



Chai, David, *Zhuangzi and the Becoming of Nothingness*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019, 216 pages

Eric S. Nelson¹

Published online: 01 April 2019
© Springer Nature B.V. 2019

Recent Anglophone philosophical interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 often tend to construe the text (based on selective ahistorical readings of isolated passages) as articulating forms of skepticism, relativism, and nihilism, relying on modern Western epistemic and normative categories unfamiliar to classical Chinese discourses and the composite multilayered text associated with the enigmatic figure ZHUANG Zhou 莊周. In *Zhuangzi and the Becoming of Nothingness*, David Chai offers a philosophically systematic and hermeneutically nuanced elucidation of the *Zhuangzi* in relation to its historical context, subsequent Chinese reception, and contemporary philosophical concerns. The author displays great erudition by taking into consideration the historical context of the text by contrasting it with recently uncovered excavated texts such as the *Hengxian* 恒先 (*Primordial Constancy*) and *Huangdi Sijing* 黃帝四經 (*Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor*), the *Daodejing* 道德經, and other early Daoist and eclectic sources, and the extended history and variety of Chinese commentaries that are frequently ignored in Western philosophical accounts of the *Zhuangzi*, thereby revealing the text's complexity and richness. Chai counterpoises the commentary of GUO Xiang 郭象, which through its rendition of the text has deeply shaped the Western discourse concerning the *Zhuangzi*, with an array of other sources that indicate more hermeneutically and conceptually satisfying alternative interpretations (48).

In this first of three envisioned volumes (173), Chai's analysis promises to transform *Zhuangzi* studies by providing a historically informed, textually nuanced, philosophical interpretation of the neglected cosmological and ontological dimensions of the *Zhuangzi* in relation to its fundamental question of nothingness. This innovative work clarifies the *Zhuangzi*'s cosmology, ontology, and ethos of a Daoist life-praxis of forgetting and composing the heart-mind through the meontological priority of generative nothingness. From the Western ontological and theological perspective that posits and prioritizes first entities such as God and being, one of the challenges of genuinely

✉ Eric S. Nelson
eric.nelson@ust.hk

¹ Division of Humanities, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong

encountering early Chinese thought, including the sources identified with Daoism, is the notion of a generative becoming and functioning of nothingness from which being and nonbeing, *dao* 道, the one (*yi* 一), and the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) arise and return.

Mé-ón (μη-όν) is Greek for “not-” or “non-being,” and meontology the inquiry into nonbeing and nothingness. Chai modifies this expression in Chapter 1 of this study, undertaking what could be described as a “meontological turn” in contrast to the prioritization of the discourse of being. This turn—intimated in the Chinese commentarial tradition—not only has noteworthy implications for interpreting the *Zhuangzi*, but for ontology itself. For example, whereas Martin Heidegger formulated the ontological difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*), and Being as the primordial philosophical question of Western metaphysics, Chai’s first chapter articulates a compelling Daoist alternative in tracing the structure and significance of a distinctive meontological difference between two senses of *wu* 無, namely, ontic nonbeing and ontological nothingness, through an analysis of *wuwu* 無無 in the *Zhuangzi* that argues that this doubling is not a denial but a radicalization of *wu* (3). Such radical nothingness is not derivative, relative, or a merely negative nonbeing; it generatively constitutes reality in *Zhuangzi*’s cosmogenesis and orients Daoist arts and practices of life as discussed in the ensuing chapters.

What sort of world is generated by cosmogenic nothingness? In Chapter 2, Chai examines the *dao* 道 as the ontological emergence of the Thing (*wu* 物) from the indistinguishable unity of undifferentiated oneness (the One) and the ontic plurality of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) from their root in the Thing (36–37), tracking how the *Zhuangzi* moves from the phenomenology of traces (*ji* 跡) to the meontology of the traceless (*wuji* 無跡). Through a movement of reversal or return (*fan* 反), the Thing is released from linguistic and psychological conventions and traps through the gift of nothingness operating in it (38–39). The cosmology of the *Zhuangzi* orients and is necessary for interpreting Daoist arts of life-practice that are the focus of the *Zhuangzian* narratives of Butcher Ding (Pao Ding 庖丁) cutting up the ox, the cicada catcher, and the belt-buckle maker. These narratives are not only about becoming habitually skillful through repetitive action. As the text repeatedly reveals, they are models of nourishing life and exemplify the life-praxis of returning to the *dao* (48–49). Chai can accordingly offer a comprehensive interpretation of the connections between the cosmological, linguistic, and practical passages of the *Zhuangzi* that is lacking in other contemporary philosophical approaches.

The *Zhuangzian* life-praxis is one of unletting and undoing (55), nurturing and preserving “that which lies within things” (52). Chai is deeply attuned to the metaphors, images, and aesthetic and poetic dimensions of the text, describing how nothingness orients life-praxis as a dance (52–54). He likewise attends to its ethical significance. Daoist practices of letting-be and releasement cannot be adequately described as egoistic or altruistic in the Western moral sense of these terms, as it undoes both self and things, allowing them their own self-repose (56). The fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋), in which *qi* 氣 attains a condition of emptiness (*xu* 虛), is part of composing the heart-mind that harmonizes in vital quietude both internal emotions and external things.

