

Epistemic Peacebuilding: Daoist Philosophy Critique of Moral Authority and the Case for Cultivating Contextual Pluralism for a Sustainable Peace

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Recent peace and critical studies increasingly recognize epistemic violence as a key form of harm embedded in knowledge systems that authorize domination and exclusion. While existing scholarship has exposed its colonial and structural dimensions of epistemic violence, most approaches remain confined to critique and reform within dominant epistemic frameworks, risking the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies. Drawing on Daoist philosophy as interpreted through Johan Galtung's peace theory, this article seeks to reconceptualize peace beyond a negative peace by developing Daoist epistemic peacebuilding as an ethical condition of non-imposition and relational harmony.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative theoretical approach grounded in philosophical analysis and critical literature synthesis. Comparative conceptual analysis is used to contrast dominant paradigms of epistemic critique with an alternative framework emphasizing epistemic release rather than resistance.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that dominant approaches to epistemic violence remain tied to representational politics and normative correction, emphasizing inclusion, voice, and epistemic justice within existing knowledge regimes. While these approaches successfully expose structural inequalities, they often preserve the authority of epistemic judgment itself. In contrast, Daoist epistemology reframes conflict and violence as relational energies requiring balance rather than elimination. Applied to peace studies, this perspective reveals that epistemic violence arises not only from exclusion but from the compulsion to define, categorize, and govern knowledge. Daoist epistemic peacebuilding, therefore, rejects the pursuit of epistemic supremacy, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, and instead emphasizes non-judgment, fluidity, and coexistence without epistemic control. Peace emerges not through institutional regulation or epistemic reform, but through the de-centering of epistemic authority altogether.

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Discussions: The findings suggest that Daoist epistemic peacebuilding fundamentally challenges the assumptions underpinning both negative peace and critical peace paradigms. Whereas epistemic violence scholarship often calls for structural reform, Daoist philosophy introduces an ontological shift that suspends the logic of domination embedded in knowledge production. This reframing complicates prevailing notions of emancipation, resistance, and progress, suggesting that peace cannot be engineered through epistemic governance, even in emancipatory forms. Instead, peace is understood as an ethical condition of non-imposition, where difference is neither corrected nor assimilated. This perspective contributes to ongoing debates on decoloniality by offering a mode of peace that does not rely on counter-hegemonic truth claims, thereby avoiding the reproduction of epistemic violence under the guise of critique. This suggests rethinking human nature beyond control, highlighting ethical coexistence, spontaneity, and different understandings of the world. All of this becomes possible when it is understood that epistemological standpoints cannot be fully judged against one another.

Conclusions: This article concludes that sustainable peace requires moving beyond epistemic justice toward an epistemic condition without hierarchy or moral supremacy. Daoist epistemic peacebuilding provides a novel theoretical contribution by reconceptualizing peace as harmony without epistemic governance. By shifting attention from institutional solutions and epistemic reform to relational balance and non-coercive coexistence, the study opens new possibilities for peace theory, decolonial thought, and educational practice. Future research may explore how this framework can inform empirical studies and pedagogical models that seek to cultivate peace without reproducing epistemic domination.

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Introduction

Understanding peace and the cultivation of sustainable peace remains a primary challenge in the contemporary era. This is particularly evident when considering that global conflicts are rooted not only in direct violence or structural violence, as emphasized by Johan Galtung (1969), but rather in deeply embedded cultural violence, and more pivotally, epistemic violence. These latter two forms of violence occur when a specific body of knowledge, value system, or moral yardstick is established as an "absolute truth" and serves as the supreme standard for judging the legitimacy of other knowledge and identities. The consequence is

intellectual suppression, cultural marginalization, and the erosion of human dignity for those who deviate from the norm. Such violence is often overlooked because it operates as a standardized normalcy within society; however, epistemic violence, in particular, functions as the fundamental bedrock for all other forms of violence, despite its frequent invisibility in peace discourses.

In modern society, violence is predominantly perceived through the lenses of direct and structural violence. Consequently, traditional solutions prioritize the creation of authoritative institutions to manage and systematize these conflicts under the guise of peacebuilding to maintain social order. This framework rests upon the assumptions of contractarianism, wherein society is viewed as the result of individuals cooperating to establish a political community for the sake of peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, this modern paradigm of peace appears to be the imposition of yet another layer of coercive power, a re-institutionalization of conceptual frameworks, and judgmental standards that perpetuate violence indefinitely. Consequently, mainstream peace perspectives that emphasize institutional organization through political, economic, and legal frameworks fail to reach the root of conflicts caused by the “outlawing of difference,” the systematic exclusion of divergent thoughts and cultures from the sphere of legitimacy. This research, therefore, aims to address a critical question: How can Eastern philosophy, specifically Daoist philosophy, offer a novel alternative for peacebuilding capable of confronting epistemic violence? This inquiry arises from the Daoist foundational critique that institutionalized power is essentially oppressive, often utilizing structural and cultural violence masked as “peace” to exert domination (Chong, 2016, pp. 9-10; Møllgaard, 2014, p. 148), standing in stark contrast to classical liberal perspectives, which maintain that such institutionalized power is the guarantor of peace.

From a Daoist perspective, the emergence of true violence and conflict does not stem from an inherent defect in human nature as suggested by the Hobbesian hypothesis (Hobbes, 1994), but rather, from the manufacture of “Moral Authority” by humans, particularly the ruling class. This authority establishes fixed value systems used as standards to categorize, judge, and penalize. Laozi offers a radical critique of the institutionalization of virtues championed by Confucianism, arguing that the insistence on such virtues signals the decay of the Dao (the Way) within society. The establishment of this “legitimate authority” is thus akin to the construction of a binary logic (dualism) between good/evil and right/wrong, which inevitably leads to intellectual fragmentation and domination (Møllgaard, 2014, p. 148). Accordingly, Daoism proposes a paradigm of non-domination, aiming for a state where institutions and moral regulations naturally lose their significance without the need for the revolutionary confrontation typical of Western anarchism. This is achieved by dismantling the moral yardsticks that serve as instruments of epistemic violence at the foundational level, ultimately leading to peace that begins with the liberation of consciousness from fixed external determinants.

The deconstruction of moral authority and binary logic analyzed above leads to the central thesis of this article: the conceptualization of “Epistemic Peacebuilding” in Daoist philosophy. This form of peacebuilding does not seek harmony through the imposition of a singular value system or the forging of a consensus under the banner of universal reason. Instead, it fosters “Contextual Pluralism,” emphasizing the acceptance of fluid and pluralistic truths according to the natural state of all things. As Zhuangzi demonstrated, the eradication of violence is made possible by dismantling the ego and the monolithic value scales that attempt to define large or small and right or wrong. In the absence of epistemic domination, humanity can

return to the state of *Ziran* (spontaneity or so-of-itself), where social order is not engineered by the will of those in power but emerges from the harmonious interweaving of diverse differences existing freely without a central standard of judgment (“Harmony without Imposition”). Thus, epistemic peace in the Daoist sense is not merely a utopian dream; it is a profound ethical proposition that challenges humanity to relinquish moral authority in order to open a space for a truly sustainable and non-coercive cultural peace. This study aims to reconceptualize peace in Daoist philosophy as epistemic peace by demonstrating that violence originates from epistemic dualism, moral institutionalization, and hierarchical authority, and that sustainable peace emerges through contextual epistemic pluralism rather than consensus, moral universality, or institutional governance.

