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The Way

Dào—‘way’, ‘ways’, or ‘the way’—is the central organizing concept in classical Chinese philosophical discourse. This chapter will survey prominent, competing views of the nature of and grounds for *dào* in late Warring States texts and explore the implications of these views. We will look at different views about the metaphysics of *dào*—what sort of thing it is and what constitutes it. For precision, the discussion will use the romanized word ‘*dào*’ rather than an English translation. Classical Chinese nouns typically do not mark plurals, and in many contexts unmarked nouns function as uncountable or mass nouns. So it is sometimes unclear whether ‘*dào*’ refers to a distinct, unique way, any of a range of ways, or the sum of all ways, for example. I will try to preserve this feature of the original term by using ‘*dào*’ as a count noun in some contexts and a mass noun in others.

The basic meaning of ‘*dào*’ can be interpreted roughly as ‘path’, ‘road’, ‘track’, ‘course’, or ‘way’. Like these English words, *dào* can be concrete, abstract, or some combination of the two. A physical path can be a *dào*, as can a series of concrete steps for performing some task. A body of general policies or patterns can be called *dào*, as can a loosely framed, uncodifiable way of life, such as the *dào* of a diplomat or a parent. *Dào* can comprise a lifestyle, values, attitudes, customs, habits, and skills, as when we might speak of the *dào* of being a monk, a lawyer, a teacher, a sailor, or a skier. *Dào* can refer to a culture, such as the *dào* of an agricultural community or a hunter-gatherer community. It may refer not only to what we do, but how we do it—the manner, mode, or style.

Dào can be either descriptive or normative. Descriptively, *dào* can refer to how things happen—the actual, factual way that something typically proceeds or has proceeded. In this sense, it can refer to such things as regular patterns of nature, to how things go or work, or to customary or habitual ways of doing things. But *dào* can also be a normatively appropriate or practically effective way to do something, including how we are to act, what practices to follow, what ends or values to pursue, for example, or what method, technique, or approach to use in pursuing some end. In some contexts, used normatively, *dào* overlaps with what we would consider ethics or morality. However, such

normative *dào* may cover not only what we would consider moral norms but those associated with prudence, courtesy, tact, kinship relations, and other social or political relations. Used broadly, *dào* can refer normatively to the way to live well—the good social, political, and ethical life.

A further ambiguity is that *dào* can refer either to the course or norms we follow or to our path or performance as we proceed. Suppose we follow a track through the woods. Like the English word ‘path,’ *dào* may refer either to the track that guides us as we walk along or to the flow of our movement as we go. Thus we can speak of *dào* as a path we follow or as the process of following that path. A conception of *dào* as a path we aim to follow is normative. A conception of *dào* as a process can be either descriptive or normative, referring either to how we happen to proceed or to a norm of performance we seek to attain. Here, then, the distinction is between *dào* as a guide or method to be followed in our performance and *dào* as the performance itself.

This dual understanding of *dào* is reflected by several texts from the late classical period that explicate *dào* by appeal to the concept of *lǐ*, ‘pattern’ or ‘patterns.’ *Lǐ* originally referred to the grain or the pattern of lines in a piece of stone or wood. In philosophical discourse, the word came to refer to the orderly, coherent patterns by which things are organized and develop or interact. Some texts explain *dào* as pattern, implying that *dào* just is the patterns of things with which we interact—in effect, the grain of things. One passage in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, for instance, equates *dào* with patterns (Zz 16/3). A passage in an essay entitled ‘Methods of *Dào*’ in ‘Canonical Methods,’ one of the Mǎwángduī silk manuscripts, states that ‘there being things that do not conform to *dào*’ amounts to failing to comply with the patterns of things, whereas ‘things each conforming to *dào*’ is complying with the patterns (Mwd 82). The implication is that *dào* and the patterns coincide. By contrast, a passage in the ‘Prince and Ministers’ book of the *Guānzǐ* gives the relation between *dào* and patterns a slightly different nuance, saying that *dào* refers to ‘conforming to the patterns without error’ (Gz 79/27; 30.8). (There are two *Guānzǐ* essays entitled ‘Prince and Ministers,’ (I) and (II). Unless otherwise noted, I am referring to (I).) Here, it seems, *dào* is not patterns but the path by which we conform to them—the process of following patterns rather than the grain or pattern itself.

In discussing *dào*, then, in this chapter and those that follow, we may find it helpful in some contexts to draw distinctions along two dimensions. The first is descriptive versus normative *dào*: the actual way things proceed versus an ideal or model way to proceed. The second is what we can call ‘guiding’ versus

'performance' *dào*: *dào* as a path that guides us along versus *dào* as the performance of traversing such a path.

From the discussion so far, it seems that *dào* could incorporate or exemplify descriptions or norms employing a range of concepts that explicate the idea of a way, path, or track. *Dào* might be articulated, partially at least, in terms of laws, regularities, principles, models, values, ends, methods, techniques, rules, guidelines, habits, policies, styles, or manners. All of these concepts seem potentially useful as explanations of or cues to *dào*. We should take care not to identify the concept of *dào* with any of these, however, for the simple reason that a way is not the same thing as a principle, law, or rule, nor a method, technique, or style. Instead, we will understand classical Chinese philosophical discourse better if we treat *dào* as a primitive, basic concept neither reducible to nor wholly translatable into any of these other, perhaps more easily codified or articulated concepts. The role of *dào* as a primitive is especially clear in contexts where it refers to a process or performance, for then it is clearly not a rule, method, or habit but an ongoing stream or flow of activity. Of course, *dào* might comprise, or be articulated through, rules, methods, habits, or other items that are elements of or aids to performance. But *dào* itself is simply a way or path, not a rule, method, habit or other means of indicating the way or path.

