

On Laozi's "Tao" and Confucius's "Tao"

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Abstract: As great sages of the pre-Qin period, both Laozi and Confucius grounded their respective philosophical discourses on the concept of "Dao", establishing the cultural foundations of Taoism and Confucianism. Objectively speaking, while they share connections, they also differ in their approaches. Laozi's "Dao" primarily refers to the fundamental principles governing the existence of the world, whereas Confucius's "Dao" regulates worldly order through ethical and moral guidance. From a categorical perspective, ethical and moral principles exist within the framework of universal laws, thereby forming an intrinsic connection between the two.

Keywords: Dao; Ontology; General phase; Specific phase

Online publication: October 29, 2025

1. Introduction

As is well known, in order to discuss or compare two cultures within the same category, the prerequisite is that these two cultures should have certain similarities or similarities in both essence and form. On the contrary, discussion or comparison cannot proceed. Based on this, there are indeed some similarities between Laozi's "Dao" and Confucius' "Dao". Firstly, in terms of literal meaning, both exist in the field of Chinese characters, with concrete meanings referring to "road" or "pathway", belonging to the medium through which humans or animals travel the world. For example, Chapter 53 of *the Tao Te Ching* states: "The great road is vast, but people have good paths." "The great road", which means a smooth path, is the inevitable path for people to work or socialize. Secondly, from a layman's perspective, both can encompass the means of doing or handling things and belong to the category of methodology. For example, Confucius said, "The Doctrine of the Mean is impartial and impartial, without any shortcomings" (*The Doctrine of the Mean*), and "Dao" refers to the method or strategy of dealing with things. Thirdly, based on the descriptions of Laozi and Confucius, both indicate metaphysical existence and belong to the category of ontology. In short, Laozi's "Dao" and Confucius' "Dao" constitute comparable basic conditions both in terms of semantics and the categories used by the two.

The purpose of discussion or comparison is not to distinguish between superiority and inferiority, but to explore the differences in the ideas of the two great sages from the perspectives of metaphysics and ontology, to

find differences within the commonalities, and to explore the commonalities within the differences.

Firstly, although both belong to metaphysical existence or narrow philosophical categories, they differ in their referents. “Metaphysics is called the Way” in the *Book of Changes*. From a descriptive perspective, both Laozi’s “Way” and Confucius’ “Way” contain a strong metaphysical color, or they are both within the scope of narrow philosophy. For example, Chapter 31 of the *Tao Te Ching* states: “Soldiers are ominous weapons, objects, or evil, so those who possess the Tao are not to be found.”

It is obvious that the “Dao” here refers to knowledgeable individuals who have a kind heart, care for life, and love peace. The “Dao” naturally embodies the meanings of “goodness” and “peace-loving”, existing in the metaphysical realm. For example, Chapter 46 of the *Tao Te Ching*: “There is a way in the world, but horses run on feces. The world is lawless, and soldiers are born in the suburbs.”

According to Mr. Chen Guying’s understanding, the so-called “there is a way in the world” refers to being politically on track, while the so-called “there is no way in the world” refers to not being politically on track^[1]. In other words, the term “Dao” here implies political clarity and social harmony, and also belongs to the metaphysical realm. Chapter 77 of the *Tao Te Ching*: “The way of heaven is to make up for the deficiencies while damaging the surplus. The way of man is not like that, where loss is not enough to offer surplus.”

It is not difficult to see that the “Way of Heaven” refers to natural laws or laws, while the “Way of Man” refers to social laws formulated by human society for its own interests. As Wang Bi noted: “Like the quantity of human beings, each has its own body and cannot be equal.” In other words, both the “Way of Heaven” and the “Way of Man” are metaphysical existences. Similarly, in Confucius’ perspective, “Dao” also manifests as a metaphysical existence. *The Analects of Confucius*, *Liren* records: Confucius said: “A scholar who aspires to the Tao and is ashamed of evil clothing and food is not enough to discuss with others.”

Obviously, the “Dao” here is a spiritual realm existence, referring to filial piety, loyalty, righteousness, benevolent governance, harmony, and other metaphysical categories. For example, “When hearing the Tao in the morning, one can die at night” (*Analects of Confucius*, *Liren*), “Tao” refers to the ethical truth. In Confucius’ view, the ethical truth has already reached a realm beyond life and death. Undoubtedly, the “Dao” here exists within the scope of narrow philosophy. However, as seen in the previous text, although Laozi and Confucius both referred to the metaphysical form of existence of “Dao” in different ways, they are different in terms of meaning and realm of existence. As far as Laozi is concerned, the content of “Dao” is broad, referring to both the laws of nature or the laws of nature, as well as the laws governing the operation of human society, justice, and conscience, and the laws governing political operation. And Confucius’ “Dao” is more manifested in the description and regulation of ethics and morality. As mentioned above, “the aspiration of a scholar towards the Tao” refers to the ethical qualities that a gentleman should cultivate himself, constantly improve his filial piety, integrity, loyalty, and promote benevolent governance. For example, *the Analects of Confucius*, *Xueer* records: “A gentleman’s duty is fundamental, and the Tao is born from the foundation. Filial piety is the foundation of benevolence.”

