Characteristics of *Wu*

In this section, I concentrate on how *wu* can be related to the ontological and more generally construed notions of nothingness. I set out from the notion that *wu* is an aspect of *Dao*—the ultimate level of reality in the Daoist metaphysical model.

Proceeding to discussing *wu*, let us first delineate a distinction between ontological nothingness and nothingness more generally construed (hereafter simply “nothingness”). Ontological nothingness refers to what cannot exist in any way. Since the Daoist metaphysical universe constitutes a reflection of the “one-world view”—a world without transcendence—which is consistent with a large part of Chinese philosophy, ontological nothingness can be further specified as referring to what cannot exist spatiotemporally. Apart from non-existence, one cannot offer another account of ontological nothingness—not because, for instance,

4 I discuss how the liminal states of *Dao* and *you* overlap can be interpreted in Banka (2022).

5 For some more detailed discussions that are focused on specific issues, see Banka (2018; 2023). Also, the possibility of a mereological reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics is proposed by Chad Hansen in *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (1983). The argument is constructed from a linguistic angle in postulating a semantics of the Chinese language founded on a mereological conceptualization of reality (Hansen 1992, 48, 48n†). On this view, reality is composed of interpenetrating stuffs, which are classified as mereological objects (Hansen 1983, 35). More broadly, this proposal can be situated among recent approaches to Daoist metaphysics. For a brief account of these, see Zhao (2022, 197–98).

ontological nothingness evades systematic ontological accounts, or cannot be cognized—but due to that it does not exist.

A more general concept of nothingness differs from ontological nothingness in that it refers to entities that evade systematic accounts.⁶ In other words, nothingness as a concept encapsulates entities that exist or can exist, but are significantly different from what is typically regarded as an existing entity.

The above differentiation can be illustrated by two types of negation proposed by Władysław Stróżewski: crossing-out and differentiating. The former eliminates the referent of a concept or proposition. In this case, the referent is nothing, otherwise non-being (*nie-byt*). The latter indicates that apart from the negated referent there is something different—nonbeing (*niebyt*). Accordingly, the crossing-out negation refers to ontological nothingness. Regarding the differentiating negation, it refers to the result of this very negation. For instance, the non-being of a burnt house are its ruins. They are clearly not the house and are different from the house as the house's nonbeing (Stróżewski 2003, 167–68). Hence, the second type of negation refers to something that exists.

As previously mentioned, *wu* can be conceptualized as an aspect of the fundamental level of reality in the Daoist model. Therefore, my discussion begins by viewing nothingness in terms of ontological dependence, which I believe to be most natural in a further conceptualization of *wu*.

Dao, as the fundamental reality level, is ontologically prior to *you*. In Chapter 1, *Dao* is described as “the beginning of all things [萬物]” (Chan 1969, 139). In this sense, *Dao* is prior to what one can conceptualize as the world, which is made of concrete entities.⁷

The ontological priority of *Dao* consists in being temporally antecedent to the world and being more ontologically fundamental. Regarding the former, evidence can be found in Chapter 25:

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth. (Chan 1969, 152)⁸

What is of greater importance for our discussion is the latter priority, according to which *Dao* is more fundamental by way of being the material from which

6 Such entities can be, for instance, entities that have no properties or/and cannot be cognized.

7 I will conceptualize this further in mereological terms in the next section.

8 Considering that Daoist metaphysics, as well as the Chinese metaphysical tradition in general, does not assume a metaphysical “time zero”, which stands for the beginning of the universe, the temporal antecedence is not absolute but rather relative in the process of an incessant transformation of the universe.

everything is made. This characteristic is probably best encapsulated in the following simile from Chapter 28:

When the uncarved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things
(as *Tao* is transformed into the myriad of things). (Ibid., 154)

Analogously with wooden objects made from wood, the world of concrete entities is produced from and persists thanks to *Dao*. This description of *Dao*'s ontological priority also shows in what sense *Dao* is viewed in terms of nothingness. *Dao* is not an ontological nothingness that temporally precedes the origination of concrete entities. *Dao*'s nothingness aspect consists in being undifferentiated in comparison with concrete entities, whose forms are finite and hence definite.

