

# Oakeshott's Superficial Daoism

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**Abstract:** It is rarely noticed that Oakeshott occasionally quotes the *Zhuangzi* in *Rationalism in Politics*. The *Zhuangzi* was an ancient Daoist text emphasizing the free and wandering life of someone who skillfully acts without pretension or independent purpose. Oakeshott quoted it in support of his own typically Oakeshottian conclusions. But I argue in this paper that Oakeshott misunderstood the actual force of the anecdotes to which he referred. Oakeshott used Daoist wisdom to support his practical philosophy but entirely missed that the *Zhuangzi* was all about achieving a higher immersion in or indifference to reality, and hence was not about battling against 'rationalism in politics' but about transcending rationalism, irrationalism and even practice in order to achieve a higher therapeutic end.

**Keywords:** Oakeshott; Daoism; forgetfulness; morality; action; intention; politics

## I. INTRODUCTION

Reflecting upon the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Michael Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, one may wonder about his role in contemporary theory: about whether the style or substance of his work is obsolete. For my part, the worry is not so much that Oakeshott's approach, especially in this classic text, might be too much of its own time, but that it might not be untimely enough. In *Rationalism in Politics* there is, to use an Oakeshottian word, an intimation of a style of thinking about human living and acting that the author seemed to have approved of, but which he left underdeveloped. Throughout the essays of *Rationalism in Politics*, there is a subterranean trajectory of references to ancient Chinese philosophers. In particular, the classical Chinese Daoism of the *Zhuangzi* is cited favorably in a number of key moments, often at the end of essays, as illustrations for certain culminating points Oakeshott was trying to make.<sup>1</sup> As illustrations, these references mostly do work in the way he intended, but I will claim that by citing a text like the *Zhuangzi* in his defense Oakeshott opened the door for the emergence of a kind of skeptical vision that goes far behind what he wished to convey and which might be worth reclaiming today.

In other words, Oakeshott had no idea how right he was in citing the *Zhuangzi*, for it is a text that offers a superior form of skepticism that surpasses the 'politics of scepticism' he himself tended to favor as a corrective to the rationalist and perfectionist 'politics of faith.' Oakeshott

could have used Daoist insights to achieve a more thoroughgoing and, in Western terms, a Pyrrhonian kind of skepticism. That Oakeshott was no Pyrrhonian seems to have been established (Laurson 2005). In fact, Oakeshott's so-called skepticism appears to amount to little more than a confession of uncertainty or doubt concerning more dogmatic and assertive approaches: the usual Cartesian or Socratic genuflection. One thing I will do here is, with the aid of the *Zhuangzi*, note more precisely where Oakeshott's skepticism stops and where something more thoroughgoing could be developed.

Oakeshott refers to the *Zhuangzi* five times in the first edition of *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, and on one more occasion at the end of his introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which was added to the second edition of the book. I shall divide Oakeshott's references to the *Zhuangzi* as follows. The first set of references has to do with the negative effects of rationalist moralizing, the second set with the necessity of forgetting purposiveness for the sake of skillful action, and the third with the necessity of forgetting everything for the sake of achieving joy and equanimity. Mostly as a matter of convenience, I will organize these three sets of references around the theme of forgetfulness, so that the first could be labeled 'moral forgetfulness,' the second 'local forgetfulness,' and the third 'global forgetfulness.' This organization also works in a narrative sense insofar as at each higher pitch of forgetfulness we reach a higher stage of skeptical equanimity or, what is the same thing, Daoist wisdom.

I will address each theme by emphasizing that Oakeshott only partially succeeded in getting the Daoist texts to serve as illustrations for his own points. My motivation for this exercise is not to blame Oakeshott for misreading the *Zhuangzi*. I doubt he could have done much more than he did with the text given his context and interests. Rather, it is to note that if we take Oakeshott seriously in his suggestion that these references illustrate his arguments, we can make a further claim that if fully understood in a Daoist sense, Oakeshott's arguments may contribute to offering us today a superior therapeutic relationship to the world, a relationship where we see the consequences of making explicit what Oakeshott left implicit, and of completely realizing what Oakeshott only intimated. Whether Oakeshott would have approved of this exercise is harder to see, but it is likely that, notwithstanding his references to the *Zhuangzi*, he would find most aspects of Daoism too extreme for his tastes. Thus, what follows may also enable us to obtain a unique perspective of the limits of Oakeshott's thought.

