Zhuangzi's "Difference Stories" and Patient Moral Relativism

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1 Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to consider what textual evidence there is in support of the claim that Zhuangzian ethics is so-called "patient moral relativism" (PMR). To do so, let me first provide a brief outline of PMR.

Consider the following sentence: when you are doing something to someone, you should decide *what* to do by considering what the person would want you to do. This sentence is telling us how we should decide what to do—that is, which *decision-making procedure* we should adopt. It does not tell us *why* we should adopt this particular decision-making procedure. Perhaps the reason why we should adopt it is because it has the correct *standard of rightness* as part of its content. A *standard of rightness* provides us the conditions under which an action is right, and hence, perhaps the reason why you should adopt that particular decision-making procedure is because what it *means* for your action to be right is for it to be appropriately informed by what the recipient of your action would want you to do.

However, *standards of rightness* and *decision-making procedures* can come apart.[1] For example, it might be that the reason why I should make decisions by considering what the recipient of my action would want me to do is because using such a procedure reliably leads me to do what is right, and what is right is something *other than* what the recipient of my action wants me to do. In that case, using the

[1] For a discussion of how the two can come apart and why it matters, see Bales (1971) and Driver (2011: 118f).

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correct decision-making procedure reliably points me towards what is right, but it does not have a standard of rightness as part of its content. Consider, in that light, the following claims made by Huang Yong 黄勇, which are either descriptive of what he calls "patient moral relativism" (PMR) or at least entailed by it:

(a) "[W]hen we make decisions about our actions affecting others, what really matters morally is not our desires as agents or subjects, but the desires of others as patients or recipients." (Huang 2005: 403)
(b) "An action is morally right or wrong relative to the standard of the patient." (Huang 2010a: 8)
(c) "[T]he moral appropriateness of our actions toward others is not determined by our standard as moral agents but that of our moral patients." (Huang 2010b: 1057)
(d) "What really counts in judging whether an action is moral or not is […] what the patient thinks in light of his or her own standard." (Huang 2014: 169)
(e) "We have to adopt standards of the actual recipients of our action, and not those of anyone else's, to evaluate our actions." (Huang 2015: 103)
(f) "Whether my action affecting others is moral or not […] depends upon how the patient, the person who receives, or is affected by, my action, thinks about it." (Huang 2018: 883)

From (a)–(f), it seems that Huang takes PMR to be both a standard of rightness for actions and the correct decision-making procedure. Claims (a), (d), and (e) suggest that PMR is a correct decision-making procedure: we ought to decide how to act by considering something about the patient of our action. Claims (b), (c), and (f) suggest that PMR provides a standard of rightness: actions done unto patients are morally right because they correctly relate to certain properties exhibited by the patient of our action.

Taken together, PMR seems to amount to the following view. What makes an action done unto a patient a morally right action is that it accords with the patient's X (where 'X' stands for the patient's desires (a), their moral standards (b), (c), (e), or what they think (d), (f)), and we should decide what to do unto a patient by considering what actions accord with the patient's X.[2]

One might object to PMR by pointing out that a misinformed patient, or a patient under the influence of drugs, might consent to an action that is bad for her or that she would otherwise not consent to. Hence, one might object that it is implausible that an action done unto a patient is morally right just in case it accords with the patient's desires or evaluative standards. Huang avoids such an objection by limiting the scope of what counts as a morally relevant desire or evaluative standard. That is, only the *right* kind of desires or evaluative standards of the patients will do—namely, what Huang calls "rational desires" (Huang 2010a: 10n9). A person's desire is a rational desire only if the person "(1) is aware of alternative things to be desired, (2) if the person has the reasoning ability to make comparisons among the different

[2] Elsewhere, Huang takes this 'X' to be the nature of the patient (e.g., Huang 2010a: 23n25, b: 1055, 1059). I return to this further below.

things to be desired, and (3) the desire chosen is based on such knowledge and reasoning" (Huang 2005: 414).