The notion of *dào* may seem a novel or unorthodox basis from which to approach ethics, politics, epistemology, or language. I suggest, however, that in practice the concept of *dào*—understood roughly as ways, paths, routes, or approaches—is deeply familiar. Many of us are accustomed to reflecting on or evaluating the various ways that things happen, ways by which we might do something, or ways by which we seek to live. Classical Chinese thought thematizes and develops this common, useful notion.

The pivotal role of the concept of *dào* is crucial to understanding late classical Chinese thought, because the focus on *dào* shapes the orientation of philosophical discourse—the concepts, assumptions, and theories employed, the concerns and problems considered, and the solutions proposed. The concern with finding and following *dào* leads to an emphasis on dynamic patterns of activity over time—on how things arise, develop, and proceed, rather than on how they stand, what they are, or how they are constituted. Persons are regarded as embodied agents engaged in *dào*, not detached thinkers or spectators. Discussion focuses on practical performance rather than theoretical description. Although explicit guidance for following *dào* has its place, the chief concern is not to represent or describe *dào* but to follow or perform

it. Indeed, description itself is explained in terms of following *dào* correctly: describing something accurately is itself a performance, one that conforms to norms of language use. More broadly, thought and knowledge are understood through their relation to action and thus to *dào*. To think is to adopt various attitudes modelled on language use, disposing us to certain patterns of activity; to know is to draw distinctions in conformity to relevant norms. Since thought and action are aspects of *dào* performance, discrete thoughts or acts are seen as elements of systematic, ongoing patterns of states, attitudes, and activity, not isolated, individual units.

Since *dào* covers the way, manner, or style of our activity as well as its direction, content, and ends, *dào* performance is understood largely along the lines of skill performance. Following *dào* is like speaking a language, pursuing a craft, performing a sport, or playing a musical instrument. Accordingly, the emphasis in early Chinese ethics and action theory is on the abilities, habits, traits, and dispositions that contribute to such skills or skill-like activities. This approach to action contrasts with an intellectualist model that emphasizes reasoning about, deciding on, and then undertaking some discrete act. It explains why, for some late classical texts, the ideal life could be one in which a person seldom engages in explicit, self-conscious thought or ratiocination: such persons have achieved such mastery of *dào* that there is rarely a need to self-consciously think their way through a situation.

Complementing this skill conception of action, the concept of *dào* yields a distinctive approach to normativity, through which our environment presents us with paths that exert normative force in guiding action. The key to this approach is a conception of persons as inevitably finding ourselves on some path, moving in some direction, acting from certain dispositions, employing certain capacities, and pursuing certain ends—minimally, seeking to fulfil our basic material needs. These dispositions, capacities, and ends can be thought of as constituting our *dé*—the Virtue, power, or capacity by which we follow *dào*. They are shaped by and interact with our social and physical environment to present us with various potential *dào* to pursue, some of which will proceed more smoothly or effectively than others. We inevitably must move along some *dào*, in some direction; the question is not whether to do so but which of the available *dào* to take. The nature of the normative ‘force’ associated with the concept of *dào* is distinctive, identical neither to what we typically think of as moral obligation nor to prudential self-interest. It derives from the status of some *dào* as purportedly ‘better’ than others, either because they take us in a more fitting direction or towards a more fitting end, or because they guide us in a more fitting manner. To perform *dào* well—competently,

even masterfully—is to traverse a path in a suitable direction smoothly, successfully, and sustainably. On this picture, an apt or appropriate *dào*—one we normatively should follow—is one that guides us along an appropriate direction in a smooth, effective manner, where what counts as the right direction or an effective manner is among the issues up for debate.

The underlying, architectonic concern with *dào* thus affects how texts from the late classical period approach the topics treated in this book. Political thought is understood as inquiry into the *dào* by which to govern a state. According to some texts, sound governance lies in actively leading political society to follow an appropriate *dào*; for others, it lies responding and conforming to a spontaneous communal *dào*. In ethics, the fundamental normative and structural concept is *dào*, rather than, for example, rules, standards, individual acts, intrinsic goods, or admirable character traits. These and other concepts may have a role, to be sure, but they are framed as aspects or elements of *dào*, understood as a comprehensive, normatively appropriate way of life. Ethical cultivation is a matter of learning, orienting, or conditioning oneself to perform *dào*. In epistemology, knowledge is regarded as a competence in distinguishing things and seeing how the patterns of various distinctions relate to each other according to *dào*. In philosophy of language, the most prominent function of language is to guide action, and language use is regarded as itself an aspect of *dào*. Some texts hold that language is a means of guiding us to follow *dào*; others that its use tends to obstruct us from following *dào*. The discussion in the following chapters will address how a general concern with *dào* shapes discourse on the topic of each chapter.

As might be expected, given the structurally and thematically fundamental place of *dào* in late classical discourse, many questions about *dào* are deeply contested. Just what sort of thing is *dào*? What way of life is the proper *dào*—what is its content or direction? What criteria determine that content or direction—what factors make some path an appropriate *dào*? How do we follow *dào*? How does it guide us? Can it be made explicit and transmitted through speech? Different texts present a variety of stances on such issues. Indeed, as we will see, in some cases what the texts call *dào* is so different that they are almost talking past one another. In later chapters, we will explore competing theories concerning the correct or appropriate *dào* (Chapters 2 and 3), the processes by which we learn and follow *dào* (Chapters 4 and 5), and the role of language—if any—in promulgating and following *dào* (Chapter 6). The present chapter will explore different conceptions of what *dào* is, with an eye to how they shape rival views of its content and the process of promulgating and following it.