Review of Literature

Institutional Peace, Violence, and Daoist Reconfigurations of Conflict

Contemporary peace scholarship has increasingly interrogated the limitations of negative peace, most notably articulated by Raymond Aron, which defines peace merely as the absence of physical warfare (Aron, 1966). Within such a condition of silenced guns, individuals often remain subjected to structural and cultural violence, forms of harm that escape conventional recognition as violence (Galtung, 1969). In response, recent studies seek to radicalize the concept of peace by challenging the contractarian assumptions rooted in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1994), which portray human beings as innately aggressive and in need of control by a sovereign authority (Hobbes, 1994). From this perspective, the imposition of institutional power itself becomes a form of conceptual and epistemic violence, narrowing peace to compliance with state-regulated order and prioritizing elite stability over genuine human flourishing. Such critiques open a conceptual space for rethinking peace beyond institutional containment and coercive moral governance.

It is within this critical turn that Daoist philosophy has been revisited as a counter-discourse to dominant paradigms in international peace studies. In the foundational dimension of the field, conflict has traditionally been defined through a dualistic lens of opposing war and peace, a framework that privileges institutional mechanisms as external tools for terminating violence. Johan Galtung (1996), however, drawing upon Daoist epistemology, proposes a transcendence of this rigid dichotomy. Daoism emphasizes dynamism, transformation, and the harmonious coexistence of opposites, suggesting that conflict is not an entity to be eliminated but a form of energy requiring fluid and adaptive management. Peace, therefore, is not conceived as a static absence of motion but as an emergent order arising from continuous cycles of transformation. This Daoist reconfiguration of peace provides the philosophical foundation for subsequent interpretations that move beyond institutional critique toward psychological and ontological transformations of the human subject.

A deeper analysis of Daoist interpretation as a counter-discourse to institutional power reveals that significant academic contributions frame Daoism through psychological and ontological lenses. Ron Catabia (2017) and Tom Pynn (2014) propose that sustainable peace requires an ontological shift toward returning to the root and understanding the “Cosmic Human,” a state where the individual’s vital energy (*Qi*) is integrated with the Dao and the universe (Catabia, 2017). This paradigm directly facilitates the cultivation of internal peace, which transcends mere emotional tranquility to encompass the deconstruction of the ego. This

ego is viewed as the primary source of self/other dichotomy, which inevitably leads to identity-based division and subsequent violence. By dissolving these rigid identities and recognizing our inherent interconnectedness, peace emerges psychologically from this ontological realization. This process must align with *Ziran* (spontaneity/naturalness) and is actualized through *Wuwei* (non-action), understood as refraining from artificial interference.

Furthermore, Pynn (2014) affirms that when an individual achieves the state of *Wuwei* (non-action), or refrains from actions that defy the natural trajectory, they transcend coercive power (entering a state of non-coercion). This arises from an understanding of the interconnected nature of all things, an acknowledgement that harmony flourishes only when entities are left to their own natural course. Notably, Catabia links Daoism to human rights, viewing *Wuwei* as a profound respect for the natural “way” of others without infringing upon their freedom. However, a critical gap remains: the critique of moral governance (e.g., Confucianism) as a symptom of the Dao’s decline (Laozi, 2001, p. 106, 68). The imposition of singular moral values (what is “good” or “right”) inevitably bifurcates society, creating their opposites (that which is “evil” or “wrong”), leading to a systemic judgment that is more profoundly violent than physical warfare.

As Tocci and Moon (2020) explain, the state of “non-violencing” in Daoism transcends the binary logic of violence versus non-violence. This is understood through the principle of *Wuwei*, emphasizing flexibility, openness, and the spontaneity of human interaction devoid of dominating intent. Akin to the properties of water, softness overcomes the rigid. In this sense, non-action is not passivity but a powerful, proactive engagement that challenges mainstream values by allowing conflict resolution to emerge creatively and with minimal impact. This shifts the status of peace from a predefined outcome to a fluid evolution capable of handling violence through maximum openness, beyond the constraints of coercive moral codes. Furthermore, Dang (2025) and Dang and Low (2026) argue that these Daoist dimensions facilitate global citizenship, allowing individuals to adapt within diverse contexts much how like water flows into different vessels while maintaining its essence. While Catabia (2017) and Pynn (2014) have established foundations for psychological transformation through Daoist peace education, the critical question remains: how can such peace endure within the modern epistemic structures that enforce absolute, universal standards of truth?

Epistemic Violence in Contemporary Critical and Peace Scholarship

While Daoist philosophy offers a profound reconfiguration of peace beyond institutional and moral governance, the reproduction of violence through knowledge itself remains insufficiently addressed within mainstream peace theory. This concern has been articulated in contemporary critical scholarship through the concept of epistemic violence, which has gained renewed attention as a lens for examining how harm is produced not only through material coercion but also through systems of knowledge production.

Brunner (2021) observes that despite the proliferation of violence in global political life, international relations and peace studies have long relied on reductionist understandings of violence, treating knowledge as inherently opposed to direct or physical harm. However, the ongoing decolonial turn has increasingly revealed the deep entanglements between knowledge, power, and violence, positioning epistemic violence as a structural condition of the modern world order. Building upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s foundational formulation (Spivak, 2010), contemporary scholars have expanded the concept to encompass the colonality of power,

knowledge, and “Being,” highlighting how dominant epistemologies systematically silence, distort, or erase alternative ways of knowing. Brunner (2021) further argues that epistemic violence cannot be fully undone from within academia, as scholars themselves remain embedded in capitalist and colonial knowledge systems.

Beyond international relations, epistemic violence has been extensively examined across psychology, education, and social theory. Epistemic violence in mainstream psychological research has led to the systematic omission of indigenous and marginalized epistemologies, as well as through essentialist interpretations of group differences. Bunch (2015) conceptualizes epistemic violence as a form of “slow violence” that operates through everyday practices of classification, othering, and exclusion, gradually shaping identities and social hierarchies over time.

More recent scholarship has emphasized the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of epistemic violence. Graves and Spencer (2022) conceptualize epistemic violence as a script embedded in language itself, privileging “rational” knowers while excluding those deemed irrational or illegitimate from knowledge-making processes. Moreover, epistemic violence arises when individuals from marginalized groups are involuntarily positioned as representatives of entire communities, resulting in the silencing of both the individual and the group for whom they are taken to speak. Empirical studies in education and public space governance (Collins & Boumechaal, 2024) demonstrate how epistemic violence operates institutionally, shaping experiences of belonging, identity, and political participation.