Further confirmation for this understanding of *Dao* as nothingness can be found in Chapter 41, where *Dao*, among other things, is described as the “great square with no corners” (ibid., 160). The great square is not bereft of any corners, but quite the opposite—it has all the corners that can be actualized as concrete square-shaped entities. Accordingly, the lack of forms (here shape) is not to be attributed to lacking them, but to lacking a particular one or a finite number of them. This can be also confirmed by referring to *Dao* as “the storehouse of all things” (ibid., 168), which points to *Dao* having all entities, instead of being an “empty entity”, which could be interpreted as an ontological nothingness.

Thus, *Dao*'s nothingness consists in being an undifferentiated level of reality that can be viewed as a totality or whole on which all concrete entities depend.⁹

According to the above interpretation, *Dao* is not an ontological nothingness contrasted with *you* consisting of existing entities. The difference between *Dao* and *you*, which can be partly mapped onto the generally construed nothingness, consists in the sense that, undifferentiated in contrast to concrete entities, *Dao* cannot be cognized, expressed in language, or even named, as many fragments of the *Daodejing* underscore.¹⁰

Considering the above, the nothingness of *Dao* consists in lacking the characteristics of actualized concrete entities. In other words, *Dao* exists but, in contrast to concrete entities, it is not particular as a thing—its nature can be named as “no-thingness”. In fact, a compliant description can be found in Chapter 14, where the infinite and nameless *Dao* “reverts to nothingness” (Chan 1969, 146). Considering that here “nothingness” stands for the original *wuwu* 無物—literally

9 Analogously with shapeless wood in Chapter 28 (Chan 1969, 154), from which concrete wooden things with definite and finite shapes can be produced.

10 For instance, fragments from Chan (1969, chap. 1, 14, 21, 25).

“no-thing”, “nothingness”, or “no-thinghood”—this metaphysical characteristic can be postulated.

Conceptualizing *wu* as such a variety of nothingness remains compliant with other metaphysical characteristics of *Dao* as the ultimate level of reality. For instance, Chapter 25 describes *Dao* as:

... undifferentiated yet complete [混成], which existed before heaven and earth ... it depends on nothing and does not change [獨立而不改]. It operates everywhere [周行] ... (Chan 1969, 152)

Accordingly, by virtue of being all plausible concrete entities, *Dao* is both ontologically complete and occupies (or is) all of spacetime. It is also independent in that its existence is not conditioned by the origination, persistence, or cessation of concrete entities. It can be seen that the nothingness defined by undifferentiation contrasted with the characteristics of particular concrete entities complies with and complements the concept of *Dao* as the fundamental aspect of reality.

To sum up, conceptualizing *Dao* in terms of nothingness is attributed to its not being a concrete object, which is confined by the finiteness and hence definiteness of form. This fact can also support the indescribable and non-cognizable dimensions of *Dao*.

Mereology: Formulating the Nothingness Problem

The above reconstruction of *wu* has excluded the *Dao*’s ontological nothingness status and attributes nothingness to undifferentiation as a characteristic of an existent entity. This in turn invites a more precise account of the nature of undifferentiation, and, as immediately follows, how concrete entities originate from the undifferentiated. I believe that this problem can be approached in a mereological way. In the three following subsections, I propose three plausible explanations of *wu*, which relate to (a) Mereological Nihilism, (b) Unrestricted Composition, and (c) a dismissal of the ontological standing of compositions. In the next section, I propose considering *Dao* as an ontological stuff. This interpretation is connected to mereology by referring to the ontological standing of parts.