Let us grant for the sake of argument Huang's account of rational desires. What will be relevant to my argument is that, according to Huang's account, rational desires are based on all-things-considered judgements: we consider various alternatives, compare them against each other, and then judge on the basis of such a comparison. Whether rational desires are constituted by such judgements or merely the product of such judgements is for Huang to spell out in more detail, but the point is that a person can have a rational desire if and only if she makes a decision based on an all-things-considered judgement about what is desirable. For the sake of convenience, I henceforth call a person *rational* just in case she is capable of making such all-things-considered judgements. If a rational person is the 'recipient' of an action and the action accords with that person's rational desire, then, according to PMR, that is a right-making feature of the action. It is what makes the action morally right. Correspondingly, if the action contravenes the person's rational desire, then that is a wrong-making feature of the action.

Huang Yong refers to PMR by various names, including the "moral copper rule" (Huang 2005), or the "ethics of difference" (Huang 2010a, b), and he describes it as "Zhuangzian ethics" (Huang 2018: 838; 2022: 473), sometimes as "Zhuangzian Virtue Ethics" (Huang 2010b: 1056; 2015: 102). Important for my purposes in this chapter is the fact that Huang believes there to be textual evidence in support of ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.[3] The primary textual evidence for this interpretation is a set of passages that Huang calls the "difference stories": the story of the Marquis of Lu 魯侯 and the sea bird from Chapter 18, the story of Hundun's 渾沌 demise from Chapter 7, and the story of Bo Le's 伯樂 horses from Chapter 9.

In what follows, I examine how strong Huang's textual evidence is for the claim that Zhuangzi accepts PMR. My argument proceeds by first introducing a story that neither supports (nor contradicts) an interpretation of Zhuangzi as holding PMR—namely, the story of Lady Li's 麗姬 abduction. I argue that the reason why the story of Lady Li's abduction neither supports (nor contradicts) ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi is illustrative of why some of the difference stories fail to support Huang's interpretation.

2 The Story of Lady Li

In Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, we find the story of the abduction of Lady Li from her ancestral homeland, which I will henceforth abbreviate as *Lady Li*:

[3] Here, and throughout, I will follow Huang's convention of loosely talking about views that a person called "Zhuangzi" may or may not be holding. I do this for the sake of convenience, and I am not committed to the view that there was a person called Zhuangzi 莊子 (or Zhuang Zhou 莊周) who authored the eponymous text *Zhuangzi*, nor am I committed to the view that the *Zhuangzi* was authored by a single person.

> Lady Li was a daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first captured and brought to Qin, she wept until tears drenched her collar. But when she got to the palace, sharing the king's luxurious bed, and feasting on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead don't regret the way they used to cling to life? […] Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream. And yet the foolish imagine they are already awake – how clearly and certainly they understand it all! (2/79–83).[4]

Huang correctly points out that *Lady Li* does not contradict reading Zhuangzi as holding PMR (Huang 2022: 480). Elsewhere, Huang seems to make the related claim that *Lady Li* is not textual evidence in support of PMR (Huang 2010a: 23). I take these claims to be uncontroversial, and I grant them for the sake of argument. The question that is relevant for my purposes is *why* the passage neither supports nor contradicts Huang's interpretation.

On first sight, the question seems to have an obvious answer. Zhuangzi does not say that it is right or wrong for Lady Li to be abducted, nor does he say that the people who abduct her are morally good or bad people. That is, when it comes to *Lady Li*, Zhuangzi does not morally evaluate any of the agents or their actions.

In addition to that, Huang's reason for arguing that *Lady Li* does not contradict PMR is that "this passage is not about how we should treat people" (Huang 2022: 480) but rather that "Zhuangzi is using this as an analogy to show the equality of life (Lady Li's living at home) and death (Lady Li's living at the palace)" (*ibid.*). Such an interpretation is supported by the immediate context of the passage. Right before Zhuangzi mentions *Lady Li*, he poses the following two questions: "How then do I know that delighting in life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows his way back?" (2/78–79) Moreover, right after *Lady Li*, Zhuangzi ends with a similar question: "How do I know that the dead don't regret the way they used to cling to life?" (2/80–81) Hence, there is a deeper, non-moral point that Zhuangzi is making in *Lady Li*, and we can learn that point by considering the story in its context.