## 2. MORAL FORGETFULNESS

In the essay, 'Rationalism in Politics,' Oakeshott concludes with a lament that the plague of rationalism might have struck a deathblow to the "whole field of morality and moral education" (1991, p. 40). Rationalism, in the sphere of morality, is the clumsy attempt to reduce complex moral practices to a system of ideals to be discovered through rational reflection and then later applied in practice. For Oakeshott, genuine morality is rooted in religious or social traditions. It is not something that can be artificially imposed through novel shortcuts or 'cribs,' as he would call them. Morality is as ubiquitous as social life itself, rooted in long-since developed religious and ritual practices. It is supposedly something more like an element or medium, something in or through which human social life is possible. It is something with a deep past and which coasts with the force of historical inertia. A moral practice is never something that can be invented from scratch. Oakeshott's slogan of 'nothing in advance' is as applicable to morality as it is to seemingly every other topic he discusses. His concern in attacking rationalism, including moral rationalism, is always to emphasize that there is no graceful way to interrupt tradition, no technique that could be as effective as the evolved practice itself, no technical knowledge that could occasion as aesthetically pleasant and authentic a performance than the unroutinizable know-how displayed by an experienced virtuoso.

The rationalist's reduction of morality to the systematization of ideals or principles—essentially, the reduction of practical morality to normative ethics—is bad, for Oakeshott. And since doing normative ethics is basically the same as doing metaethics, doing metaethics is bad too. This could be called Oakeshott's metametaethical claim: doing metaethics, which is all normative ethics amounts to, is bad because it is an attempt to remove oneself from (and thus aim to manipulate) traditional, intuitive, practical morality—

which, as a collection of un-self-consciously and non-purposively traditionally performed practices, is itself good. In contemporary terms, this would place Oakeshott in the metametaethical camp of moral intuitionist, quietist, non-naturalist, and robust realism. This is a view that often includes the claim that normative ethics and metaethics are themselves unethical insofar as they interrupt first-order moral experiences (Dworkin 1996; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014).

In other words, normative ethics and metaethics are bad for not being genuine morality itself. It is in the context of Oakeshott's metametaethical claim that he first cites the *Zhuangzi*. We can discuss Oakeshott's use of the *Zhuangzi* in terms of his metametaethical claim. To illustrate his supposition that "moral ideals are a sediment; they have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition, so long as they belong to a religious or a social life" (1991, p. 41), Oakeshott cites one of the ironic tales from 'The Spinning of the Heavens' outer chapter where the *Zhuangzi* has Confucius seeking insight from Lao Dan ('Old Lao,' or Laozi, the legendary author of the first Daoist classic, the *Daodejing*) about the Course or Way (the Dao). The quotation reads,

Confucius came to see Lao Dan and spoke to him of humankindness and responsible conduct. Lao Dan said, "If you are winnowing grain and the dust gets in your eyes, heaven and earth and the four directions may seem to change positions. If your skin is menaced by mosquitos and flies, it can keep you awake all night. This humankindness and this responsible conduct that you speak of in such baleful tones—they really upset our hearts and minds (Ziporyn 2020, p. 123).

In the essay, 'The Tower of Babel,' Oakeshott offers another footnote including a similar claim aligning Confucianism with contrived moral rationalism and Daoism with habitual moral intuitionism. Again Oakeshott complains that since traditional morality is inextricably linked to a society's common way of life, moral theorizing and idealizing is mostly a pathological degradation of that society's basic moral structure. Of course, moral practice without any moral reflection would be 'defective,' but it is more detrimental to moral life to have moral practice become subject to moral ideals than not, for "in a world dizzy with moral ideals we know less about how to behave in public and in private than ever before" (1991, p. 481). Oakeshott places this point in the classical Chinese context by writing,

For example, Jên (consideration for others) [Ren, the 'humankindness' mentioned above] in Confucian morality was an abstraction from the filial piety and respect for elders which constituted the ancient Chinese habit of moral behavior. The activity of the Sages, who (according to Chuang Tzu) [Zhuangzi] *invented* goodness, duty and the rules and ideals of moral conduct, was one in which a concrete morality of habitual behavior was sifted and refined; but, like too critical anthologists, they threw out the imperfect approximations of their material and what remained was not the reflection of a literature but merely a collection of masterpieces (1991, p. 480).