Before I proceed to each of these tasks, I ought to present a mereological account of the *you* region, until now described only as concrete entities. This is essential as a foundation to considering each of the three options, and helps explain the mereological nature of the relationship between the *Dao* and *you* regions.

The whole *you* region is constituted of concrete entities, which are referred to in the *Daodejing* as *wu* 物—“things”. Chapter 1 of the *Daodejing* paraphrases what

originates from *Dao* as “*wanwu* 萬物”, literally “ten thousand things”, (Chan 1969, 139), which is usually understood (and translated from the Chinese) as “everything”, “all things”, or simply “the world” (not an ontological universe). Although the wording is not and should not be taken literally, it suggests that *Dao* produces countable, and hence discrete, entities.

The concrete entities that furnish *you* can be, and mostly are, complex.¹¹ This is particularly well illustrated by a fragment from Chapter 11, where the usefulness of *Dao* in *you* is demonstrated by, for instance a wheel made of thirty spokes, or a house made of walls (ibid., 144–45). Importantly for our discussion, these descriptions concurrently show that concrete entities are wholes constituted by distinguishable parts, which (here) are spatially arranged in a certain, determined way. Accordingly, concrete entities can be conceptualized as compositions determined by composition rules. In other words, what makes them compositions is their parts and their specific arrangement.

Another important feature of the concrete entities consists in that they are, in contrast with *Dao*, temporal. This characteristic is mentioned in, for instance, Chapter 16:

All things [*wanwu*] come into being ... All things flourish. But each one returns to its root. (Chan 1969, 147)

The existence of concrete entities reveals a defined trajectory: they come into being, persist within limited time, and cease to exist. All these stages are dependent on *Dao*, from which they originate, and thanks to which they can persist (like wooden things thanks to wood mentioned in Chapter 28 (ibid., 154)), and return to the fundamental reality level. This trajectory complies with their mereological characteristics in that concrete entities—wholes—exist as long as their parts are arranged in a determined way. The beginning and end of existence of wholes is tantamount to the arrangement and disarrangement of parts respectfully.

The above mereological reconstruction of the *Daoist* metaphysical model encounters complication when a broader context of the *Dao* and *you* relationship is taken into consideration. The main problem can be formulated in the following way: How can compositions, which constitute the world, be produced by nothingness characterized by undifferentiation, which is not similar to *wu*-things conceptualized as compositions with determined parts and composition rules? Whatever exists as a concrete entity, overlaps *Dao*, which would suggest that the parts or even compositions in *you* must overlap parts and compositions in *Dao*. But in this case, *Dao* would no longer be undetermined.

11 The *Daodejing* does not mention the existence of things that are made from unique parts, because this is regarded as implausible.

As can be seen here, the problem is not ontologically radical in that it is not about how existence is produced out of an ontological nothingness. Instead, the question concerns how a metaphysical region that lacks compositions can be ontologically (and mereologically) fundamental for the other region that can be fully accommodated in mereological terms. I believe that this question can be consistently solved within mereology, where there are three plausible options of a “mereological nothingness” to be considered. All of them involve assuming a mereological characteristic that differs from the Restricted Composition status if the *you* region. They are: (a) Mereological Nihilism, (b) Unrestricted Composition, and (c) the dismissal of an ontological standing to upper bounds.

Mereological Nihilism in Dao

In order to define Mereological Nihilism, the essential mereological concepts should be introduced, and these include parthood. Mereology distinguishes between two types of parts (or parthood relationships): the Proper Part (PP) and the Improper Part (P). Proper parts overlap the common understanding of part in the sense that it takes more than one part to form a composition, otherwise a whole. This can be formulated in the following way:

$$PPxy \equiv Pxy \wedge x \neq y^{12}$$

An improper part is less intuitive in that apart from consisting in proper parthood, it also accommodates a case in which compositions can be made of only one part:

$$Pxy \equiv PPxy \vee x = y^{13}$$

According to Mereological Nihilism, the world consists solely of mereological simples, which are entities that do not have proper parts and are not proper parts of other entities. Consequently, the only parthood relationship in Mereological Nihilism is the case of improper parthood in which a simple is the part of itself. Therefore, a metaphysical model based on Mereological Nihilism entails a mereologically flat world in which there are no complex compositions.

