Dao 道 (Way or the way things are; ultimate reality or the ultimate).

One primary, and non-mystical, understanding of dao in classical Chinese philosophy is that the dao is the way things are, no matter how a thinker or a school of thought understands the way things are and how he or she elaborates such an understanding. The notion of dao is one fundamental, across-the-board reflective category in classical Chinese philosophy; a variety of schools of thought take the pursuit of the dao as one fundamental task or mission in their understanding and capturing the way things are. One classical and representative, reflective understanding of dao is given in the Daoist classical text, Lao Zi’s Dao-De-Jing where the dao is understood primarily as the metaphysical dao: it is the ultimate source, unifying power, and fundamental principle of nature and the universe; it manifests itself through particular individual things. When the dao is possessed or manifested by individual things, it becomes its manifested character, i.e., what ‘de’ (德) means in its broad sense in the Dao-De-Jing. As highlighted in the opening passage of the Dao-De-Jing, on the one hand, the dao is not absolutely beyond language delivery; rather, the dao can be talked about and captured in language, as Lao Zi’s own linguistic practice in the Dao-De-Jing shows. On the other hand, the dao that has been characterized in finite descriptions is not identical with, or does not exhaust, the eternal dao.

One extension of the metaphysical dao in the human society is the human being’s performance following the way of the metaphysical dao (‘performance dao’ for short). Human virtue, i.e., what ‘de (德)’ means in its narrow sense in the Dao-De-Jing, is considered the manifestation of the metaphysical dao in human beings regarding morality. It is de as human virtue in this sense that endows human beings with the power that distinguishes them from other things. The dao in human society is also understood as the way that things in general get to some goal, concretely as a road or a path construed normatively or as a recommendation or guide, in the spirit of wu-wei (i.e., doing things in a natural or un-excessive way). Ways can be added to each other so we have ways of a person, a family, a community, and a species. The human being’s pursuit of (or her performance following) the dao does not necessarily imply conforming to a pre-fixed path; the point is that any path per se that the dao-pursuing agent is currently paving is expected to be in accordance with, or capture, the way things are in nature. Daoism takes pursuing, modeling on, and performing the dao as the fundamental mission of the human being in their reflective inquiry.