# *Dao De Jing* and *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*
# Making Sense of Ineffability

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ABSTRACT | In a number of philosophical traditions, East and West, there are things that are held to be beyond the limits of language, that are ineffable. Philosophers in these traditions also explain *why* there are such things, in the process, describing them. The things would hence appear to be both effable and ineffable. Though one may try to wriggle out of these contradictions, the most straightforward response is simply to accept that we are dealing with contradictory objects. In the first part of the paper, we will see how the phenomenon in question arises in the Daoist and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions. In the second, we will see how the contradiction concering an object which is both effable and ineffable can be handled using the techniques of paraconsistent logic.

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## 1  Introduction

This paper concerns a curious phenomenon: the effable ineffable. One finds this, amongst other places, in certain interpretations of Daoism and in certain kinds of Buddhism – most notably Madhyamaka, but more generally other branches of Mahāyāna. According to both of these views, there is something that is ineffable. Both of these views, however, talk about this ineffable thing: indeed, they explain *why* it is ineffable. That is, of course, a contradiction. Moreover, it is a contradiction which is entirely obvious. What to make of the matter?

We might argue about what, exactly, it means to say that an object is ineffable, though the following discussion is largely independent of the precise details of a definition. Thus, in an attempt to get out of the problem, one might insert an *ad hoc* escape clause: an ineffable object is one about which one can say nothing, *except* that it is ineffable. This won't help here, since, as we will see, a lot *more* is said about the objects we will be concerned with.

One may, of course, try to defuse the contradiction in some more sophisticated way. And certainly some Buddhism thinkers did just this,[1] though I will not go into the matter here.[2] Another strategy – and the one investigated in this paper – is simply to accept the contradiction. This is certainly a possibility if one is a dialetheist and is prepared to deploy a paraconsistent logic. But how, exactly, does one deploy these techniques? This paper provides an answer to this question.

In the first part of the paper, we will look at the Daoist and Buddhist texts which generate the phenomenon. In the second part of the paper, we will look at the logical techniques which may be deployed to handle it. An interlude on paraconsistent logic explains the relevant basics of paraconsistent logic for those who have not met them before.[3]

## 2  Daoism and Buddhism

### 2.1  The *Dao De Jing*

First, the *Dao De Jing*, 道德經. This is traditionally supposed to have been written by a character called Laozi, 老子, a rough contemporary of Confucius (5th c. BCE).

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[1] For example, Gorampa (1429-1489). For a discussion, see (Priest 2018, 6.2).

[2] Some familiar moves in the game are discussed in (Priest 202+).

[3] This paper is a written-up version of a talk with the same title given at the conference *Dialetheism and Related Issues in Analytic Asian Philosophy: an International Workshop*, Kyoto University, June 2017. Parts of it have since appeared in (Priest 2018), esp. (Priest 2019b, ch. 5), (Deguchi, Garfield, Priest, and Sharf 2021). Thanks go to an anonymous referee of this journal for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

However, modern scholarship suggests that it is a text of a much later date, and is simply a collection of sayings of old masters (one meaning of *laozi*). That is certainly the way it reads, since it appears to contain multiple voices.

Exactly how to interpret the text and its passages is a matter of some contention. However, we are going to focus here on just one verse, and the interpretation given to this by one of the most influential Neo-Daoist commentators, Wang Bi ( 王弼, 226-249 CE).

The *Dao De Jing* opens famously with the lines (Lynn 1999, p. 51):[4]

> The Dao that can be described in language is not the constant Dao; the name that can be given it is not the constant name.

Wang Bi's commentary on this goes as follows (*Ibid*):

> The Dao that can be rendered in language and the name [*ming*] that can be given it point to a thing/matter [*shi*] or reproduce a form [*xing*], neither of which is it in its constancy [*chang*]. This is why it can neither be rendered in language nor given a name.

The *Dao De Jing* then continues (*Ibid*):

> Nameless it is the origin of the myriad things; named it is the mother of the myriad things.

Wang Bi's commentary (*Ibid*):

> Anything that exists originates in nothingness [*wu*], thus, before it has forms and when it is still nameless, it serves as the origin of the myriad things, and once it has forms and is named, it grows them, rears them, ensure them their proper shapes, and matures them as their mother. In other words, Dao, by being itself formless and nameless, originates and brings the myriad things to completion. They are originated and completed in this way yet do not know how it happens. This is the mystery [*xuan*] beyond mystery.