Collectively, this body of literature establishes epistemic violence as a pervasive and multidimensional phenomenon central to contemporary peace and social theory. Yet, despite its critical insights, much of this scholarship remains anchored in strategies of normative critique, resistance, and reform within existing epistemic structures. Most approaches, —including feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial frameworks, —continue to operate through moral positioning, oppositional critique, and the production of counter-truths. While these strategies effectively expose domination and amplify marginalized voices, they often reproduce the very subject-object dichotomy and epistemic authority they seek to dismantle.

Moreover, prevailing frameworks tend to assume the necessity of universal ethical standards, correct knowledge claims, or emancipatory standpoints, thereby sustaining an implicit hierarchy of knowing. This limits the possibility of an epistemic condition in which plurality can exist without competition for legitimacy or claims to “Truth.” What remains underexplored is how peace might be cultivated epistemically by calling for a more radical reconfiguration of epistemic relations themselves, without reliance on judgment, representation, or corrective authority gaps.

Building upon the existing literature, this article seeks to re-evaluate the roots of violence and identity-based division through a Daoist critique of “Epistemic Violence.” It transcends the limitations of post-colonial theory, specifically Gayatri Spivak’s work on the subaltern (Spivak, 2010). While Spivak and critical theorists like Teo (2010) expose the power structures that silence the “Other” and critique the violence of speaking for the voiceless which often reproduces hegemony within the subject/object dichotomy, Daoism, particularly through the Zhuangzian perspective, offers a more radical solution: Contextual Epistemic Pluralism.

This article posits that Daoist epistemic peacebuilding creates a shared space devoid of judgment, where diversity exists harmoniously without othering. By removing the imposition of a universal standard, every perspective gains intrinsic value within its own context. The

convergence of pluralism and contextualism dissolves the moral authority often weaponized by the state to exert control. Transcending Spivak, a Daoist approach to peace shifts the objective from enabling the subaltern to speak toward establishing a condition where no entity can claim a monopoly over “Truth” in order to dominate others. This is not a utopian dream but a proposal for an ethics of letting-be (*Gelassenheit*), the foundation for a cultural peace far deeper than traditional positive peace. Such an ethics forms an a-centric order where diversity does not culminate in conflict, but in seamless coordination under the infinite transformations of the Dao.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in close textual reading of two primary Daoist texts. Each selected passage was first read contextually, situating it within the historical circumstances and argumentative purposes in which the text initially emerged, before being read comparatively alongside contemporary philosophical concepts in peace and conflict studies, particularly the literature on epistemic violence and epistemic peacebuilding reviewed above. This procedure was applied in three stages: first, identifying passages in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* that address moral authority and epistemic difference; second, situating these passages within their textual and historical context to establish their most textually defensible reading; and third, placing this reading into dialogue with contemporary peace-theoretical concepts in order to develop the notion of Daoist epistemic peacebuilding advanced in this study.

Primary Sources and Translations

This study centers on the close reading of two primary Daoist texts, the *Daodejing* (sometimes transliterated *Dao De Jing*) and the *Zhuangzi*. The *Daodejing* is read through Moss Roberts's (2001) translation, *Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way*. This edition was selected over the many available English renderings for three interconnected reasons. First, Roberts explicitly situates the text within the political and polemical debates that ran from the time of Confucius to the unification of the empire in 221 BCE, reading the *Daodejing* as an intervention in contemporaneous arguments over rulership, statecraft, and moral authority rather than as a purely mystical or devotional work; this framing aligns directly with the present study's concern with the critique of moral and political authority, making Roberts's translation more analytically congruent with the argument advanced here than translations oriented primarily toward a spiritual or self-help readership. Second, Roberts reproduces the condensed, aphoristic, and frequently rhymed character of Laozi's original syntax rather than dissolving it into continuous prose, preserving the interpretive ambiguity and rhetorical compression that the present study treats as philosophically significant instead of as a translation problem to be smoothed over. Third, Roberts incorporates and annotates variant readings from the Mawangdui and Guodian manuscript versions, allowing this study's close reading to be checked, where relevant, against the textual variation documented across the manuscript tradition rather than resting on a single received sequence of eighty-one stanzas; as Roberts notes, even the conventional stanza count and ordering are subjects of ongoing scholarly reconstruction, and no translation, including this one, offers a definitive or final rendering. Taken together, these features make Roberts's edition

a more argument-relevant and textually transparent basis for this study than a single-source, doctrinally oriented rendering would be.

The *Zhuangzi* is read through Burton Watson's (1996 in Zhuangzi, 1996) *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, a partial translation confined to the Inner Chapters and selected passages from the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters; the analysis in this study is accordingly limited to the material contained in Watson's selections rather than the full compilation. Burton Watson argues that the *Zhuangzi* cannot be adequately translated through paraphrase alone. Instead, a philosophically responsible translation should preserve the imagery, ambiguity, and poetic quality of the original text as faithfully as possible (Zhuangzi, 1996, pp. 14-22). This translational philosophy has made Watson's edition one of the most influential and widely accepted English translations in Daoist studies, and it remains a standard reference in contemporary scholarship.

These two texts were selected because they represent the two foundational strata of classical Daoist philosophy, the aphoristic-cosmological (*Daodejing*) and the narrative-argumentative (*Zhuangzi*). Additionally, their treatment of moral authority and epistemic difference bears most directly on this study's thesis. The analysis is limited by its reliance on modern English-language secondary translations rather than the classical Chinese originals; close-reading claims made here should therefore be read as claims about the philosophical content transmitted through these translations and cross-checked against their documented manuscript variants, rather than as independent philological claims about the classical Chinese.

Procedures

First, the research utilizes textual hermeneutics to examine primary Daoist canon, - principally the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, by employing close reading techniques to extract latent socio-political implications from metaphorical and aphoristic discourses. This tier goes beyond a mere historical reading, instead adopting an interpretive phenomenological approach to bridge the temporal gap between ancient Daoist concepts and the modern socio-political landscape of epistemic violence.

Second, the study incorporates comparative critique by placing Daoist thought into dialectical engagement with Western critical theories, notably, Gayatri Spivak's "epistemic violence" and Galtung's "cultural violence." This comparative tier is not intended to seek superficial similarities but to facilitate a deconstructive analysis of the subject-object and moral-authority dichotomies that underpin modern institutional peacebuilding. By using the Zhuangzian critique of "fixed meanings" or "the completion of the heart" (*Cheng Xin*), the research deconstructs the absolute truth-claims of sovereign institutions.

Third, the study synthesizes these findings through a thematic synthesis strategy, developing a novel conceptual model termed "Epistemic Peacebuilding." This process involves a "philosophical reconstruction" where the principles of contextual pluralism are formalized as an alternative to universal standardism. The methodology further ensures validity through inter-philosophical triangulation, situating the Daoist anarchist perspective alongside recent scholarly developments in Eastern political philosophy (Chong, 2016). Ultimately, this approach moves from textual analysis to the formulation of a normative framework, illustrating how the deconstruction of epistemic hegemony functions as a prerequisite for sustainable, cultural peace. By prioritizing the logic of non-interference over institutional coercion, the methodology allows for the emergence of an a-centric, non-dualistic paradigm for conflict transformation,

fulfilling the criteria for a systematic philosophical inquiry into the roots of non-violent coexistence.