So, according to Oakeshott, the moral intuitionism of the Daoism of the *Zhuangzi* appears to be the corrective to the moral rationalism of Confucianism. Daoism does not indulge in moral abstraction. It sticks to moral practice, while Confucianism invents moral ideals and principles, degrading true morality in the process. Oakeshott is only half-right about this, however. It is the case that Daoism distinguishes itself from Confucianism by attacking it for its moral rationalism and moral realism. It also attacks Mohism for similar reasons. The problem with Oakeshott's claim is that Daoism is not, in metaethical terms, an example of moral intuitionism and so is not, in terms of Oakeshott's metametaethical claim, criticizing Confucianism for contaminating traditional morality with highfalutin moral theorizing. The common refrain found throughout Daoism is that *any* moralizing at any level of concreteness or abstraction is a loss. Even the most intuitive moral habit, if it is *moral* at all, is already a sign of a diminution of power and oneness with the amorality of nature and the Dao. A thought echoed throughout the *Zhuangzi* is made in the *Laozi*: "Heaven and earth [tian, or nature] is not humane [ren]" (Moeller 2007, p. 15). In other words, the

world does not instantiate humankindness at all. It is a property which does not exist. No moral property exists. Not only is morality systematically false for Daoism, rendering its metaethical reflections closer to the moral anti-realism of contemporary moral error theory, Daoism does not regard Confucianism as morally bad in the way Oakeshott seems to. The *Zhuangzi*, therefore, is not able to fully serve as support for Oakeshott's metametaethical claim. This is an epistemic issue here, but there is a deeper therapeutic matter at play as well.

For Daoism, morality itself is the disease, not reflecting, idealizing, and theorizing about it. Trying to perfect morality through systematization and routinization is something an already sick person or society does. It just makes the illness worse. Normative ethics and metaethics are indeed a degradation, but so is any intuitive, habitual, or traditional morality. The source of the sickness is thinking normative judgments actually succeed in corresponding to the world, holding any moral beliefs whatsoever, or participating in any moral practices no matter how much they are feigned to be habitual or intuitive. Supposed moral knowledge is already a typical piece of all-too-human arrogance and mendacity. A moral practice is already a sign of humanity's cutting itself off from the Dao, from nature's amoral omnipotence. These claims are littered throughout the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi* Oakeshott cites most often. The Daoist, then, would be neither a Confucian moral rationalist nor an Oakeshottian moral intuitionist and traditionalist. This is because there is no non-pathological way one can be moral. The problem with the 'baleful tones' of talk of humankindness and responsible conduct is not that it really upsets our moral intuitions, habits, or traditions, as Oakeshott seems to think, but that it upsets 'our hearts and minds,' our inner peace, our equanimity. Morality itself, whether fast or slow, is the disease, the disturbance. This is the first, basically Pyrrhonian, point that pushes Daoism past an approach Oakeshott is willing to countenance. While he seems to avoid being a moral rationalist or absolutist, he also does not want to be a moral skeptic. The Daoist, on the other hand, quietly recommends we forget about morality altogether.

### 3. LOCAL FORGETFULNESS

In another set of references to the *Zhuangzi*, Oakeshott makes a claim about know-how. The issue is the relationship between technique and what Oakeshott calls 'practical knowledge.' In 'Rationalism in Politics,' Oakeshott emphasizes it is through some combination of technique and practical knowledge that skill or artistry of any sort emerges. This goes for activities ranging from cooking to painting, and it is involved in fields as seemingly opposed as science and religion. Oakeshott is not, however, making the usual distinction between know-that or know-what and know-how. Rather, to know that something is the case already necessitates an intuitive and subtle grasp of the manner in which a certain kind of approach is employed. Internal to technique is already a distinction between technique and practice whereby technique follows from a dexterous practical intuition, a performative ability to know which techniques to employ and in which manner. While distinct, technical and practical knowledge are inseparable and involved in any skillful human activity. One could say that, for Oakeshott, what makes them inseparable is an at least partial dependence of technical knowledge on practical knowledge. Intuitive practice, in other words, seems to enjoy a kind of metaphysical priority in Oakeshott.