The thought is clear. Behind the flow of phenomenal events, there is a certain principle, Dao, 道, which generates the flux. Dao, though, cannot be named, that is, cannot be described.

Neither the *Dao De Jing* nor Wang Bi, gives an argument for the existence of Dao. However, Wang Bi does give an argument for its ineffability. In fact, he gives two. Here is the first (Lynn 1991, p. 30):

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[4] Quotations are taken from (Lynn 1999), to which page references refer. Interpolations are the translator's.

> The way things come into existence, and efficacy [*gong*] comes about,
> is that things arise from the formless [*wuxing*], and that efficacy em-
> anates from the nameless [*wuming*]. The formless and the nameless
> [the Dao] is the progenitor of the myriad things. It is neither warm
> nor cool and makes neither the note *gong* nor the note *shang*. If it
> were warm, it could not be cold; if it were the note *gong*, it could not
> be the note *shang*. If it had a form, it would necessarily possess the
> means of being distinguished from other things; if it made a sound,
> it would necessarily belong among other sounds.

In other words, Dao cannot be characterised in any way. For if it could, it would
not be able to be something else. But since it can be all things, it can't be charac-
terised.[5]

Wang Bi's second argument goes as follows (Lynn 1999, p. 32):

> ... even the most replete [Dao], as long as it can still be expressed
> in words, would never have the capacity to govern Heaven and Earth,
> and the greatest thing that can possibly have form would never be
> large enough to house the myriad things. ... Any name for it would
> fail to match what it is. Any comparison for it would fail to express all
> that it is. A name necessarily involves how one thing is distinct from
> other things, and a comparison necessarily involves how the tenor of
> one thing depends on the vehicle of another. Making distinctions, any
> name would fail to be inclusive; being dependent, any comparison
> would fall short of all that it is. As it cannot be perfectly inclusive,
> any name for it would deviate greatly from the truth; as it cannot
> express all that it is, any comparison for it would fail to designate
> what it really is.

The thought here is that Dao is so great that it transcends any linguistic categori-
sation.[6]

Now, whether or not these are good arguments, it is clear that Wang Bi is
explaining why Dao is ineffable, and, in doing so, describing, that is, characterising,
it in certain ways.

Here, then, is our phenomenon in the *Dao De Jing*. A text that talks about the
ineffable.

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[5] It is worth noting that an argument of exactly the same kind is given by Plato in the *Timeaus*, for the
ineffability of the stuff which receives the forms, $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$. See (Sorabji 1988, pp. 32ff.).
[6] Again, it is worth noting that a similar argument for the ineffability of God was used by the 15th
Century Neo-Platonist, Nicholas of Cusa. See (Priest 2002, pp. 22ff.).

## 2.2  Buddhism

Now let us turn to Buddhism. All forms of Buddhism distinguish between the conventional reality of the way that the world appears to us (Skt: *saṃvṛti satya*), and the ultimate reality of the way that the world really is (Skt: *paramārtha satya*). Different schools of Buddhism, however, interpret the distinction in different ways. Here we are concerned with Mahāyāna Buddhism, and particularly Madhyamaka.

Around the turn of the Common Era, a new kind of sūtra started to emerge, the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) *Sūtras*. One thing these do is to claim that to grasp ultimate reality, words are of no use. Thus we have in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*:[7]

> All words for things in use in this world must be left behind,
>
> All things produced and made must be transcended –
>
> The deathless, the supreme, incomparable gnosis is then won.
>
> That is the sense in which we speak of perfect wisdom.

And in another *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtra, the *Vajracchedikā* (Diamond) *Sūtra*, we have:[8]

> [The Buddha said]: Subhūti, words cannot explain the real nature of the cosmos. Only common people fettered with desire make use of this arbitrary method.

The point is taken up by Nāgārjuna, who flourished some time in the 2nd c. CE, in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), the first philosophical text to try to make sense of the new sūtras.[9] Thus we have (MMK XIII: 8):[10]

> The victorious ones have said
>
> That emptiness is the elimination of all views.
>
> For whomever emptiness is a view
>
> That one will accomplish nothing.