Finally, we might add the following third reason for why *Lady Li* does not support or contradict ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi. Although Lady Li comes to harm (and, let us assume, all harm is bad for the person being harmed), this fact on its own is not enough to tell us whether something morally right or morally wrong has been done. The reason for this is simple. From the sentence "X is bad for S" does not follow that we have a reason for or against pursuing X, let alone a moral reason. If S is a criminal, then the fact that X is bad for S might sometimes count as a reason in favor of doing X. For example, if punishment is always bad for those who are being punished, but if it is morally right to punish criminals, then we have a moral reason to do what is bad for some people in some circumstances. One might also hold that it is sometimes morally wrong to pursue what is good for you. The point is that, if Zhuangzi says that some actions benefit or harm some people, this on its own does not suggest that he has views about which actions we have reason to pursue or avoid.

To summarize, I believe that *Lady Li* is a story that

[4] My translations are taken from Brook Ziporyn's edition (Ziporyn 2020), with minor changes.

(L1) has someone come to harm,
(L2) does not have Zhuangzi morally evaluating actions or agents featured in the story,
(L3) and it expresses a deeper, non-moral point, when read in context.

The fact that a passage exhibits (L1) is insufficient to establish that it supports the view that Zhuangzi holds PMR. The fact that a passage exhibits (L2) and/or (L3) disqualifies the passage from being textual evidence in support of Huang's interpretation. In what follows, I argue that two of the difference stories exhibit (L1) and either (L2) and/or (L3). Hence, if *Lady Li* is not textual evidence in support of PMR because *Lady Li* exhibits (L1)-(L3), then we have a reason to doubt whether some of the difference stories can textually support Huang's interpretation.

3 The Marquis of Lu and the Sea Bird

The first difference story is that of the Marquis of Lu and the sea bird:

> In olden times a seabird came to roost in the outskirts of Lu. The Marquis of Lu took it riding in his chariot to the temple, where he prepared a banquet for it, having the music of the Nine Shao performed for its entertainment and supplying it with the best chops from the butcher for its delectation. The bird looked at it all with glazed eyes, worried and distressed, not daring to eat a bite, not daring to drink a sip, and after three days of this, the bird was dead. The Marquis was trying to use what was nourishing to himself to nourish the bird, instead of using what was nourishing to the bird. Those who wanted to nourish a bird with what is nourishing to the bird would let it perch in the deep forest, roam over the altars and plains, float on the rivers and lakes, gorge itself on eel and minnows, fly in formation to wherever it stops and find its place willy-nilly wherever it wants (18/34–36).

Does this passage express the idea that an action done unto a patient is morally right only if it accords with the patient's rational desires? I believe that it does not, because the passage exhibits the same features (L1)–(L3) that led us to conclude that *Lady Li* does not support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

First, it is clear that the story of the Marquis of Lu exhibits feature (L1)—namely, that someone comes to harm. In this case, the sea bird comes to harm: it dies after three days of being offered meat. The fact that someone comes to harm is insufficient to support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi, for reasons I spelled out in Sect. 2.

Second, does the passage say that Zhuangzi is morally evaluating the Marquis of Lu or his actions? It does not. To illustrate why that is so, let me consider in detail two sentences that might be falsely interpreted as making a moral point.

One might suggest that the following sentence is making a moral point: "The Marquis was trying to use what was nourishing to himself to nourish the bird, instead of using what was nourishing to the bird" (18/35). Perhaps one might be tempted to think that Zhuangzi is, in that sentence, expressing the following view: the Marquis of Lu has done something morally wrong, because the Marquis tried to nourish a bird with what would nourish himself rather than with what would nourish the bird. But such a reading begs the question. It already assumes that Zhuangzi

holds the view that an action done unto a patient is morally wrong if it contravenes some X about the patient (where X, in this case, let us henceforth assume, is the patient's nature). This is a view we are tasked to *derive* from the text, not assume as a given.

In fact, it seems to me that Zhuangzi is not saying that trying to nourish a bird with wine is morally wrong, just as much as he is not saying that abducting Lady Li is morally wrong. All that Zhuangzi is saying is this: the Marquis of Lu did X to do Y, but X is not a way for the Marquis to do Y, it is Z that is a way for the Marquis to do Y. That is, giving wine to the sea bird is not a way for the Marquis to nourish the bird. Letting the sea bird roam freely is a way for the Marquis to nourish the bird.