Now, it is in delineating this inseparable distinction, yet asymmetrical dependency, between technique and practice that Oakeshott cites the story of the wheelwright from chapter thirteen, Heaven's Course, of the *Zhuangzi*. The reference appears to serve the function of exemplifying Oakeshott's emphasis on the relationship between technical and practical knowledge. This story goes like this: Duke Huan was reading up in his pavilion while a wheelwright was hewing a wheel below when the wheelwright asked what the Duke was reading and the Duke replied he was reading "the words of sages." The wheelwright then told the Duke that since those sages were long dead, he was reading nothing but "the dregs and dust of the ancients." The Duke replied angrily that no mere wheelwright could pass judgment on what his ruler was reading and that if he couldn't explain his comment he would be executed. The wheelwright responded:

I am looking at it from the point of view of my own profession. In hewing a wheel, if I spin slowly and make the hub too loose, it attaches easily to the crossbar but not firmly. If I spin quickly and make it too tight, I have to struggle to attach it, and it still never really gets all the way in. I have to make it not too loose and not too tight, my hand feeling it and my mind constantly responsive to it. I cannot explain this with my mouth, and yet there is a certain knack to the procedure. I cannot even get my own son to grasp it, so even he has no way to learn it from me. Thus I am already seventy years old and still here busily hewing wheels as an old man. The ancients died, and that which they could not transmit died along with them. So I say that what you, my lord, are perusing is just the dregs and dust of the ancients, nothing more! (Ziporyn 2020, p. 116).

The text does not tell us if the reply was enough to spare the wheelwright's life, but it probably was. Presumably, what Oakeshott liked about this passage was its distinction between communicable technical knowledge and incommunicable practical knowledge expressed through the wheelwright's explanation for his judgment concerning the analogy between the 'words of sages' and what he can say about hewing a wheel. Whatever can be written down and rendered a mere collection of instructions cannot possibly convey the skill required to actually display the know-how of proper wisdom or proper wheel-hewing. Of course, one could not be wise or skillfully hew wheels without being able to communicate something about one's abilities, some technical knowledge, but the real 'knowledge' needed for the performance of one's skill resides in a practical know-how that cannot be sufficiently expressed. This seems to also account for why the wheelwright cannot retire and let his son take over the family business: he cannot teach him verbally how to properly feel the skillful hewing of a wheel. This is an accurate reading of the *Zhuangzi*, and so an apt illustration of Oakeshott's claim, as far as it goes. What it misses, however, is the deeper context of the Daoist approach to artisanship found in the *Zhuangzi* and in other Daoist texts that is only implicit in this particular story.

If read next to the many other 'knack stories' found throughout the *Zhuangzi*, one starts to see an important difference between the original text and Oakeshott's claim about it. For Daoists, artistry or skill is not just a matter of noting the secondary and contrived nature of technical knowledge, but of obtaining a deeper recognition that the contrived and harmful nature of all knowledge, including know-how, gets in the way of a proper and effective display of a skill. It is not so much that the wheelwright has a practical knowledge, a know-how, that he cannot communicate and impart to his son, but more that the wheelwright's real incommunicable skill is based on a non-knowledge, a total forgetting, of any conscious or purposive intent in acting in a specific way as he skillfully hews a wheel. Just as Daoist metametaethics involves quietly forgetting morality altogether, Daoist artisanship involves forgetting knowledge entirely for the sake of a skillful performance. Neither technical nor practical knowledge contributes to Daoist artistry. The skillful performer, the Daoist virtuoso, empties himself of all cognitive content. He forgets the distinction between himself, his skill, and his work of art. They are all one natural, spontaneous, unknowable, and ineffable process. All genuine arts or skills are so many ways the Dao constantly creates, transforms, and destroys itself. This, again, is starting to go too far from Oakeshott's original concern with the asymmetrical mutual dependence between know-how and know-that. Daoism is again likely too extreme for Oakeshott. It is probable that while Oakeshott is preoccupied with practice of any sort, Daoism is concerned specifically with perfected practices.

For example, in both the *Leizi* and the *Zhuangzi*, we find tales of masterful swimmers who seem indistinguishable for their element, swimming as just another way the water itself flows. One day, the *Zhuangzi* tells us, Confucius was viewing the massive Lu waterfall when he saw an old man leap down the torrent. Thinking the old man was committing suicide, Confucius sent some of his disciples to pick up his body, but when they came to him he hopped out of the water onto the bank singing with his hair streaming down his back. Confucius ran to him and said he thought he was a ghost and asked if he had a Dao, a way or course, that allowed him to swim like that. He replied,



No, I have no Course. It all starts out in the given, grows through the inborn nature, and comes to perfection in the fated. I enter into the navels of whirlpools and emerge with the surging eddies. I just follow the Course of the water itself, without making any private one of my own. This is how I tread the waters (Ziporyn 2020, p. 154).

Confucius was shocked, as he usually is in these stories insofar as the *Zhuangzi* uses him in an ironic manner. He asked what he meant by ‘starting out in the given, growing through the inborn nature, and coming to perfection in the fated?’ The old man replied,

Born among the hills, I first came to feel safely at home there among the hills—that’s the given. Gravitating toward the water as I grew up, I then came to feel safely at home in the water—that was my inborn nature. And to be thus and so without knowing how or why I am thus and so—that’s the fated (Ziporyn 2020, p. 154).