Findings

Reconsidering the Epistemological Foundations of Daoism

Scholars of Chinese philosophy who focus specifically on the Zhuangzi have commonly interpreted its philosophical system as grounded primarily in an epistemological stance. In particular, several influential interpretations have portrayed Zhuangzi as advancing a form of relativism. Chad Hansen, for example, argues that Chapter 2 of the Zhuangzi exhibits features of what he terms radical skepticism and perspectival relativism. According to Hansen, perspectival relativism maintains that all perspectives are correct relative to their respective standpoints, while radical skepticism holds that human beings are unable to know truth as such, since no truth exists independently of our conceptual frameworks (Hansen, 1983, pp. 35–39). Hansen contends that the *Zhuangzi* presents arguments suggesting that no single perspective enjoys privileged epistemic authority. The distinctions and classifications that structure our understanding of the world are, in this view, imposed retrospectively through linguistic conventions. Names and categories are assigned by human beings and thus cannot claim permanence or necessity. Consequently, reality cannot be said to exist independently of the mind, and truth cannot be known apart from our conceptual and linguistic frameworks. Daoist relativism, in this interpretation, does not presuppose an absolute, immutable, or metaphysically ultimate *Dao* (Hansen, 1983, pp. 35–39). Rather, perspectival relativism as taught by Zhuangzi leads to radical skepticism insofar as truth is understood as dependent upon human cognition, rendering access to an objective reality beyond interpretation impossible. Such skepticism is closely linked to linguistic conventionalism, in which meaning itself is relative to socially constituted practices of naming and distinction, and is therefore often characterized as relativistic skepticism. This interpretation is frequently supported by reference to Chapter 17 of the Zhuangzi, particularly the well-known dialogue between Zhuangzi and Huizi concerning the happiness of fish:

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Chuang Tzu said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!"

Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?"

Hui Tzu said, "I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!"

Chuang Tzu said, "Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao." (Zhuangzi, 1996, p. 110)

This dialogue raises questions concerning the status and conditions of knowing. From a relativist perspective, Lea Cantor (2020) interprets this passage as exemplifying what she terms species relativism. Species relativism holds that epistemic claims are necessarily constrained by the cognitive frameworks specific to each species, rendering human judgments anthropocentric. Applying this to the fish dialogue, Cantor argues that humans cannot legitimately determine the happiness of fish using human conceptual standards, since fish and humans belong to different species with fundamentally different modes of existence. Huizi's challenge, "You are not a fish," rests on the assumption that knowledge is limited to the epistemic boundaries of the human species. Zhuangzi's response does not claim privileged access to the fish's inner state; instead, he affirms that his claim arises from his own situated perspective—standing by the riverbank. Both interlocutors thus rely on human-centered epistemic frameworks. Cantor concludes that their shared reliance on anthropocentric judgment establishes a form of objectivity within the limits of human cognition, distinguishing species relativism from hard relativism (Cantor, 2020, p. 226).

Alex T. Hitchens further develops this line of interpretation in his contextualist reconsideration of the "happy fish" passage. Hitchens argues that remaining embedded within a single perspective obscures its limitations. Only through shifting perspectives can such constraints be recognized. However, this shift does not grant direct access to the fish's experience. Rather, Hitchens suggests that both fish and humans may participate in a shared experience of "happiness" through purposeless wandering and adaptive attunement to their respective environments. Happiness, on this account, does not possess a unified structural essence. Zhuangzi, therefore, need not "jump into the water" (Hitchens, 2023, p. 600) to understand fish happiness; his understanding arises through contextual immersion, where fish, riverbank, Huizi, and Zhuangzi collectively constitute the experiential situation. Knowledge, in this sense, cannot be separated from the contextual factors through which it emerges. Hitchens thus proposes a transitional contextualism in which all perspectives are fluid, relational, and context-dependent (Hitchens, 2023, p. 585). In contrast to relativist readings, Karyn Lai situates Zhuangzi within a pluralist framework. Lai argues that Zhuangzi affirms epistemic pluralism rather than relativism, emphasizing the legitimacy of multiple truths without subordinating them to a single authoritative framework. Whereas relativism often implies mutual exclusion between perspectives, pluralism allows diverse perspectives to coexist without hierarchical adjudication. Zhuangzi, Lai suggests, moves beyond binary distinctions of right and wrong, using them illustratively rather than normatively. The parable of the frog in the well and the summer insect exemplifies this stance (Zhuangzi, 1996, p. 97; this research's translation). This passage highlights the inescapability of perspectival limitation while simultaneously affirming the value of experiential diversity. For Lai, Zhuangzi's pluralism encourages ethical attentiveness to others by recognizing the legitimacy of their lived experiences (Lai, 2013, pp. 77–78).

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that while Zhuangzi may be characterized as relativistic in a limited sense, he cannot be adequately understood as a radical skeptic. If Zhuangzi affirms that beings can apprehend truth from within their own perspectives, then scepticism understood as the denial of the possibility of knowledge—cannot coherently apply. Transitional contextualism is better understood as embedded within Zhuangzi's broader metaphysical vision of relational unity, emphasizing the dynamic interdependence of all things (Hitchens, 2023, p. 597; Hall & Ames, 1987, pp. 246–249). Attempts to collapse plurality into absolute unity risk conceptual inconsistency and practical paradox. Accordingly, this study

argues that the most plausible interpretation of Zhuangzi integrates epistemic pluralism with contextualism, preserving the value of diverse perspectives without recourse to an objective center.

This study's claim that the pluralist-contextualist reading is the most plausible interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* may appear to sit uneasily beside the article's broader thesis that no standpoint should claim epistemic authority over others. The tension is only trivial. The article's thesis concerns the illegitimacy of moral and political authority, or the use of a standpoint to categorize, judge, and govern other standpoints not the ordinary scholarly practice of offering a textually grounded and comparatively defensible reading among competing interpretations. Claiming interpretive plausibility within a hermeneutic community, open to further revision and contestation, is categorically different from claiming a Dao-like, totalizing epistemic authority that forecloses other readings. Moreover, this study does not aim to position itself as Zhuangzi, or to speak in his voice with unmediated authority; rather, it seeks to show how a Zhuangzian epistemological proposal opens a path beyond judgment and assertion, thereby extending and enriching the scope of debate within Zhuangzi scholarship. The authors are nonetheless aware that this undertaking risks performing precisely what Zhuangzi himself might resist: establishing an epistemic standard for what counts as a correct interpretation of his thought. Yet such clarification remains necessary, since without rendering Zhuangzi's proposal reasonably intelligible, interpretation risks proceeding without genuine understanding of Zhuangzi at all. The research does not claim to have grasped Zhuangzi most fully or definitively; rather, it offers one tendency of reading, with an appropriation of Zhuangzi for present purposes, without insisting that this proposal is correct or must stand as the highest standard. Indeed, that this interpretation is itself offered as one reading among others, rather than as the single correct account of Zhuangzi, is consistent with, rather than a departure from, the Daoist epistemic stance the study defends.