In response, one might draw on the following sentence to argue that Zhuangzi is making a distinctively moral point: "If you want to nourish a bird with what nourishes a bird, then you should […]" (18/35–36). Perhaps one might think that the sentence says that, if you want to perform a morally right action unto someone, then you should do X, where X is an action that accords with the patient's nature. But this, once again, reads a moral theory into the text rather than out of it. It already assumes that it is morally right to nourish a bird with what nourishes a bird. Hence, it assumes rather than proves that Zhuangzi holds PMR.

This leads me to believe that the story of the Marquis of Lu has feature (L2) in common with *Lady Li*—namely, it is a story in which Zhuangzi does not morally evaluate agents or their actions. Hence, the story does not support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

Against this, one might object by drawing on the context of the story to argue that, although the story itself does not *seem* to have Zhuangzi morally evaluate the Marquis of Lu, the context suggests that Zhuangzi *does* make a moral point after all. Let us, therefore, consider the context in which the story is told.

The story of the Marquis of Lu is told by Confucius 孔子 in Chapter 18, and Confucius conveys the story to explain why he is worried about Yan Hui's 顏回 departure to the state of Qi 齊:

> When Yan Yuan traveled east to Qi, Confucius looked very worried. Zigong leaned off his mat and asked, "Your disciple here ventures to ask why you look so worried about Yan Yuan travelling to Qi."
>
> Confucius said, "[…] I am afraid that Hui will talk to the Marquis of Qi about the *dào* of Yao, Shun, and the Yellow Emperor, and repeat to him the sayings of Suiren and Shennong. The Marquis will then seek some resonance with it in himself, and he will surely fail to find it. This will confuse him, and such a man's confusion is what brings doom. Have you alone never heard about it? In olden times a seabird came to roost in the outskirts of Lu (18/28–33).

Confucius worries that Yan Hui will get himself killed (or, on some interpretations of the story, that Yan Hui will unintentionally end up killing the ruler of Qi),[5] because Yan Hui fails to appreciate what it takes to effectively reform the ruler of Qi. Confucius then proceeds to tell us about the failure of the Marquis of Lu to appreciate what it takes to accommodate a sea bird.

[5] See Chu (2014: 579–586). I return to this possibility further below.

The purpose of the story is therefore to illustrate why Confucius believes that Yan Hui will not be successful in reforming the ruler of Qi. He will not be successful, because Yan Hui ventures out to Qi without a proper understanding of what it takes for him to reform the ruler. Just as the Marquis of Lu takes holding a banquet to be a way for him to entertain a sea bird, but holding a banquet is, in fact, not a way for him to entertain a sea bird, so too does Yan Hui take lecturing about various ancient sages to be a way for him to reform the ruler. It therefore seems to me that the purpose of the story is not to offer us an account of which actions are morally right or wrong. Rather, the purpose is to tell us why Yan Hui's approach to reforming a ruler by lecturing him about the ways of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 is going to be ineffective.

Therefore, it seems to me that the story of the Marquis of Lu has features (L1)–(L3) in common with *Lady Li*, and hence the story does not offer us textual evidence in support of ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

In response to the argument so far, one might offer the following objection. Perhaps the reason why Confucius is worried about Yan Hui departing for Qi is not because Yan Hui runs the danger of getting himself killed, but rather because he might inadvertently end up killing the ruler of Qi. If that is so, then perhaps the reason why Confucius does not want Yan Hui to end up killing the ruler of Qi is because killing the ruler of Qi is morally wrong. It is morally wrong, because, perhaps, killing someone (normally) contravenes that person's rational desires. Hence, the story exhibits PMR, because Zhuangzi implicitly judges the killing of the ruler of Qi to be morally wrong.