There are two points to make about this story with respect to Oakeshott. The first is that Daoist virtuosity in skill or artistry ultimately entails one affirming one’s fate of not knowing how or why (or even that one successfully performs such a skill as one engages in its performance. As the Daoist scholar and translator, Hans-Georg Moeller, puts it: “There is no knowledge about the Way when it is performed” (Moeller 2004, p. 112). Not only would it be simply incorrect to call this Daoist approach to artistry ‘technical knowledge’ or ‘know-that,’ but calling it ‘practical knowledge’ or ‘know-how’ would not be quite right either. It would perhaps be better described as ‘neither know-that nor know-how’ or maybe ‘practical non-knowledge,’ something rather distinct from Oakeshott’s more dualistic understanding. Moeller emphasizes that the Daoist swimmer “can’t even swim! He has unlearned active swimming, so that he can float with the water, [and] he masters the ‘technique’ of swimming because he moves just as the water moves, by letting the water master him” (Moeller 2004, p. 112). Daoist skill means forgetting all local knowledge that, how, and why one performs that skill.

The second point is that we can now see the probable source of the difference between Oakeshott and the *Zhuangzi* on ‘practical skill.’ Daoism is a negative perfectionism while Oakeshott is flatly opposed to any perfectionism, or at least that is how it appears in other texts like *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*. Daoist practice is one of increasing performative perfection through subtraction of all that is human or non-natural or lacking spontaneity, and the way to achieve this perfection is to not only forget moral judgments, as we saw in the last section, but to forget any kind of theoretical or practical knowledge as well. The point is to diminish and ultimately eliminate oneself so that one can achieve the perfection of the Dao’s natural, constant non-purposive expression of omnipotent creation and destruction. As we read in the *Loazi*:

Who engages in learning increases daily. Who hears of the Dao diminishes daily. To decrease and to decrease even more so that ‘doing nothing’ is reached. Doing nothing, and nothing is undone (Moeller 2007, p. 115).

What is fascinating about Oakeshott’s relationship to this more extreme Daoist approach of forgetting just about everything for the sake of achieving negative perfection when skillful acting is Oakeshott seemed to have been aware of it. There is a moment in “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” where he is discussing the slow history of the emancipation of works of art, or poetic images open for contemplative attention more generally, from more utilitarian, political, or religious functions. He notes that such a treatment of poetic images is mostly not found in the ancient Greek or Roman worlds, but that in the ancient East there were signs of a more aesthetically pure appreciation of artistic activity as something done for its own sake. He again cites a story of a virtuoso from the *Zhuangzi*. There is a tale of a carpenter in the *Zhuangzi* “whose description of the activity of being an artist is almost entirely in terms of what he had to

forget” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 531). Oakeshott is referring to the chief woodworker for the Marquis of Lu who produced extraordinary bellstands. When the Marquis saw one of his carved bellstands, he asked the carpenter about which technique he used to make objects that look like the work of spirits. Since this story directly follows after the story of the Daoist swimmer, we get a pretty similar response from the carpenter:

I am just an artisan—what technique could I have? However, there is one thing. When I am going to make a bellstand, I dare not let it deplete my vital energy. Rather, I fast to quiet my mind, and after three days, I no longer presume to care about praise or reward, rank or salary. After five days, I no longer presume to care about honor and disgrace, skill and clumsiness. After seven days, I become so still that I forget I have four limbs and a body. When this happens, for me it is as if the ducal court has ceased to exist. My skill becomes so focused that everything external slides away. Then I enter into the mountain forests, viewing the inborn Heavenly nature of the trees. My body arrives at a certain spot, and already I see the completed bellstand there; only then do I apply my hand to it. Otherwise I leave the tree alone. So I am just matching the Heavenly to the Heavenly. This may be the reason the result suggests the work of spirits! (Ziporyn 2020, p. 154).