Finally, this pluralist-contextualist reading situates Zhuangzi's epistemology in productive dialogue with contemporary philosophy of science and the humanities. The proposal by Canali and Lohse (2024) to integrate epistemic pluralism and contextualism as a unified framework for resolving epistemic conflicts in public policy illuminates Zhuangzi's relevance beyond its historical context. Their explanation demonstrates that embracing epistemic diversity does not entail abandoning evaluative judgment but rather shifting from rigid hierarchies of knowledge to context-sensitive assessments of epistemic appropriateness. Expanding epistemic authority to include practitioners, communities, and affected stakeholders would mirror Zhuangzi's resistance to monopolized epistemic power. In this sense, pluralist contextualism does not dissolve truth; instead, it reveals truth as emergent through dynamic relationships among human beings, the world, and situational conditions.

How Daoist Philosophy Reveals Epistemic Violence as the Source of Other Forms of Violence and Its Opposition as the Grounds for Emancipation

The concept of epistemic violence is systematically articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" in which she demonstrates how certain knowledge systems particularly Western epistemologies that claim universality and neutrality, function to marginalize, exclude, and devalue other forms of knowledge, such as local knowledge, lived experience, and the cultural worldviews of the colonized. As a result, the voices of "subaltern" groups are not recognized as possessing genuine epistemic authority or legitimacy

(Spivak, 2010). Thomas Teo (2010) further develops the notion of epistemic violence in a more concrete sense by arguing that theories constructed through biased interpretations of empirical data can inflict tangible harm upon particular social groups. A paradigmatic example is scholarly work that claimed people of African descent were naturally inferior in intelligence, a claim that profoundly shaped social attitudes, public policy, and institutional practices. Epistemic violence, therefore, is not merely a problem internal to epistemology; it constitutes a foundational mechanism of power and structural oppression.

Spivak also offers a sustained critique of Western intellectuals who attempt to “speak for” the “voiceless,” arguing that such efforts often silence subaltern subjects once again by reproducing the Western subject–object framework. Representation, rather than dismantling marginality, frequently reinforces it by re-inscribing the subaltern as an object of knowledge rather than a speaking subject (Spivak, 2010). Drawing on this framework, the present study proposes that epistemic violence can be understood on at least two levels: (1) the exclusion and suppression of divergent voices from epistemic consideration through reduction and marginalization, and (2) the reconstitution of those voices as epistemic objects through acts of representation by epistemically privileged subjects, thereby reaffirming their subordinate status. Both of these levels are grounded in modern epistemological frameworks that employ standardized criteria of knowledge to determine epistemic value, ultimately reinforcing the monopolization of knowledge by those deemed legitimate knowers. As a consequence, epistemic violence persists rather than disappears. This raises a crucial question: how does Daoist philosophy understand and respond to epistemic violence?

This study argues that Daoist philosophy, particularly as it is articulated in the *Zhuangzi*, offers an approach that differs significantly from Spivak’s critique. Rather than merely exposing the domination of one knowledge system over others, Daoism proposes an epistemological stance that allows multiple forms of knowledge to coexist without hierarchical ranking. The epistemic orientation of Daoist philosophy is best understood as pluralistic contextualism rather than relativism. The *Zhuangzi* repeatedly demonstrates that human knowledge is necessarily limited by experience, context, and life conditions. The well-known parables of the frog in the well and the summer insect illustrate that one cannot judge another’s understanding of the world by imposing one’s own epistemic framework upon it (Zhuangzi, 1996, pp. 34-36). Yet the *Zhuangzi* does not advocate abandoning one’s epistemic standpoint altogether. Instead, it calls for an awareness of the limits of one’s perspective and an invitation to “step beyond” it, viewing the world as a shared space without elevating any single standpoint as the ultimate standard of truth. This is particularly evident in the text’s treatment of disputes over right and wrong, where judgment is deliberately “suspended” (*xuan pan*), allowing reality to unfold in its continual transformation (Zhuangzi, 1996, p. 97).

This conception resonates with Ganeri’s (2019) notion of epistemic stance, according to which knowledge does not depend solely on possessing a single, perfectly reliable method, but rather on adopting an openness that permits multiple approaches to illuminate different aspects of reality without requiring mutual negation. Daoist epistemic pluralism thus does not deny the existence of truth; it rejects the monopolization of truth. At the same time, Daoist contextualism connects significant value to the relational and situational conditions under which things exist. The convergence of pluralism and contextualism in Daoist philosophy, this study argues, constitutes a crucial foundation for reducing epistemic violence, insofar as it prevents any single

perspective from becoming dominant or suppressive, while allowing reality as it is to manifest itself.

From this epistemic orientation emerges what the present study terms an “Ethics of Difference.” The Daoist ethics of difference articulated in the *Zhuangzi* does not rest on the moral assumption that individuals reason from identical standpoints or anticipate the same consequences from their actions, as is often presupposed in Confucian moral reasoning. Instead, it foregrounds human differences in thought, ideals, desires, preferences, behaviors, and social practices, while affirming the equal value of all human beings (Huang, 2010, pp. 69–70). Equality, in this view, does not derive from shared rational capacities or access to an ultimate truth, but from the irreducible diversity of lived experience. To define humanity solely in terms of rationality or epistemic access to certain ideal truths is to sever and diminish the full spectrum of human experience. Each person’s experiences, however small or particular, constitute their entire being. To exist as oneself through one’s distinctive life experiences is to realize one’s humanity in its fullest sense.

In this context, equality signifies the absence of a neutral, universal standard by which differences can be hierarchically evaluated. Huang illustrates this through Zhuangzi’s examples of difference: the equal value of human life in dry environments and eel life in wet environments does not imply that eels should live on land or humans in water. To impose such conditions would be to force others to conform to one’s own mode of existence (Huang, 2010, p. 91), thereby reverting to an ethic of sameness. The Daoist ethics of difference thus opens a space for peace as coexistence without domination, coercion, or the problematization of difference. Acceptance of *ziran* the natural course through which beings follow their own ways—becomes the ethical foundation of compassion and patience, diminishing the impulse to exercise epistemic power over others. Huang further connects the ethics of difference to political philosophy by developing a politics of difference. While individual moral actions may affect relatively few others, political institutions, laws, and public policies exert force over all who fall within their jurisdiction. Consequently, ethical frameworks based on sameness become increasingly problematic at the institutional level (Huang, 2010, pp. 91–92). Daoist thought challenges liberal neutrality, such as Rawls’s original position and the veil of ignorance, by rejecting the possibility of an ultimately correct neutral standpoint (Rawls, 1971). Political principles, from a Daoist perspective, must therefore be grounded in difference itself; social rules that fail to acknowledge difference lack legitimacy.

A politics of difference faces the well-known dilemma of whether treating disadvantaged groups the same as others ignores their specificity or treating them differently risks stigmatization. Huang argues that Daoist philosophy resolves this dilemma by relinquishing fixed standards altogether. Difference is normal, not exceptional, and ethical action consists in treating difference as an ordinary condition of human life (Huang, 2010: 94). While endorsing Huang’s interpretation, the present study extends it by emphasizing that Zhuangzi’s philosophy is not relativistic but pluralistic. As Isaiah Berlin argues, pluralism differs fundamentally from relativism: whereas relativism denies meaningful truth claims altogether, pluralism affirms the possibility of understanding diverse values, ideals, and forms of life through imaginative insight (Berlin, 1991, p. 10, 80).