On mapping Mereological Nihilism onto *Dao*, we achieve a region constituted of mereological simples, which differs considerably from *you* in that there are no complex compositions. Here, the nothingness of *Dao* consists in that the fundamental parts form no compositions, and hence this level of reality cannot be

12 x is proper part of y if and only if x is part of y and x is not y .

13 x is part of y if and only if x is proper part of y or x is y .

described in terms of proper parthood and composition rules. Consequently, the totality of simples is not tantamount to nonexistence, and yet is unable to exist as compositions.

This model poses the question of how the simples in the *Dao* region can be proper parts in the *you* region. The legitimacy of this question comes from the fact that all entities in *you* must overlap *Dao*, and what is shared on the side of *you* includes proper parts.¹⁴ A detailed discussion of this problem goes beyond the scope of this paper, and I only list two possible solutions that will make the nihilism of *Dao* and composition in *you* compliant.¹⁵ First, composition in *you* does not necessitate composition in the ontologically prior *Dao*. For instance, the two regions can be subjected to compliant, yet different laws.¹⁶ Second, the ontologically prior *dao* makes composition in *you* possible, but this does not imply that there are proper parts in the *Dao* region, as there cannot be proper parts prior to the compositions that they make.

Dao as Unrestricted Composition

As mentioned in the introduction, according to Unrestricted Composition any entities can form a complex entity made from them. Accordingly, *Dao* as Unrestricted Composition would have all the compositions that can be actualized in *you*, which is the region of Restricted Composition. This interpretation also remains consistent with the overlap, in which *you*, as a finite number of compositions, is a portion of all (most likely, an infinite number of) compositions.

Assuming *Dao* as Unrestricted Composition also remains consistent with *Dao*'s ontological priority, as well as its other characteristics. *Dao*, by virtue of being all compositions, is naturally prior to any portion of compositions. Unrestricted Composition also complies with the infinite and atemporal character of *Dao*, in that it is everything that can ever become concrete entities. Accepting Unrestricted Composition also solves the problem of part status, as *Dao* has proper parts, which can be shared by compositions in *you*.

In this option, the nothingness of *Dao* is attributed to undifferentiation by way of being an infinite number of compositions, whose parts are arranged in accordance with an infinite number of composition rules. This status can be illustrated by the uncarved wood from Chapter 28 (Chan 1969, 154), which has an infinite

14 Although the *Daodejing* does not state whether the *you* region also includes unique part compositions, this option should not be excluded. For instance, electrons are compliant with this model.

15 For detailed arguments referring to Mereological Nihilism, see Banka (2022).

16 This relationship can be interpreted in terms of the dependence between metaphysical nomological laws.

number of wooden objects. The nothingness of *dao* in this case consists in being everything rather than an ontological nothingness.

Dropping Compositions

Mereology is usually construed as a theory of relationships between parts and wholes, but can also be confined to relationships between parts only.¹⁷ A whole, otherwise a composition,¹⁸ is what is constituted by a certain arrangement of parts. However, one can entertain a model in which there are only relationships between parts. For instance, a model of this sort can have the reflexivity axiom, according to which everything is part of itself,¹⁹ as well as the transitivity axiom, according to which if *x* is part of *y*, and *y* is part of *z*, then *x* is part of *z*. Such a model can remain highly informative of parthood relationships and concurrently abstain from introducing the notions of a whole or upper bound. Metaphysically speaking, a parthood-only model would not grant an ontological standing to compositions, which would be of a conventional character.