Instead of Confucius himself, as in the case of the story of the swimmer, here we have the Marquis of Lu expressing bafflement at a Daoist virtuoso performance. Again, such a performance requires forgetting the surrounding moral world of Confucian duties and then forgetting all purposive and intentional approaches to acting and creating. The carpenter not only fasts, but fasts his heart-mind (*xin*), the seat of cognition in ancient China. He empties his mind of all desire and distraction, all deliberating and knowing. He entirely forgets himself. He does not carve bellstands. Bellstands carve themselves through him. He taps into nature’s unwrought perforations and lets them guide him. He becomes inseparable from the bellstand the tree naturally makes through him. Nature natures and he is a way that is so. In his case, that way is carving bellstands. There is neither technical nor practical knowledge involved. It just happens of its own accord. Oakeshott knew this, but, for him, “of the East I hesitate to speak” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 531). Today, we need not be so hesitant. In fact, if we want to avoid the pitfalls and ugliness of rationalism, we can go even further than Oakeshott and return to a Daoist approach where we do not have to balance technical and practical knowledge. We can forget about knowledge altogether, or rather realize that in true skillful action no knowledge is involved. Virtuosity is not a cognitive affair. Again, this is not to blame Oakeshott, but to see where precisely he stops and where we can go if we were inspired by the Daoist examples Oakeshott has given us. Now that we have forgotten morality and knowledge, is there anything else we can forget? Yes, everything else.

#### 4. GLOBAL FORGETFULNESS

There are many stories about fish and fishermen in the *Zhuangzi*. Oakeshott cites some of them. He asks us to consider fishing in ‘On Being Conservative.’ He makes a distinction between someone who fishes for the sake of catching fish and someone who fishes for the sake of enjoying oneself or merely passing the time. In the latter case, whether one catches fish is secondary to the point of irrelevance. What matters instead is the ritual of fishing, of exercising the skill of fishing. For Oakeshott, this kind of fishing calls for a conservative disposition, a tendency to preserve the familiarity of fishing for its own sake. However, one cannot fish in this way if one’s approach is too “unfamiliar” or “grotesquely inappropriate” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 418). Oakeshott cites the story from the *Zhuangzi* of King Wen running into an old fisherman in the countryside. He sees this fisherman as exemplifying the latter, more conservative kind of fishing. We also find in this tale more emphasis placed on exercising a skill while forgetting cognitive content or intention. King Wen was so impressed by this fisherman he wanted to let him govern his state:

When King Wen was out observing the sights at Zang, he happened to see an old man fishing without ever treating his fishing as fishing. Since it is only by fishing without grasping one's fishing that one can fish with real constancy, King Wen wished to raise this man up to office and put him in charge of the state, but because he feared this would cause unrest among his great ministers and his own father and elder brothers, he tried to put this wish out of his mind and forget about it (Ziporyn 2020, p. 170).

Some think this story is an allusion to Jiang Taigong, also known as Jiang Ziya or Lu Shang, the adopted teacher of King Wen of Zhou. It goes that King Wen found this old man fishing in the wilderness with straight nails at the end of his line instead of hooks (Ziporyn 2020, p. 172). The question for us is, is Oakeshott right in viewing this fisherman as embodying a conservative disposition, as someone who performs a skill entirely for the enjoyment and familiarity of it without concern for its utility? It would appear so. But one may wonder if Oakeshott might have found the added detail that the fisherman fished with straight nails and not hooks to be perhaps 'grotesquely inappropriate' and pushing the activity of fishing into something unfamiliar, thus not being very conservative after all. What exactly is this fisherman conserving anyway? If indeed the conservative views activities in ritualistic terms, we may wonder if this fisherman is fishing ritualistically. How attached to familiar fishing is this fisherman, really? From his own perspective, is he even fishing? We might want to say he is not fishing just as much as the Daoist swimmer or carpenter are not swimming or carving.

One could claim this fisherman is similar to many other characters in the *Zhuangzi* who possess Daoist wisdom and who are apparently performing normal, human rituals and activities, but who have internally completely detached themselves from their external activities, from how they appear, to use the title of chapter four, 'in the human world.' Internally, the Daoist sage wanders the infinite Dao and its endless transformations, all the while pretending to participate in human rituals and activities. This fisherman has forgotten all finitude, but he keeps that to himself. Among humans, he does what humans do, and with some facility. So he fishes, and perhaps he even fishes well. He has been burdened with human form, so he might as well fish like humans do, or at least appear to. Again, Oakeshott is half right in his use of the example of the fisherman. The Daoist fisherman fishes with nothing but joy, with no intention of catching any fish. He at least appears to have a conservative disposition. But Oakeshott is half wrong insofar as he fails to note the source of the fisherman's joy. It is not through a conservative disposition, a tendency to faithfully preserve the reality of the ritual, the familiarity of the activity, that the fisherman experiences joy. Oakeshott did not see through the fisherman's pretense of fishing. He did not join the fisherman on the Dao's wandering road of constant drift and doubt. Internally, the fisherman is completely absorbed into the Dao's ceaseless transformations. He is utterly detached from the activities and rituals he must externally perform while he appears human. Oakeshott did not note that the Daoist participation in human activities and rituals like fishing is done in order to hide the world inside the world and thus forget it entirely.