Finally, Daoist philosophy reveals epistemic violence as the root of cultural and direct violence. This is vividly illustrated in Zhuangzi’s parable of training horses, where human knowledge systems redefine horses as instruments to be disciplined for utility. This epistemic

framework becomes cultural violence once training and domination are normalized and morally justified, legitimizing the use of reins, chains, and whips under the guise of education rather than cruelty. Such normalization exemplifies the internalization of epistemic violence described by Hansen (1992, p. 212).

Epistemic violence also culminates in direct violence, most notably war. In *Daodejing*, Laozi repeatedly emphasizes that weapons are ominous instruments (*buxiang*) and that war is a profound tragedy rather than a source of glory (*Daodejing*, Chapters 30, 31, 67, 69). War arises only after epistemic processes have constructed distinctions between “us” and “them,” “right” and “wrong,” thereby legitimizing violence. These epistemic divisions violate *ziran*, which recognizes the equal value of all life. Once such distinctions are institutionalized through education, ritual, and commemoration, cultural violence legitimizes direct violence. Laozi’s insistence that victory must be marked by mourning underscores his attempt to dismantle the cultural narratives that glorify war. Thus, Daoist opposition to war is not merely a superficial ethics of peace but a radical critique of the epistemic structures that normalize violence. To dismantle epistemic violence is, therefore, a necessary condition for dismantling violence in all its forms. Only by dissolving epistemic hierarchies can humanity return to a peace grounded in the *Dao*, where all beings are recognized as sharing a common ontological belonging.

Sustainable Peace through Epistemic Peace in Daoist Philosophy

Peace as the Deconstruction of Epistemic Violence

When the problem and origins of peacebuilding in Daoist philosophy are examined through the conceptual framework of Western peace theories, it becomes evident that Daoist peace does not rest upon the termination of observable conflicts that culminate in violence, nor upon the management of violence at its final stage. Rather, Daoist philosophy redirects the inquiry toward the epistemic conditions that make conflict possible in the first place. The findings of this study indicate that, from a Daoist perspective, violence does not originate in the use of force or in political power structures; instead, it begins with processes of cognitive division and the judgment of the world through dualistic frameworks that separate “this” from “that.” Such epistemic bifurcation constitutes the foundational logic of all forms of fragmentation and antagonism. The study demonstrates that Daoist philosophy systematically critiques Confucian thought, particularly its moral institutionalism. Confucianism emphasizes codified norms and ritualizes moral orders that estrange individuals from their *ziran* (natural spontaneity). More importantly, Daoism dissolves the boundary between the so-called sage, or *junzi*, and ordinary individuals. In Confucianism, the sage is positioned as an epistemic authority whose knowledge legitimizes hierarchical distinctions between rulers and subjects, the knowledgeable and the ignorant. Daoism rejects this configuration by denying the formation of knowledge systems that justify political domination by their separation of right from wrong of wisdom from ignorance. As Moeller’s analysis of the *Dao De Jing* suggests, “the more knowledge there is, the greater the reduction of desire becomes impossible” (Moeller, 2006, p. 96). The rejection of epistemic authority thus functions as resistance to the production of social artifices that would eventually crystallize into institutions, later serving as conduits for cultural and structural violence.

The present analysis further shows that *Zhuangzi* regarded sage-based knowledge as unnecessary precisely because Confucian epistemology legitimates rulers’ monopolization of knowledge and facilitates institutionalized domination. For *Zhuangzi*, such epistemic

monopolies contradict the contextual and plural nature of knowing, which is always contingent upon relational differences that coexist harmoniously. Consequently, Daoist philosophy rejects both knowledge systems that distort *ziran* by imposing artificial norms and the Confucian sage who acts as a bridge toward political oppression through epistemic authority.

A systematic conceptual analysis reveals that Western peace theories from Hobbes to modern peace paradigms are generally grounded in the assumption that humans are naturally inclined toward conflict and therefore require reason, rules, or contracts to regulate their destructive tendencies. Hobbes, for instance, defines peace as a fundamental law of reason that humans must pursue in order to escape the state of war. This formulation presupposes an image of human beings as inherently savage and violent (Hobbes, 1994). Daoist philosophy, however, advances a fundamentally different framework: the core problem does not lie in the absence of rules but in their excess. Over-regulation distorts natural spontaneity and produces conflict rather than preventing it. As Laozi makes explicit, when the *Dao* is lost, virtue emerges; when virtue fails, benevolence, righteousness, and ritual follow. This sequence represents not moral progress but regression. Peace and normalcy precede moral codification; moral systems arise only because excessive valuation and epistemic overproduction necessitate mechanisms of control. From this perspective, epistemic violence emerges through the establishment of singular standards of truth, goodness, and correctness, which automatically suppress alternative ways of knowing. The present study thus proposes that Daoist peace should be understood as epistemic peace rather than institutional or contractual peace. When dualistic judgment is absent, conflict is no longer systematically produced. Peace, therefore, is not the outcome of managing violence but the result of refusing to generate violence at its epistemic source.

Peace as a Critique of Morality Imposed by Institutional Power

Building upon this analysis, the study demonstrates that Daoist philosophy does not regard morality as a means of peacebuilding. On the contrary, institutionalized morality is interpreted as a symptom of degeneration from the *Dao* and as a structural condition that produces conflict. Laozi's account of civilizational decline illustrates that ritual (*li*) marks "the beginning of disorder." As the text says:

*Thus the loss of the Way
Meant the advent of virtue,
The loss of virtue
The advent of kindness,
The loss of kindness
The advent of service,
The loss of service
The advent of ritual rule.
Ritual rule turned loyal trust to deceit,
Leading to disorder. (Laozi, 2001, p. 106).*

Morality, in this sense, is not the foundation of harmony but a compensatory mechanism that emerges when humanity departs from its natural mode of being.

Western peace theories typically associate peace with justice, legitimacy, and social stability. Contractualist thinkers such as Hobbes conceptualize peace as a rational necessity for escaping war (Hobbes, 1994). Daoist philosophy rejects these shared assumptions by exposing social orders, moral norms, and role distinctions as civilizational artifices that distort human nature. Laozi's critique extends to hierarchical relations between rulers and subjects and even familial roles, all of which interfere with spontaneous harmony (Laozi, 2001, pp. 67-68).

Morality requires binary distinctions of right/wrong and good/evil which generate what this study conceptualizes as epistemic violence, the root of structural and cultural violence. Daoism thus interprets conflict not as an expression of human nature but as the product of enforced moral frameworks. Accordingly, peace cannot be achieved through universal moral standards. Rather, Daoist peace emerges from liberation from institutionalized morality, not from the construction of alternative moral regimes. This position does not endorse moral relativism but rejects centralized moral authority that suppresses plural forms of life.