The views to be eliminated are not, of course, those of conventional reality. They are perfectly good, just merely conventional. The views to be given up are those concerning ultimate reality.

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[7] (Conze 1973, p. 12).

[8] (Price and Wong (trs.) 1990, p. 51).

[9] It must be said that interpreting this text is a contentious matter. The interpretation given here is in line with that to be found in (Garfield 1995), and (Priest 2018, ch. 4).

[10] Translations from the MMK are taken from (Garfield 1995).

But why should ultimate reality be ineffable? Nāgārjuna indicates the reason in the following passage (MMK XVIII: 9):

> Not dependent on another, peaceful and
>
> Not fabricated by mental fabrication,
>
> Not thought, without distinction.
>
> That is the character of reality.

The reality in question is, of course, ultimate reality. The point is that conventional reality is conceptually constructed. Ultimate reality is what one arrives at when one "peels off" the concepts. Concepts (mental fabrications), cannot, then, be applied to ultimate reality. To describe it, one would have to deploy concepts, and so make it merely conventional; so one cannot describe it.

So important is the point, that it is made at the very start of the MMK in its dedicatory verses:

> I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha
>
> The best of teachers, who taught that
>
> Whatever is dependently arisen is
>
> Unceasing, unborn,
>
> Unannihilated, not permanent,
>
> Not coming, not going,
>
> Without distinction, without identity,
>
> And free from conceptual construction.

Again, the ultimate is concept-free.

But as we see, Nāgārjuna characterises the ultimate in many ways. Indeed he does so in saying that it is not conceptually constructed. Here, then, is our Buddhist example of the phenomenon: a text which talks about the ineffable.

## 2.3  Taking Stock

Let us now take stock. The situation is as follows. Dao/ultimate-reality is ineffable. But this is explained, thereby describing it. So it is effable.

In fact, what is driving this contradiction is something deeper. The effability/ineffability of something is grounded in its very nature: its objecthood/non-objecthood. For note that:

  • Something is an object iff one can say something about it.

If something is an object, one can say something of it – for example that it is an object, or that it is self-identical. Conversely, if something is not an object, one can say nothing of it. For to say anything is to predicate. This requires an object to which to apply the predicate.[11]

   This thought will guide us into the formal analysis which follows. But before we turn to that, let me point out the following. It might be thought that the phenomenon we are dealing with is something peculiar to the Asian philosophical traditions. It is not. It is to be found in Western philosophical traditions too. Let me give just two examples.

   In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein provides an analysis of language, reality, and the relationship between them. Language is constituted by propositions. These are composed of names, enformed in a certain way. Reality is constituted by states of affairs. These are composed of objects, enformed in a certain way. A proposition, $p$, describes a state of affairs, $s$, if the names in $p$ refer to the objects in $s$, and $p$ and $s$ have the same form. But form is not an object: it is the way that names or objects are put together. So one can say nothing about it. But the *Tractatus* is full of statements about form: indeed, it explains why one cannot talk about it. Wittgenstein is, of course, well aware of the matter, and it leads to the stunning dénoument of the *Tractatus*.

   In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger asks the *Seinsfrage*: what is being? And he immediately tells us that there is a singular mistake to avoid. Being is not itself *a* being, that is, it is not an object: it is that in virtue of which objects (beings) *are* objects (beings). But of course, in an attempt to answer the *Seinsfrage*, Heidegger's works are full of statements about being. And to say anything of something is exactly to treat it as an object—indeed, even the *Seinsfrage* itself treats it as an object. Heidegger is also well aware of the matter, and struggles in numerous ways to deal with it in his later writings.

   What Wittgenstein and Heidegger made of these matters, is not our concern here. I simply want to point out that the phenomenon we are dealing with is not restricted to Eastern philosophy. Indeed, it is one of the most profound metaphysical issues, East and West. A thinker comes to the conclusion that there are limits to what can be said. Some things are ineffable. And the thinker explains exactly why they are so, thus describing the ineffable.[12]

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[11] Indeed, to say of some thing that it is not an object must be false (i.e., have a true negation). Any non-object will, then, be contradictory—as we shall see.

[12] For more on the matter, see (Priest 2002). On Wittgenstein, see (Priest 2002, ch. 12). On Heidegger, see (Priest 2002, ch. 15).