As just one more example of this Daoist 'genuine pretending,' as Moeller and Paul D'Ambrosio call it (2017), there is the story of Mengsun the Prodigy from the *Zhuangzi*. When Mr. Mengsun's mother died, he gained a reputation throughout Lu as an exemplary mourner, having performed all the mourning rituals and displayed the requisite appropriate emotions with great skill. The only thing was that he felt no real sorrow and was not actually sad in his heart. He had fully affirmed that death was just another fated transformation, nothing worth lamenting. He "wailed but shed no tears" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 61). One of Confucius' disciples, Yan Hui, was baffled by this and asked Confucius to explain it to him. Confucius said,

This Mr. Mengsun has gotten to the end of the matter, beyond mere knowing. For when you try to distinguish what is what but find it is impossible to do so, that is itself a way of deciding the matter. This Mr. Mengsun understands nothing about why he lives or why he dies. His non-knowing applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next unknown transformation, noth-



ing more. ...Others cry, so he cries too. And that is of course the only reason he does so (Ziporyn 2020, p. 61).

Confucius later describes Mr. Mengsun's pretense, his performative detachment from his social role as a mourner, in terms of his "resting securely in the displacement, constantly dropping away with each transformation as it goes." In this way, Mr. Mengsun, and all other similar Daoist sages, like our old fisherman above, "enter into the oneness of the clear sky, empty Heaven [tian: nature]" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 61). So, there is something a bit odd going on when these Daoist exemplars seemingly exhibit normal human skills, and perfect normal human roles, and rituals. Daoists neither know anything about nor feel anything precisely for their external performances. It is all make-believe to them. They are conserving nothing because there is nothing to conserve. They, instead, identify with the endless transformation and ceaseless non-identity of all practices and all things. That is the oneness they experience and become. And yet they do not show that externally. Instead, they do what is expected of them. They just sit and fish or mourn. They live by the *Zhuangzi's* counsel: "Don't let the external compromise get inside you and don't let your inner harmony show itself externally" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 40). From an Oakeshottian perspective, this will likely appear as absolutely remarkable. It takes everything to a far higher level than anything Oakeshott was up to in his essays.

The Daoist fisherman forgets fishing, forgets himself, and thus forgets everything else. This, it could be argued, is the final goal of Daoism: global forgetfulness. Following Confucius' explanation of Mr. Mengsun to Yan Hui, a few stories later we find Yan on his own journey towards Daoist sagacity, to global forgetfulness. Yan tells Confucius he is making real progress because, in his words, "I just sit and forget" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 63). Confucius wonders what he means and Yan says, after having first forgotten "humankindness and responsible conduct [morality]" and then "ritual and music [all that requires knowledge and intentionality]," he just sits and forgets. Yan says "it's a dropping away of my limbs and torso, a chasing off of my sensory acuity, dispersing my physical form and ousting my understanding until I am the same as the Transforming Openness." Confucius responds amazed that Yan must be free of any preferences or constancy and that he is such a worthy man he wants to be accepted as his disciple (Ziporyn 2020, p. 62). So now we have our third stage of forgetfulness, global forgetfulness. The Daoist forgets morality, purpose, and everything else. Therefore, he becomes the Dao by simply drifting and wandering around as the infinite transformations of the Dao.

Oakeshott cites probably the best image of Daoist global forgetfulness, of its negative perfectionism: the forgetful fish. The last sentence of Oakeshott's introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a quote from another section from the same chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we have just been citing, chapter six, 'The Great Source as Teacher'. The lines concern the superior nature of fish thriving in the depths of their element, completely forgetting each other when compared to the struggles fish face when dealing with droughts:

When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes (Ziporyn 2020, p. 56).

The inference is clear from the context of his introduction to *Leviathan* that Oakeshott means this image to serve as a metaphor for the benefits provided by the Hobbesian state. Just as fish can forget each other in the rivers and lakes, so can Hobbesian citizens forget each other in the midst of having followed the natural law and given up some natural right for the sake of obtaining the peace and security provided by a sovereign state. Hobbesian civil association allows citizens to forget each other enough to not have to force one another into collective enterprises, which always involve a loss of individual freedom. Hobbesian citizens do not have to blow and spit on each other in order to thrive. Instead, they mostly forget about each other as they endeavor to enjoy their individual pursuits.