Peace as Harmony without Consensus

Daoist peace is neither grounded in consensus nor in ideological unity. Unlike contractualist models that require agreement upon shared principles, Daoist peace arises from harmony that does not depend on judgment, valuation, or standardization. Western political philosophy often defines peace as the resolution of hostility through treaties or *Pax* agreements as settlement. Daoism challenges this logic by revealing that consensus itself necessitates exclusionary standards determining which voices count.

From a Daoist perspective, conflict does not stem from diversity but from the elevation of particular values as universal norms. Western peace models, whether negative peace, positive peace, or institutional peace, remain embedded in logics of regulation, hierarchy, and moral centralization. Daoism offers an alternative vision in which all beings follow their own courses in spontaneous coordination. Social disorder arises only when civilization imposes artificial structures that erase differences.

This conception aligns with critiques of cultural and epistemic violence. Harmony without consensus does not require agreement or moral unity; it requires the absence of epistemic hierarchies. Peace emerges not from making all voices converge but from refusing to elevate any voice as a universal standard. This study, therefore, concludes that Daoist peace constitutes an epistemic peace: a mode of coexistence in which violence is dismantled at the level of knowledge production itself.

Table 1 summarizes the contrast between Western peace paradigms and Daoist epistemic peace as developed across the three dimensions discussed above.

Table 1

Comparison of Western Peace Paradigms and Daoist Epistemic Peace

Dimension	Western Peace Theories	Daoist Epistemic Peace
Origin of conflict	Rooted in human nature or the absence of regulation (Hobbes, 1994)	Rooted in cognitive/epistemic division—dualistic judgment separating “this” from “that”
Role of morality	Foundation of social order; peace requires shared moral or legal standards	A symptom of decline from the <i>Dao</i> ; institutionalized morality generates rather than resolves conflict (Laozi, 2001, p. 106)

Table 1*(Cont.)*

Dimension	Western Peace Theories	Daoist Epistemic Peace
Basis of peace	Consensus, treaties, and agreement on shared principles (peace as settlement)	Harmony without consensus; the absence of epistemic hierarchy, not the convergence of voices
Mechanism of peace	Rules, contracts, and institutions that manage or restrain violence	Dissolution of dualistic judgment at its epistemic source, prior to institutional intervention

Note. Compiled by the authors based on the analysis presented in this section.

Discussions

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing scholarly debates in Daoist philosophy and peace studies by offering a reconceptualization of peace that shifts the analytical focus from institutional, moral, and normative frameworks to the epistemic conditions that generate conflict. While previous studies have drawn on Daoism as a source of ethical inspiration or spiritual cultivation for peace, this research advances a more radical interpretation by positioning Daoist philosophy as a systematic critique of epistemic violence itself. In doing so, it intervenes directly in several strands of existing literature and reorients their underlying assumptions.

First, this study challenges dominant interpretations of Daoist epistemology that frame Zhuangzi primarily as a relativist or skeptic. Influential readings by Hansen (1983) and others argue that Zhuangzi's perspectivism collapses truth into linguistic conventions, leading to radical skepticism and the denial of objective knowledge. While such interpretations have been valuable in highlighting Zhuangzi's critique of fixed distinctions, the present findings suggest that this line of interpretation underestimates the constructive dimension of Zhuangzi's thought. As demonstrated in the analysis of the "happy fish" dialogue, Zhuangzi does not deny the possibility of knowing; rather, he rejects the elevation of any single epistemic standpoint into a universality of truth. This supports and extends pluralist readings proposed by Lai (2013), while resisting the tendency still present in parts of the literature to treat pluralism as a softened form of relativism.

At the same time, the findings resonate with recent contextualist interpretations, particularly Hitchens's (2023) account of transitional contextualism. However, this study departs from existing contextualist readings by arguing that contextualism in Daoism cannot stand alone. Detached from pluralism, contextualism risks becoming a descriptive account of situated knowing without normative implications. By contrast, the present findings show that Daoist contextualism is inseparable from epistemic pluralism: multiple perspectives are not merely context-bound but mutually non-hierarchical. This integrated pluralist-contextualist framework represents a conceptual advance beyond the literature that treats these approaches as analytically distinct.

Second, the study contributes to debates on peace theory by questioning the foundational assumptions of modern peace paradigms. Classical Western approaches from Hobbesian contractarianism to liberal peace theory generally conceptualize peace as the outcome of regulating conflict through institutions, moral norms, or consensus (Hobbes, 1994). Even critical peace theorists, while exposing structural violence, often retain normative

commitments to justice, emancipation, or universal moral standards. The findings of this study challenge these assumptions by demonstrating that, from a Daoist perspective, such normative frameworks themselves function as sources of epistemic violence. This insight extends to Galtung's (1996) influential typology of violence. While Galtung distinguishes direct, structural, and cultural violence, the present findings suggest that these forms presuppose a deeper epistemic layer. Daoist philosophy exposes how binary epistemic structures, such as good/bad, right/wrong, normal/deviant constitute the conditions under which structural and cultural violence become intelligible and legitimate. In this sense, epistemic violence is not merely an additional category, but the generative logic underlying all other forms of violence. This argument goes beyond existing peace studies literature, which has rarely interrogated the epistemic foundations of violence with such depth.

Third, the study engages critically with scholarship that interprets Daoism as a resource for peace through inner cultivation or ethical disposition. Works such as Catabia (2017) and Pynn (2014) emphasize Daoist practices *wu-wei*, non-attachment, and spiritual self-cultivation as means of fostering peaceful individuals and societies. While these contributions are valuable, the present findings suggest that such approaches remain embedded within the modern peace paradigm they seek to soften. By treating peace as something to be cultivated or promoted through ethical improvement, they implicitly accept the assumption that conflict is a problem to be managed rather than a condition produced by epistemic structures.

In contrast, this study argues that Daoist philosophy reverses the direction of inquiry. Instead of asking how Daoism can contribute to peacebuilding, it asks how dominant peace projects themselves generate conflict through epistemic domination. This shift aligns with Daoist critiques of Confucian moral institutionalism, where codified virtues and rituals are interpreted as signs of degeneration rather than progress. As Moeller (2006) has observed, the proliferation of knowledge and moral norms corresponds to an increase in desire, regulation, and ultimately disorder. The findings of this study deepen this insight by framing moral institutionalization as a form of epistemic violence that precedes political coercion.

Fourth, the discussion of harmony without consensus situates the study within contemporary debates on pluralism, democracy, and coexistence. Liberal political theory often assumes that peaceful coexistence requires consensus, procedural agreement, or at least shared normative commitments. Even pluralist models typically rely on a meta-framework that adjudicates among differences. The Daoist model articulated in this study rejects this assumption altogether. Harmony is not the result of agreement, but the outcome of non-interference and non-hierarchical coexistence. These findings challenge not only liberal peace theory but also deliberative and consensus-based models of conflict resolution. From a Daoist perspective, consensus is not neutral; it presupposes criteria that determine whose voices count and whose do not. The pursuit of consensus thus reproduces epistemic violence by marginalizing perspectives that do not conform to dominant evaluative standards. By contrast, Daoist harmony emerges when no single perspective is authorized to judge others. This insight parallels, but also radicalizes, critiques of epistemic injustice in contemporary philosophy by moving beyond inclusion toward de-centering epistemic authority itself.