## 3 Interlude: Paraconsistent Logic

In the next section, we will turn to the matter of how to analyse the situation in which our thinkers find themselves, by deploying the tools of paraconsistent logic. These tools may well be unfamiliar to some readers, so in this interlude, I will explain the relevant basics of simple paraconsistent logic, *LP*.[13]

First, classical (propositional) logic. Every situation – or interpretation as logicians call it – divides up sentences into those that are true, $\mathfrak{T}$, and those that are false, $\mathfrak{F}$, these two categories being mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Negation toggles a sentence between these two zones. So if *A* is true, ¬*A* is false; and if *B* is false, ¬*B* is true. We may depict the situation thus:

$$\mathfrak{T} \qquad\qquad \mathfrak{F}$$

| | |
|---|---|
| *A* | ¬*A* |
| ¬*B* | *B* |
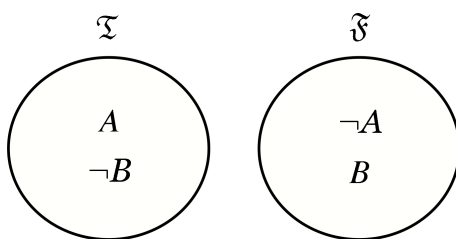
A valid inference is one such that there is no interpretation where the premises are true, and the conclusion is not. But as is clear, a sentence and its negation can never both be in the true zone. It follows that the inference of explosion is valid:

- *A*, ¬*A* $\models$ *B*

If there is no interpretation in which *A* and ¬*A* are both true, then, *a fortiori*, there is no interpretation in which they are both true *and B* is not.

Now to paraconsistent logic. This is exactly the same, with just one crucial difference: namely, the true and the false zones in an interpretation may overlap.[14] Negation still takes a formula from the true zone to the false zone, and vice versa.[15] But now, suppose that something is both true and false, that is, in the overlap between the two zones. Then its negation is both false and true, that is, it is in the overlap as well. Thus we can have the following interpretation:

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[13] For full details see, e.g., (Priest 2008, chs. 7 and 21).

[14] There are some paraconsistent logics in which they may underlap as well, but that is not relevant to this story.

[15] Beware: being false is now *not* the same as not being true. (These correspond to different areas in the following diagram.)
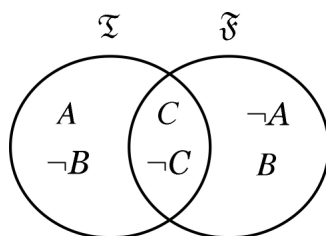
In this, $C$ is in the overlap, so both $C$ and $\neg C$ are true (and false as well, but that does not matter). $B$ is not in the true zone; so we have a counter-example to explosion:

- $C, \neg C \nvDash B$

There is one more thing which we need to note. This concerns not propositional logic, but predication. A predicate has an extension and an anti-extension; these comprise the objects of which the predicate is true and the objects of which it is false, respectively. In classical logic, extension and anti-extension are the complements of each other. That is, the two zones are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. In paraconsistent logic, as one would expect, they, also, may overlap in an interpretation. So if $P$ is monadic predicate, its extension and anti-extension are subsets of the domain. And if '$a$' refers to an object in the overlap, $Pa$ and $\neg Pa$ are both true (and false).

One predicate, in particular, will concern us in what follows: the identity predicate, =. This is a binary predicate, and so its extension and anti-extension are sets of *pairs* of the domain. As one would expect, the extension of the predicate is:

- $\{\langle d, d \rangle : d \in D\}$

That, in fact, is sufficient to guarantee all the standard properties of identity. The anti-extension of the identity predicate can be any set which *contains* the complement of this. In particular, then, the extension and anti-extension of the identity predicate may overlap. Thus, whatever $d$ is, $\langle d, d \rangle$ is in the extension of =; so if '$a$' refers to $d$, then $a = a$ is true. But if $\langle d, d \rangle$ is in the anti-extension as well, then $a = a$ is false; that is $\neg a = a$ is true as well.[16]

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[16] Quantifiers, I might note, work in exactly the same way in paraconsistent logic as they do in classical logic.