When mapping such a model onto *Dao*, we achieve a region in which the fundamental level entities remain in parthood relationships, but they do not compose in an ontological sense. Accordingly, here *Dao*'s nothingness consists in evading the "composition conceptualization", in contrast to the *you* region, where determined arrangements of parts constitute compositions that have an ontological standing.²⁰

This option can raise a doubt that the ontological status of concrete entities in *you* is merely conventional—since the ontologically prior *Dao* has no compositions, it may be argued that compositions in *you* are also impossible. This state of affairs would consequently cut against the grain of Daoist metaphysics. A plausible solution to this ontological difference in status of compositions across the two regions can be offered by emergent properties. The main characteristics of emergent properties can be formulated as follows:

- (a) Emergent properties appear on a certain complexity level of an entity and are significantly different from the properties of a lower level of this complex entity.

17 Achille Varzi claims that in fact the concept of whole goes beyond mereology and requires a topological complementation (Varzi 2007, 945)

18 This question can also be viewed in terms of the upper bound concept. Roughly speaking, an entity is an upper bound for some entities if they are its parts (not necessarily the only parts).

19 Pxx.

20 In other words, only the arrangements that agree with composition rules holding in *you* are ontologically valid.

- (b) There is a relationship between these two levels. It consists in the determination of the higher by the lower level.

Emergent properties can be illustrated by chemical compounds, whose properties or behaviour are significantly different from the elements that constitute them. Concurrently these emergent properties need to be determined by their fundamental level composites.

Emergent properties can explain the ontological standing of concrete entities in *you* despite their absence in *Dao* in the following way. Considering that in the *you* region compositions exist as long as their parts are arranged in a determined way, it can be said that emergent properties are present in certain arrangements of fundamental parts. In this sense, a composition would be a complex arrangement that concurrently has emergent properties. In other words, the level of complexity at which emergent properties appear is tantamount to a concrete entity. Following this, on (a), what appears at the “thing *wu* complexity” cannot be reduced to the thing’s composite parts. In this sense, only things enjoy the properties of concrete entities. Concurrently, on (b), these properties remain dependent on the lower level—*Dao*—which determines all the arrangements, and therefore, has all the properties that can emerge.

Dao as an Ontological Stuff

My final interpretation of *Dao* as nothingness is complemented by stuff ontology. Generally speaking, stuffs are juxtaposed with other entities based on countability. In comparison with countable entities, countability within stuffs appears to be more conventional than intrinsic.²¹ For instance, apples, which can be counted by the piece, can be contrasted with apple juice. We can count juice by the litre, gallon, cup, or other volume units, each of which is not embedded in the stuff. Stuffs are externally measured rather than counted based on some intrinsic and unique “unit”. Hence, dividing stuff (discreteness in stuff) is conventional rather than ontological.

The above oneness of stuff versus the discreteness of countable entities has also another important implication. It is difficult to talk about an ontological stuff as a complex entity constituted by parts. A house as a complex entity is made of bricks, windows, doors etc., which are distinct and countable composites. A stuff, by virtue of being indiscrete, does not decompose into parts.

This characteristic of stuff is convergent with *Dao*, for instance compared to the uncarved wood from the aforementioned Chapter 28 (Chan 1969, 154). Another

21 Sometimes, a distinction between counting and measuring is applied to things and stuffs respectively (Steen 2022).

evidence for a stuff interpretation can be found in Chapter 25, which lists the essential characteristics of *Dao* as the ultimate reality:

There was something [*wu* 物] undifferentiated [*hun* 混] yet complete [*cheng* 成], which existed before heaven and earth.

... it depends on nothing and does not change.

It operates everywhere... (Chan 1969, 152)

Although *Dao* is referred to as thing, it is characterized as *hun*, which can be literally rendered as “blended” or “muddy”—something unstructured, which inclines a stuff interpretation. As ultimate reality and everything that can originate in the *you* region, *Dao* spreads over all the spatial locations in the universe. As a stuff, *Dao* is eternal by remaining unchanged at all temporal locations, in contrast to things, whose changes in part arrangement affect their persistence over the whole of time.