My answer is that, for such a reading to fit the text, what is required is for us to establish from elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi* the view that killing others is morally wrong *for the reason that* it contravenes something morally relevant about the person being killed (e.g., their standards, nature, or rational desires). Hence, if we can establish by drawing on *other* textual evidence that Zhuangzi holds PMR, then we might be able to read the story of the Marquis of Lu as supporting PMR. As it stands, however, the story of the Marquis of Lu does not seem to me to support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

4 Hundun's Demise

The second difference story comes at the end of Chapter 7:

> The emperor of the southern sea was called Shu. The emperor of the northern sea was called Hu. The emperor of the middle was called Hundun. Shu and Hu would sometimes meet in the territory of Hundun, who always waited on them quite well. They decided to repay Hundun for such bounteous virtue. "All men have seven holes in them, by means of which they see, hear, eat, and breathe," they said. "But this one alone has none. Let's drill him some." So every day they drilled another hole. Seven days later, Hundun was dead (7/33–35).

In this passage, as in *Lady Li* and the story of the Marquis of Lu, someone comes to harm—this time, it is Hundun. Given that Hundun's coming to harm is, on its own,

not enough to support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi, we must look for other indications that the story expresses PMR.

A natural way to proceed is by asking whether Zhuangzi morally evaluates Shu 儵 and Hu 忽 (or their actions) for having unintentionally killed Hundun. The answer is 'no'. Zhuangzi *prima facie* makes no normative claims in this passage. Unlike in the story of the Marquis of Lu, none of the sentences, as far as I can see, could be mistakenly construed as saying that someone did something morally wrong. Hence, so far, the story of Hundun's demise has features (L1) and (L2) in common with *Lady Li* and so it does not support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

But one might dispute that the story contains no moral lessons. Perhaps, so the objection might go, drawing on the context in which the story appears will make it clear that the story exhibits moral evaluations that accord with PMR. Although the three emperors appear only one time throughout the entire *Zhuangzi*, one might draw on the text that immediately precedes the story to suggest that we should read a moral lesson into Hundun's demise:

> Not doing, not being a corpse presiding over your good name;
> Not doing, not being a repository of plans and schemes;
> Not doing, not being the one in charge of what happens;
> Not doing, not being ruled by your own understanding. In this way, embody the endlessness and roam where there is no sign, fully living through whatever is received from Heaven without thinking anything has been gained, thus remaining a vacuity, nothing more. The Utmost Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Thus he can overcome all things without harm (7/31–33).

Presumably, one might suggest that Shu and Hu caused harm to Hundun, because they did not use their mind like a mirror. One might then suggest that using one's mind like a mirror amounts to using PMR as a decision-making procedure: a person uses her mind like a mirror in deciding what to do unto a patient when her decision is informed by what accords with the nature of the patient.

Such an interpretation of what it means to use the mind like a mirror needs to draw on other text in support of it. For example, Huang draws on his interpretation of what it means to have a "fixed mind" (*chéng xīn* 成心) to support his reading of what Zhuangzi means by using one's mind as a mirror (e.g., Huang 2010a: 15–17). Those are substantive, interpretive steps that we must accept for us to take the story of Hundun's demise as textual support for ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

I bracket here whether these additional interpretative steps are successful. My point is that the story of Hundun's demise does not, on its own, support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi. In fact, *prima facie*, the story does not feature Zhuangzi morally evaluating any person or their actions. Hence, only if we read a moral lesson *into* the story of Hundun's demise, by, for example, accepting other substantive interpretative steps, might we be able to explain why the story of Hundun's demise supports Huang's interpretation.

5 Bo Le's Horses

The final difference story concerns the entirety of Chapter 9, but specifically Bo Le's treatment of his horses:

> Chomping the grass and drinking the waters, prancing and jumping over the terrain – this is the genuine inborn nature of horses. […] Then along comes Bo Le, saying, "I'm good at managing horses!" He proceeds to brand them, shave them, clip them, bridle them, fetter them with crupper and martingale, pen them in stable and stall – until about a quarter of the horses have dropped dead. Then he starves them, parches them, trots them, gallops them, lines them up neck to neck or nose to tail, tormenting them with bit and rein in front and with whip and spur behind. By then over *half* of the horses have dropped dead. […] If you put yokes and poles on their necks and level them down with crossbars and shafts, they will come to understand how to split the shafts, wriggle out of the yokes, butt the hood, spit out the bit, and gnaw through the reins. Hence it really is Bo Le's crime that the horses came to understand how to feint, and from there even how to rob and steal" (9/2–16).[6]

Clearly, the passage says that someone comes to harm: many of Bo Le's horses die during their training. This aligns with *Lady Li*'s (L1) and, without further argument, is not enough to support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi.