## 4   Making Sense of the Effable Ineffable

### 4.1   Objecthood and Identity

Now let us return to the topic of ineffability. First, what is it to be an object? The answer is simple: to be an object is to be something. That is, $x$ is an object iff:[17]

  • $\exists y\ y = x$

$x = x$ is a logical truth. It follows that $\exists y\ y = x$, and so that $\forall x \exists y\ y = x$. That is, everything is an object. No surprises there.

   But suppose that $x$ is not an object. That is, $\neg \exists y\ y = x$; then $\forall y \neg y = x$; and so, in particular, $x \neq x$. So if $x$ is an object that is not an object, $x = x$ and $x \neq x$.[18]

### 4.2   Naming

Next, we turn to the issue of naming. An intuitively correct principle concerning truth is the familiar $T$-Schema:[19]

  • $T \langle A \rangle \leftrightarrow A$

Here, $Tx$ is the truth predicate ($x$ is true), $A$ is any closed sentence, and angle brackets are a name-forming device. Naturally, cognate semantic notions, such as satisfaction and denotation, are governed by similar schemas. The one for denotation is the less-familiar $D$-Schema:[20]

  • $\forall x (D(\langle n \rangle , x) \leftrightarrow n = x)$

$D(y, x)$ ($y$ denotes $x$) is the denotation predicate, and $n$ is any name. Now, take any object that is not an object. Call this '$\mu$'. Then, instantiating the $D$-Schema, we have:

  • $D(\langle \mu \rangle , \mu) \leftrightarrow \mu = \mu$

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[17] The particular quantifier here, $\exists$, note, should not be taken as "existentially loaded". That is, $\exists y$ is simply read 'some $y$ is such that', not as 'there exists a $y$ such that'.

[18] The converse also holds. For suppose that $x \neq x$. Then either $x = y$ or $x \neq y$. In the first case, $x \neq y$, by the substitutivity of identicals. So in either case $x \neq y$. That is, $\forall y \neg x = y$, i.e., $\neg \exists y\ y = x$.

[19] Of course, some people (though not myself) do not accept this in full generality, since, given a few other conditions, it delivers contradictions such as the liar paradox. These concerns are not relevant here, and so I ignore them.

[20] See, e.g., (Priest 2005, ch. 8.2).

Since $\mu = \mu$, it follows that $D(\langle\mu\rangle, \mu)$. That is, '$\mu$' names $\mu$ (naturally).

But since '$\mu$' refers to something that is not object:

- $\neg\exists y\ y = \mu$

That is:

- $\forall y\ y \neq \mu$

So for any name, '$n$':

- $n \neq \mu$

By the $D$-Schema again:

- $D(\langle n\rangle, \mu) \leftrightarrow n = \mu$

So by contraposition:[21]

- $\neg D(\langle n\rangle, \mu)$

That is, $\mu$ has no name – not even '$\mu$'!

## 4.3   Statements about $\mu$

And now, at last, we can turn to ineffability. Note that if the statement '$Pn$' is about an object, $x$, then '$n$' must refer to $x$. But as we saw in the last subsection, $\mu$ has no name, so one can say nothing about it. Hence, it is ineffable.

But again, and as we also saw in the last subsection, '$\mu$' is a name for $\mu$, and so one *can* say things about it, such as that it is self identical, $\mu = \mu$; or that it is and is not an object, $\exists y\ y = \mu$ and $\neg\exists y\ y = \mu$.

The simple paraconsistent technical machinery delivers exactly what is required.

## 5   Conclusion

In the first half of this essay, we saw that versions of both Daoism and Buddhism are committed to there being something that is ineffable (Dao, ultimate reality). Both, however, talk about it, and so are committed to its effability as well.

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[21] There is an issue here about whether one should expect the conditional employed in schemas of this kind contrapose. However, let me set that issue aside here.

In the second part of the essay, we have seen how one can make precise and rigorous sense of the matter, using some simple techniques of paraconsistent logic.

That does not, of course, show that these views are true; that is an entirely different matter. However, it does show that the dialetheism of these views cannot be rejected simply on the grounds of logical incoherence. The situation provides another possible application for a dialetheic application of paraconsistent logic, to boot, adding to those concerning the paradoxes of self-reference, motion, vagueness, and the law.[22] Is this application anachronistic? Literally, yes, of course. Objectionably so? No. No more so than is using 20th Century mathematics to analyse Newtonian physics.

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[22] See, e.g., (Priest 1987), (Priest 2019a).

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