Finally, the study's findings place Daoist philosophy in dialogue with contemporary discussions in the philosophy of science and public policy, particularly debates surrounding epistemic pluralism and contextualism. Recent proposals by Canali and Lohse (2024) to dismantle evidence hierarchies and expand notions of expertise echo Daoist resistance to

epistemic monopolization. However, whereas contemporary policy debates often justify pluralism pragmatically to manage uncertainty, Daoist philosophy offers a deeper ontological and epistemological justification. Knowledge plurality is not a temporary strategy but a condition of non-violent coexistence. In this respect, the present study demonstrates that Daoist epistemology anticipates and deepens contemporary critiques of technocratic authority. By refusing to privilege any single epistemic standpoint, whether scientific, moral, or institutional, Daoist philosophy exposes how claims of objectivity can function as instruments of domination. Epistemic peacebuilding, as articulated here, therefore represents not merely a Daoist contribution to peace studies but a broader theoretical intervention into how knowledge, authority, and coexistence are conceptualized.

Rather than opposing dominant epistemologies with alternative truths, Daoist epistemic peacebuilding suspends the very impulse to adjudicate epistemic legitimacy. In contrast to representational critiques of epistemic violence (Spivak, 2010), which problematize who speaks for whom, Daoism questions the deeper assumption that peace requires speaking, correcting, or morally positioning at all. This marks a decisive shift from epistemic resistance to epistemic release. When read alongside contemporary analyses of linguistic and rhetorical violence (Graves & Spencer, 2022), Daoist non-judgment (*wuwei*) can be understood as an ethical refusal to stabilize meaning into authoritative scripts. Similarly, the Daoist ethics of difference resonates with critiques of slow violence (Bunch, 2015) yet diverges by rejecting the temporal logic of progressive emancipation. Peace, from a Daoist perspective, does not emerge through reforming epistemic structures over time but through the immediate de-centering of epistemic authority.

Thus, this study extends the literature by proposing that sustainable peace requires not epistemic justice within knowledge systems, but an epistemic condition in which no system can claim moral or cognitive supremacy. Daoist epistemic peacebuilding reframes peace as harmony without epistemic governance—an a-centric coexistence that fundamentally reorients how violence, knowledge, and plurality are understood.

In sum, the findings of this study reposition Daoist philosophy as a critical resource for rethinking peace at its epistemic roots. By engaging and challenging existing interpretations in Daoist scholarship, peace theory, and epistemology, the study demonstrates that sustainable peace cannot be achieved by refining moral norms or institutional arrangements alone. Rather, it requires a fundamental reconfiguration of how the world is known, categorized, and judged. Daoist epistemic peace thus emerges not as a utopian ideal but as a critical practice of non-domination grounded in pluralism, contextuality, and the refusal of epistemic authority.

Conclusions

This study has argued that Daoist philosophy provides a fundamentally different way of understanding peace—one that relocates its foundation from institutional order, moral authority, and consensus-building to the epistemic conditions that shape human coexistence. By reconceptualizing peace as epistemic peace, the study demonstrates that violence originates not primarily in physical force or political structures but in epistemic dualism, moral institutionalization, and hierarchical claims to truth.

The analysis of Daoist texts, particularly the *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing*, reveals a sustained critique of epistemic authority that precedes and undergirds all other forms of domination. Unlike modern peace paradigms that seek to manage violence after it has emerged, Daoist

philosophy addresses violence at its point of inception where distinctions between right and wrong, self and other, and legitimacy and deviance are first constructed. In doing so, it exposes the epistemic production of violence as a normalized feature of civilization rather than an aberration.

One of the central conclusions of this study is that Zhuangzi's epistemology cannot be adequately understood as either relativism or skepticism. Instead, it articulates a pluralist-contextualist framework in which multiple perspectives coexist without hierarchical ordering, while remaining intelligible within their respective contexts. This framework preserves the possibility of knowledge without collapsing into universalism or nihilism. Knowledge is neither absolute nor arbitrary; it is relational, emergent, and situated. Building on this epistemological foundation, the study demonstrates that Daoist peace does not rely on moral regulation or institutional governance. On the contrary, institutionalized morality functions as a mechanism of epistemic violence that generates conflict by enforcing binary judgments and suppressing differences. Daoist peace emerges through the dissolution of moral authority, not through its refinement. This insight challenges deeply entrenched assumptions in both Western political philosophy and peace studies, where moral norms are typically treated as indispensable to social order.

The originality of this study lies in several interrelated contributions. First, it introduces the concept of epistemic peacebuilding as a distinct theoretical framework grounded in Daoist philosophy. While previous scholarship has explored Daoism in relation to inner peace, non-violence, and harmony, this study advances a systematic account of peace as an epistemic condition that precedes psychological tranquility and political stability. Second, the study offers a novel synthesis of epistemic pluralism and contextualism as a unified framework rather than treating them as separate or competing approaches. This synthesis allows for the recognition of multiple truths without collapsing into relativism and facilitates contextual sensitivity without forfeiting normative force. In doing so, it provides a robust alternative to both universalist and relativist paradigms in peace theory. Third, the study extends contemporary discussions of epistemic violence by demonstrating how Daoist philosophy moves beyond representational critiques. Rather than seeking to include marginalized voices within existing epistemic hierarchies, Daoist epistemic peacebuilding dismantles the hierarchies themselves. This shift from inclusion to de-centering represents a significant theoretical innovation, particularly in dialogue with postcolonial and critical theory. Finally, the study situates Daoist philosophy in productive conversation with contemporary debates in the philosophy of science and public policy. By aligning Daoist epistemology with recent calls to dismantle evidence hierarchies and expand the notion of expertise, the study demonstrates the continued relevance of Daoist thought in addressing modern epistemic conflicts, from public health to environmental governance.

In conclusion, this study argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through stronger institutions, clearer moral codes, or broader consensus. Such approaches merely reproduce the epistemic conditions that generate violence in the first place. Daoist epistemic peacebuilding offers an alternative vision: a mode of coexistence grounded in contextual pluralism, non-domination, and harmony without consensus. By relinquishing the desire to govern difference through epistemic authority, humanity may cultivate a form of peace that is not imposed, managed, or enforced but rather, allowed to emerge.

Author Contributions

DS: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation.
HB: Review and Editing. TC: Review and Editing, Validation.

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude Sonnet 4.5 to assist with translating Thai text into English and refining the language to meet strict grammatical and academic standards. The tool was used solely for language translation and editing purposes. The accuracy and validity of the content are based on the authors' own research and have been carefully reviewed and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Ethics

This study did not involve human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval from a human research ethics committee. The research is philosophical in nature, focusing on analysis, interpretation, and critical examination of arguments and concepts. As such, it does not fall within the scope of studies requiring ethical review or approval for research involving human subjects.

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