However, Huang's case is much stronger here than in the previous two stories. In support of ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi, one might point out that Chapter 9 starts out with two claims: the nature of horses is such-and-such, and Bo Le treats horses in a way that does not accord with their nature. One might also point out that a variation on these two claims is repeated in the following section:

> The potter says, "I'm good at managing clay! I round it until it matches the compass, square it until it matches the T-square." The carpenter says, "I'm good at managing wood! I curve it until it matches the arc, straighten it until it corresponds to the line." But do you suppose the inborn nature of the clay or the wood wishes to match a compass, T-square, arc, or line? (9/4–5).

In this passage, too, we find an instance of the general claim that the nature of X is such-and-such, and Y does something unto X that contravenes the nature of X. One might, in addition to that, point out that Zhuangzi clearly morally evaluates Bo Le. After all, Zhuangzi says that Bo Le has committed a crime (*zuì* 罪). Hence, Bo Le has done something unto his horses that contravenes their nature, and Bo Le has committed a crime. Surely, if anything, this counts as textual evidence in favor of ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi?

It does not, and the reason is this. The passages would count as textual evidence only if Zhuangzi were to say that Bo Le has committed a crime *because* he has done something unto his horses that contravenes their nature, which is not what Zhuangzi is saying. That is, the question that is relevant for our purposes is *why* Zhuangzi

[6] Ziporyn translates *zuì* 罪 in this passage as "fault", rather than "crime". I have amended the translation at this point to not beg the question against those who believe that Zhuangzi is morally evaluating Bo Le. I return to this point below. Note that Watson translates the last sentence in the following way: "Thus horses learn how to commit the worst kinds of mischief. This is the crime of Bo Luo" (Watson 2013: 67).

claims that Bo Le has committed a crime. And here, Huang's case is no longer as strong as it might have initially appeared to be.

Zhuangzi is unusually clear why he believes that Bo Le has committed a crime: "Hence it really is Bo Le's crime that the horses came to understand how to feint, and from there even how to rob and steal" (9/16). The passage does not say that Bo Le's crime is to have done something unto the horses that contravenes their nature, but rather that he caused the horses to know how to feint, rob, and steal. This is repeated at the end of Chapter 9:

> Then along came the sage, bending and twisting over ritual and music to reform the bodies of the world, dangling humankindness and responsible conduct overhead to "comfort" the hearts of everyone in the world. Only then did the people begin groping on tiptoe in their eagerness for knowledge. From there it was inevitable that they would end up struggling for profit and advantage above all. And this, all this, is really the crime of the sages (9/17–18).

Zhuangzi makes two related points here. The (Confucian) sages have committed a crime, and their crime is to have made people "end up struggling for profit and advantage above all". This aligns with Zhuangzi's aforementioned claim that Bo Le's crime is to have caused horses to know how to feint, rob, and steal.[7] Hence, what makes Bo Le's and the (Confucian) sages' actions morally wrong is that they cause their patients to struggle for profit, feint, rob, and steal.

This does not textually support ascribing PMR to Zhuangzi, because PMR is the view that what makes an action morally wrong is that it contravenes the patient's X (where X is the patient's nature, moral standards, rational desires, or etc.), rather than that it causes the patients to struggle for profit, feint, rob, and steal. Those are conceptually different claims about what makes an action morally wrong.

Let me at this point consider a possible response. One might perhaps argue that the two aforementioned views are not as different as they might initially seem to be. That is, perhaps Zhuangzi holds that, if you cause a person to struggle for profit, feint, rob, and steal, you do something unto the person that necessarily contravenes their X (assume, for the sake of argument, that X here refers to the patient's nature). In support of such a response, one might draw on the following passage:

> The mutilation of the unhewn raw material to make valued vessels is the crime of the artisan. The destruction of *dàodé* to make humankindness and responsible conduct (*rényì* 仁義) is the error (*guò* 過) of the sage (9/13–14).