We can further look into how the concept of *Dao* as stuff can be further determined. This can be done by examining to what degree *Dao* overlaps a contemporary conceptualization of stuff. Mark Steen compiles the following five categories of an ontological stuff, in contrast with that of things:²²

1. A stuff and a thing made from that stuff can have different histories as stuff can also exist before²³ the thing. For instance, the clay from which a statue has been made exists prior to, and survives, the statue.
2. Persistence over time related to the spatial arrangement of parts. While things do not persist after, say, the scattering of parts, the stuff continues. For instance, a house exists as long as its parts are spatially connected in a house structure, whereas there is no such restriction imposed on, for instance, the concrete from which it was made.
3. Stuffs are cumulative. Adding portions of a stuff results in a stuff, unlike adding things, which become collections of the same things or new things (for instance: a six-pack of beer, 50 cents made from five dimes).
4. Stuffs can be dissected in the way that dividing a stuff results in a stuff, in contrast to things, which decompose into parts.²⁴
5. Extended simples with no parts are possible but there is always some stuff from which they are made (Steen 2022).

22 Examples provided by Rafal Banka.

23 And after.

24 It seems that some counterexamples, such as an extended simple, or jellyfish, can be found.

The already mentioned metaphysical characteristics of *Dao* comply with the propensities of stuff from categories 1 and 2. *Dao* as an eternal stuff persists unaffected by the origination and part configurations of the things that *Dao* necessarily underpins. The concept of *Dao* as a stuff also complies with category 5, which is a liminal case of a composition. Category 3 appears notably incongruent with some fundamental characteristics of *Dao*. *Dao* forms a oneness that is complete.²⁵ Considering these characteristics, *Dao*, by way of permanently being everything that can originate in *you*, cannot be further complemented.

Finally, the concept of *Dao* as stuff is unlikely to accommodate category 4. Although *Dao* is permanently a complete oneness, one can consider the production of concrete entities as a stuff disconnection that converges the dissection mentioned in 4. Accordingly, production consists in that a portion of *Dao* (Unrestricted Composition) overlaps things in *you* (Restricted Composition). This overlap within *Dao* subdivides *Dao* as a whole into the portion of *Dao* that overlaps the actualized things and the portion that is situated beyond the overlap. However, at the level of *Dao*-stuff, there is no spatial disconnection.

Assuming that *Dao* is an ontological stuff, *Dao*'s nothingness would be attributed to being undeterminable in terms of concrete and complex entities, i.e. in terms of parts and wholes relationships.

As in the previous case of dropping compositions, a question arises regarding how *Dao* as an ontological stuff can produce compositions in *you*. This can be analogously answered by resorting to emergent properties.

Final Remarks

As has been demonstrated, the nothingness aspect of *Dao*—*wu* 無—should not be identified with an ontological nothingness. Quite the opposite, *Dao* as the ultimate reality constitutes a whole whose undifferentiation makes it impossible to describe *Dao* in terms of concrete objects.

All of the above discussed mereological interpretations comply with *Dao*'s ontological priority and offer an insight into how, as an undifferentiated whole, *Dao* produces concrete entities in the *you* region. The interpretations also accommodate the dynamic character with regard to Daoist metaphysics, where the coming into existence of things is not to be understood in terms of creating (producing from ontological nothingness) but emerging from transformations of the ultimate reality.

25 See Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*.

Apart from focusing on the nothingness characteristic of *Dao*, the mereologically informed interpretations open a possibility of exploring other aspects of Daoist metaphysics. For instance, one of them is the nature of concrete objects, whose status depends on their parts and how they are structured. This issue can be viewed in terms of how parthood relationships map onto relationships between spatial regions, and how this mereo-locative relationship complies with the ultimate reality level, which, as has been shown in the above discussion, can be consistently conceptualized in multiple ways.

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