And yet, again, Oakeshott seems to have missed the ultimate point of the story of the forgetful fish. The very next line after the one about the fish forgetting each other in the rivers and lakes is about how it is preferable to forget all about sovereign rulers instead of either praising or condemning them: “Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we’d be better off forgetting them both, letting their courses melt away in their transformation” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 56). Yao was the first of the paradigmatic sage-kings that Confucius regarded as an exemplar of moral rule. Jie, the last emperor of the Xia dynasty, was a legendary symbol of tyranny and cruelty. For the Daoist, then, it is better neither to praise good governing and political order nor condemn bad governing and political chaos, but forget both entirely. That is how humans can live like the forgetful fish: by forgetting rule altogether. This establishes perhaps the greatest difference between Daoism and Oakeshott: the Daoists were in many senses proto-anarchists and Oakeshott was nothing of the sort. For the *Laozi* and the chapters of the *Zhuangzi* that are usually grouped under ‘primitivist’ or ‘anarchist’ headings, the imposition of any sort of direct or explicit political rule, the type of sovereign authority that was the cornerstone of the Hobbesian vision, was another sign of loss and pathology, a straying off the Course. Order emerges spontaneously and naturally for Daoism through the collective forgetting, indifference, and submergence back into our basic animality that true wisdom entails. We are like the forgetful fish, but the Dao itself is our primary element, as we cease trying to intentionally impose order upon each other or the world:

Fish create fish in water, and humans create humans in the Course. Those who create and are created in the water just dart past each other through the ponds and their nourishment is provided. Those who create and are created in the Course simply do nothing for one another, do nothing for any particular goal, and the life in them becomes stable. Thus it is said, the fish forget one another in the rivers and lakes, and humans forget one another in the arts of the Course (Ziporyn 2020, p. 60).

It may be hard to imagine a less Oakeshottian approach to the world. If the virtue of rule, for Oakeshott, is not that it is just, but that it is settled, then the Daoist forgetting of all rule and all humanity for the sake of an identification with the unsettled, endlessly transforming, and anarchic essence of nature and the Dao would be something he would likely always have to reject. This is informative for us today, however. It is helpful to know that one of Oakeshott’s inspirations, classical Daoism, did indeed share many of his general tendencies, but that his affinity for Daoism was a touch superficial and, upon closer inspection, betrayed a certain unawareness of the irreconcilability between their ideals. Where Oakeshott wants to conserve certain kinds of intuitive morality and skilled activity for their own sake, mostly for reasons of aesthetics and preference for order and tradition, the Daoists, on the other hand, especially the Daoism of the *Zhuangzi*, aims for nothing less than a forgetting all that is moral, intentional, and merely human or finite for the sake of affirming the Dao’s endlessly transforming openness. Maybe one last aquatic image would be illustrative. Oakeshott viewed governing, and it appears living in general, as the attempt to balance the inherent tension between a more faithful or perfectionist and a more skeptical approach, to keep an even keel on the ship of state and the vessel of one’s own life. Daoism, on the other hand, just like Pyrrhonism, goes so far in the direction of skepticism it ends up as a negative perfectionism, a faith in global forgetfulness. With Daoism, it is not even so much that the ship sinks from the pressure of indulged in and championed extremities, but rather that one is no longer constrained by any type of vessel that is in need of balance. While Oakeshott sails the sea indefinitely, tacking into the wind, avoiding storms, always correcting for greater stability, the Daoist simply becomes the sea itself and forgets all about it. Whether as swimmer, fish, or governor, the Daoist is in his element. Oakeshott never went so deep.

## NOTES

- 1 The *Zhuangzi* is the name of an ancient Chinese text composed during the late Warring States period (476-221 BCE). Along with the *Laozi*, or *Daodejing*, it is one of the two main texts of classical Daoism. The first seven, or ‘inner,’ chapters are commonly thought to be the work of Zhuang Zhou (ca. 369-286 BCE), who was also called Zhuangzi (“Master Zhuang”). The authorship of the outer and miscellaneous chapters is usually attributed to other Daoist followers, often trying to add chapters written in the spirit of the inner chapters. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between Oakeshott and the *Zhuangzi*, see Chor-yung Cheung’s chapter, ‘Skepticism, Poetic Imagination, and the Art of Non-Instrumentality: Oakeshott and Zhuangzi,’ in Coats and Cheung (2012).

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