It is not difficult to see that Confucius clearly stipulated that, in his perspective, filial piety to parents and respect for elder brothers are the foundation of a gentleman’s character and the core essence of “benevolence.” In other words, Confucius’ “Dao” is to maintain social order and stability through regulations on respecting the elderly and loving the young, which embodies a certain sense of hierarchy. *The Analects of Confucius*, *Yanyuan* records that Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about politics, and Confucius replied: “A ruler, a minister, a father, a son.” On the surface, Confucius was referring to Chen Jun mainly being like a ruler, a minister being like a minister, a father being like a father, and a son being like a son. Essentially, he achieved the goal of constructing

social harmony by strengthening the concept of hierarchy.

Secondly, although both refer to the ultimate form and ontology, they are different in categories. As an ontology, Laozi's "Dao" is a questioning of the ultimate form of the world, encompassing the category of cosmology. The first chapter of *the Tao Te Ching* states: "The Dao can be the Dao, the extraordinary Dao; the name can be the name, the extraordinary Dao." The latter two "Dao" represent general statements, while the former "Dao" represents the ultimate form or totality of all things in the universe. As the ultimate form, "Dao" manifests as a transcendent existence that cannot be described in the language of the empirical world. Therefore, Wang Bica's annotation states: "It is not ordinary, therefore it cannot be taught" ^[2]. To some extent, it is equivalent to Plato's "idea" or Hegel's "absolute spirit", existing in the category of rationalism. Hegel quoted Lemuza's words and pointed out: "The Dao is the primitive reason that produces the universe, governs the universe, just as the mind governs the body." ^[3] Of course, Laozi's "Dao" is not an absolute abstraction or even sliding into the quagmire of nothingness; otherwise, it would not have become the origin of the universe. Chapter 25 of the *Tao Te Ching*: "There is a mixture of things, born naturally... I don't know its name, the strong character is called Dao."

Laozi used extremely intuitive language to clarify that the "Dao" existed before heaven and earth, and is the origin of the universal universe. The universal universe exists because of its existence. This means that although the "Dao" is an indescribable existence in the empirical world, it is not an empty entity. At the same time, it is precisely because it is the origin and totality of the world that it manifests as a self-inherent and self-rooted entity in its form of existence, with itself as the cause. That is to say: "Independent without change, Zhou Xing without danger" (*Tao Te Ching, Chapter 25*), the "Dao" itself is based on its own reasons and does not depend on any external things. Afterwards, Laozi spoke in Chapter 42 of *the Tao Te Ching*: "The Tao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to all things."

It is obvious that Laozi intuitively expressed the "Dao" as the origin of the universe and the general laws and procedures for generating all things in the universe as the origin. Clarify its physical form of existence. As Mr. Feng Youlan pointed out, "The Tao is the general principle of the origin of all things" ^[4].

Unlike Laozi, Confucius' ultimate questioning of "Dao" is reflected through his questioning of "Ren." *The Analects of Confucius, Shuer* records: Confucius said, "Born with virtue, how can Huan Gui harm me?"

Confucius clearly stated that benevolence and virtue are the essence and totality of ethics and morality, and are innate gifts from heaven. It not only explains the root of its existence, but also explains the reasons for the ethical and moral existence of the humanized world. And the reason why it serves as the essence and overall principle of human ethics and society is also due to Confucius' own regulations. "Only those who are benevolent can be good people, and those who are wicked; (*Analects of Confucius, Li Ren*)." Those who are benevolent can establish others and reach great heights; (*Analects of Confucius, Yong Ye*) Self restraint and restoration of propriety are benevolent. One day self restraint and restoration of propriety, the world will return to benevolence. (*Analects of Confucius, Yan Yuan*) These indicate that in Confucius' perspective, benevolence is the highest essence and the root of all ethical and moral values such as righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith. The reason why "Dao" and "Ren" are the same essence is also due to Confucius' own regulations. *The Analects of Confucius, Liren* records that Zengzi and his disciples asked Confucius, and Confucius said: "Canhu! My way is consistent!" It is not difficult to notice that Confucius' "Dao" is synonymous with "Ren". Rather, in Confucianism, "Dao" and "Ren" differ only in their names, but are essentially the same, manifested as the core and purpose of Confucianism. Cheng Zhijia pointed out: "The so-called consistency refers to the systematic and core of its ideology, and this core is benevolence." Specifically, Confucius regarded "ren" as the core and essence of all virtues, and placed all

other virtues under “ren”^[5]. That is to say, in Confucianism, “Dao” means “Ren”, which is the essence and overall principle of the Confucian school, pointing to the realm of ethics and morality.

In short, the similarity between Laozi’s “Dao” and Confucius’ “Dao” is only a matter of naming. Rather, although they are ultimately manifested as the highest existence and essence of their respective realms, they are completely different in connotation. Laozi’s “Dao” is the entity, the origin, and the overall existence of the diverse worlds, which exist because of the “Dao.” The “Dao” of Confucius is the core and overall principle of Confucianism, and the root of all ethical virtues and their guiding principles for action.