In Chapter 3, Chai describes how the *Zhuangzi* engages in a series of reflections on death, mortality, and temporality that radically differ from the understanding of time as

a linear series of static now points and signifies the possibility of abandoning the need for time. In the *Zhuangzi*, human temporality and mortality are contrasted with the *dao*'s cosmogenesis. The practice of undoing the anxieties of temporality and emptying time indicates a nothingness that determines rather than is determined by time (68). The *dao* manifests itself to an extent as the functioning, changing, and temporalizing of nothingness through which the restfulness of nothingness is disclosed. Consequently, there is no negation of, or flight from, time, but a practice of letting-go of time as duration and death through the composure of nothingness. The heart-mind's composure is neither a monistic nor mystical union, insofar as it allows each thing to be its own self-generative center (76). Furthermore, letting-go is portrayed in the *Zhuangzi* through various forms of uselessness (*wuyong* 無用), forgetting (*wang* 忘), and the freedom of carefree wandering (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊).

The last three chapters turn our attention to the life-praxis of nothingness indicated in the *Zhuangzi*, beginning with uselessness in Chapter 4. The *Zhuangzi* reverses ordinary expectations and judgments of what counts as useful and useless, providing anticonventional models of Daoist arts of life-practices. Daoist "naturalness" and self-so-ness (*ziran* 自然), things following their own grain, are exhibited through images of the useless, the disfigured, the grotesque, and the withered, which operate as exemplars of nourishing, composing, and preserving life (95). The useless tree is an image of life in contrast to a praxis shaped by the distancing proxy of calculative utility (92).

Modern epistemic interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* presuppose that the text is concerned with knowing vis-à-vis not knowing, understanding with respect to doubt (93). This interpretation discloses how the *Zhuangzi* is concerned with how to live in accordance with *dao* through uselessness. Resting in uselessness is the art of nourishing life. Chai distinguishes three forms of uselessness in the *Zhuangzi*. One of them concerns the release and taking in of nothingness as, for instance, the inner-void takes and keeps in an empty vessel that gives and receives (92–93). The *dao* uselessly nourishes through nothingness, and the withering of the creativity and generativity of nothingness in the useful, the calculative, and the artificial is the loss of the *dao*'s nourishing power: "From nothingness all things arise, and from uselessness all things obtain their use" (99). The ethos of the life-praxis of the *dao* is accordingly letting and allowing natural spontaneity to occur. The self-generating ordering of things is not a static hierarchy, however, as it is characterized by the dance of harmony and cacophony, balancing and chaos.

In Chapter 5, Chai depicts the Daoist ethos of forgetting—a forgetting that must forget forgetting itself that is far more radical than cognitively doubting epistemic contents—as "a perpetual letting-go of names and designations" (109). Forgetting is a practice of return (110), and in letting traces return to their tracelessness (113). There are three basic forms and practices of forgetting that Chai designates: epistemological, phenomenological, and cosmological. Forgetting is not so much about knowing or not knowing memories and cognitive-perceptual contents; it is an art of emptying in sitting-in forgetfulness (*zuowang* 坐忘), composing the mind, and letting the myriad things return to themselves. In emptying, one forgets names, images, and the constructed meanings of things through forgetting the traces of things (115); one forgets being and non-being in the meontological functioning of nothingness. The genuine self is accordingly self-forgetting (108). Such forgetting is a non-forgetting of the genuine and the real in contrast to "forgetting that which is real" (*chengwang* 誠忘) (116). Without being

restrained by retaining and burdened by the anxiety of losing, emptiness and stillness are the conditions for receiving and responding (119).

The notion of freedom in the *Zhuangzi* has been highly contested. As delineated in Chapter 6, it is not so much freedom in Western senses of freedom of the will, the individual subject, or its negative or positive liberty. Chai contends that the sense of freedom articulated in the *Zhuangzi* is primarily onto-cosmological and consists of the meontological harmonizing of things and a life-praxis of letting-go of things and the self in forgetting, composing the heart-mind, and carefree wandering. This is indicated in the discussion of the three heavenly or natural patterns (*tianli* 天理) of heavenly differentiation (*tianni* 天倪), heavenly measure (*tianjun* 天均), and heavenly harmony (*tianhe* 天和) that are sheltered in the freedom, mystery, and silence of nothingness (140). These three principles unground rather than ground according to the *dao* (154). They are practices of redistributing and equalizing measures, not a demand for undifferentiated sameness (147). The art and cultivation of *dao* in the *Zhuangzi*, enacted by the “gatherer of authenticity” (*caizhen* 采真) (165–166), is liberated from instrumental calculations and purposes, and their anxieties, in being oriented toward a nonpurposive and nondeliberative natural action (172).

The value of this book lies not only in its content that reveals Zhuangzi’s philosophical sophistication, but also in its hermeneutical approach. It is a virtue of Chai’s interpretive and argumentative strategy to indicate novel ways in which it can and should be interpreted as an interconnected whole counter to tendencies that construe it as an assortment of disconnected ideas and arguments. Weaving the text’s diverse threads in relation to the meontological question of nothingness, Chai’s ambitious work offers a significant hermeneutical strategy for interpreting the cosmology, ontology, and ethics of the *Zhuangzi* that pushes our understanding of meontology and Daoist studies in new directions.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.