Therefore, so the response continues, Zhuangzi is saying in this passage that, if an artisan does something unto raw material that contravenes the material's nature, then the artisan has committed a crime. Moreover, for Zhuangzi, the act of turning raw material into tools is a metaphor for the act of turning the people away from living together harmoniously and causing them to struggle and "take sides":

> For in those days when *dé* was fully realized, the people lived together with the birds and beasts, bunched together with all things. What did they know about "noble men" and "petty men"? So simpleminded, without understanding, their *dé* remained undivided and never left

[7] The fact that Bo Le is training horses into *warhorses* might be relevant in this context. Just as the Confucians are making people struggle for profit, Bo Le is turning horses into instruments of war.

> them. So simpleminded, not wanting anything in particular – that is what it means to be undyed and unhewn. Undyed and unhewn, the inborn nature of the people was realized. Then along came the sages. Limping and staggering after humankindness, straining on tiptoe after responsible conduct, they filled everyone in the world with self-doubt. Lasciviously slobbering over music, fastidiously obsessing over ritual, they got everyone in the world to take sides (9/9–12).

One might therefore object to my argument by pointing out that Zhuangzi's moral claim about the artisan's action is in accordance with PMR: what makes an action done unto a patient morally wrong is that it contravenes the patient's nature, and contravening a patient's nature just is to cause the patient to struggle for profit, feint, rob, and steal.

Such a response seems to me problematic, for two reasons. First, it misses the point. Zhuangzi says that the crime of the (Confucian) sages is to have caused people to behave a certain way: "From there it was inevitable that they would end up struggling for profit and advantage above all. And this, all this, is really the crime of the sages." He does not say that the crime is to have done something unto people that contravenes their nature, *even if* causing them to behave a certain way, in this case, just means contravening their nature.

Here is an example to illustrate the difference. Suppose that, in country C, burning flags is not a crime. But if a person walks up to the Department of the Interior in country C, lowers their flag, and burns it, that person will be prosecuted for having committed a crime. Although they will not be prosecuted for having burned a flag, they will be prosecuted for having willfully destroyed government property. Hence, in that specific country, even though destroying government property is a crime, and burning that specific flag amounts to destroying government property, it does not follow that burning a flag is a crime. This is so even if all the flags in that country belong to the government. Returning to the *Zhuangzi*, even though causing people to be F is a crime, and (let us assume) causing people to be F means contravening their nature, from this it does not follow that contravening their nature is a crime.

Second, even if we could somehow establish that, for Zhuangzi, what makes an action done unto a patient morally wrong is that it contravenes the nature of the patient, and contravening the nature of the patient necessarily entails causing the person to struggle for profit, feint, rob, and steal, this is still problematic if our aim is to establish that Zhuangzi accepts PMR.[8] The reason is this. Recall that PMR is the view that what makes an action done unto a patient morally right is that the action accords with the patient's rational desires (or the patient's own moral standards, or what they believe is right, depending on which formulation we adopt). Therefore, even if we could somehow establish that actions which cause a patient to

[8] Additionally, such a claim seems to me *prima facie* false because it is unlikely that Zhuangzi believes that, if you cause a person to become a robber, then you have done something unto that person that contravenes the person's nature. Perhaps Mengzi might hold such a view, given that Mengzi believes that human nature is good (6A6), but it seems to me unlikely that Zhuangzi holds such a view. I bracket this issue here and accept the contested claim for the sake of argument.

struggle for profit are necessarily actions that contravene the patient's nature, it is difficult to see how actions which cause a patient to struggle for profit are necessarily actions that contravene the patient's rational desires. It seems to me at least theoretically possible that a person can have a rational desire (in Huang's sense of the term) to become a robber, in which case it is simply false that causing a person to become a robber necessarily contravenes that person's rational desire.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that the case for interpreting the so-called difference stories as exhibiting PMR is not as strong as it might initially appear. Moreover, I have argued that PMR-friendly interpretations of these stories are plausible only if we can establish substantial interpretative claims about parts of the *Zhuangzi* that extend far beyond the difference stories.

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