Finally, different entities result in different images. Undoubtedly, it is precisely because of the different referents of the ontology that it is impossible to reach a consensus on imaging. As for Laozi’s “Dao”, it exists as the origin of the universe, and its manifestation is naturally the universal or diverse world of the universe. As mentioned above, “the Tao gives birth to one, one, two, two, three, and three all things” indicates that when the “Tao”, as the overall state of the universe, transitions from the metaphysical to the metaphysical, it follows a certain order and continuity to transform all things in the world. For example, Chapter 52 of the *Tao Te Ching*: “There is a beginning in the world, as the mother of the world. Having obtained his mother, knowing his son, and guarding his mother again, he is not in danger.”

It is not difficult to see that the term “mother” here is another name for “Dao”, while “Zi” refers to the diverse worlds and phenomena that arise from the biological transformation of “Dao” as the mother. Laozi used his mother as a metaphor for the Tao and his son as a metaphor for the phenomenal realm, activating the relationship between the “Tao” as a general and specific aspect. That is to say, Laozi’s “Dao”, as an abstract mother, manifests as a concrete and perceptible world of complexity. At the same time, it can be seen from the saying “Dao is always inactive” that when “Dao” transforms from abstract to concrete, it manifests as “inactive” in action. These are the rich and colorful teachings of Laozi. Laozi’s philosophy advocates the adoption of the “law of subtraction” in the humanized world, in order to reduce individual greed and construct a harmonious society based on “non-action”^[6]. However, Confucius’ “Dao” is different, as everything points towards the ethical world in its manifestation. As mentioned above, Confucius regarded “Dao” or “Ren” as the overall principle of his teachings, encompassing various virtues such as righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith. Rather, in Confucianism, “Dao” exists as the mother of all virtues, and other virtues such as righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith are all manifestations of “Dao” in its own domain. For example, it can be inferred from “self-restraint and restoration of propriety as benevolence” that “propriety” exists due to the existence of “benevolence” (i.e. “Dao”); According to “Killing oneself to become benevolent” (*Analects of Confucius*, Duke Weiling), “righteousness” exists as the existence of “benevolence” (“Dao”). Or, as a unique aspect, “righteousness” is not only the manifestation of the “Dao” itself, but also a means for the “Dao” to realize itself. It should be noted that although the differences in righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faith, and other aspects are differentiated from the “Dao” and the action guidelines may appear imperceptible to some extent, when they manifest as certain actions, they are perceptible. The concept of “killing oneself to become benevolent” itself is a concrete existence, ultimately manifested as various virtues taking benevolence as their ultimate destination. Mr. Qian Mu pointed out that Confucius’ ideal of life is to firmly return to the front line, that is, to coordinate the learning of “seeking benevolence” and “knowing one’s destiny with learning”^[7].

It is worth noting that although Laozi’s “Dao” manifests as a tangible and diverse world, and Confucius’ “Dao” manifests as ethical principles, this does not mean the so-called absolute alienation between the two totalities. For example, when Laozi’s “Dao” manifests as the concrete action of “Wuwei”, it is itself a virtue and belongs to the

category of ethical morality. Rather, Laozi's "Dao" itself encompasses this particular aspect of ethics and morality. The only difference is that Laozi's "Dao" takes the form of "wu wei" as "You wei", which implies a certain form of negativity, while Confucius' "Dao" is manifested as "knowingly doing something that is impossible" (*Analects of Confucius, Constitutional Questions*), presenting a rather radical form of existence in form. As Gan Chunsong pointed out: "Confucius initiated the trend of private education and responded positively to the demand for various talents caused by social mobility" ^[8]. In other words, from the perspective of the realm of existence, although Confucius' "Dao" also has its own category of existence, it is governed by Laozi's "Dao" in the realm of existence.

In summary, the "Dao" of Laozi and the "Dao" of Confucius, although different in form and manifestation, are interconnected in their specific aspects and connected in essence and connotation, with the latter dominating the former. The only difference is that the former manifests in a negative form of existence, while the latter manifests in a radical form of existence.

2. Conclusion

As a metaphysical category, "Dao" constitutes the core and overall principle of Laozi's theory and Confucius' theory, respectively. In terms of content, the former and the latter have both similarities and differences, both independent and interconnected. Specifically, Laozi's "Dao" mostly refers to natural laws and diverse worlds, encompassing the theory of cosmic generation that evolves the world based on them; Confucius' "Dao" points more towards the ethical world and moral laws, encompassing the social order constructed around it with a hierarchical system at its core. However, Laozi's "Dao" does not entirely exist within the scope of cosmology, but rather includes a description of the unique aspect of human ethics and morality in the discussion. This constitutes the commonality and connection between Taoism and Confucianism in terms of cultural development. Although Laozi's "Dao" appears as a negative form of existence in form, Confucius' "Dao" appears as a radical form of existence. But this does not affect the mutual inclusion of the two in the overall aspect, the interconnection of the two in the specific aspect, the internal connection between similarities and differences, and similarities in differences.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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