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## THE HUMAN AND THE INHUMAN: ETHICS AND RELIGION IN THE *ZHUANGZI*

### ABSTRACT

One critique of the early Daoist texts associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi is that they neglect the human and lack a proper sense of ethical personhood in maintaining the primacy of an impersonal dehumanizing “way.” This article offers a reconsideration of the appropriateness of such negative evaluations by exploring whether and to what extent the ethical sensibility unfolded in the *Zhuangzi* is aporetic, naturalistic, and/or religious. As an ethos of cultivating life and free and easy wandering by performatively enacting openness and responsiveness to things in an immanent this-worldly context, the *Zhuangzi* is oriented toward the relational attunement of disposition and practice rather than toward metaphysics or religion in a transcendent sense. It consequently suggests an immanent anarchic ethics without principles while neither forgetting nor reifying the sacred and the mundane in its playful illumination of the biospiritual dynamics of cultivating life.

### I. INTRODUCTION

One reading of the texts associated with the names Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子 is that they ignore the properly human and ethical in upholding the supremacy of an indifferent,<sup>1</sup> impersonal, and fatalistic *dao*.<sup>2</sup> Such concerns are formulated in the “Confucian” (*ru* 儒) tradition, for example by Xunzi 荀子, and remain prominent among both contemporary religious and secular personalist critics of early Daoism who argue that it lacks an appropriate conception of ethical personhood and moral agency.

Early Daoist language appears paradoxically both impersonal and individualistic in how it depicts the sage as differentiated from

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conventional norms and virtues. Daoist practices of self-transformation do not concern an individual self in a personalist sense, if personhood requires continuous identity or a constant abiding essence or soul. However, two twentieth-century Jewish thinkers have argued that ethical personalism calls for transcending a fixed and limited conception of the person, humanism cannot be realized as long as it is limited to a reified image of the human, and ethics has priority over epistemology and ontology. For Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, the primacy of ethics entails the constant deconstruction of conventional self-serving moralities. In the nontheological religious thinking of Buber and Levinas, we find traces of another way of understanding the ethical and religious significance of early Daoism.

Buber's interpretation of early Daoism is an exception to the common tendency to stress its anti-humanism, as he argued for the primarily ethical and personal character of the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>3</sup> Dwelling in accordance with the *dao* 道 is a process of cultivating and perfecting the genuine (*zhen* 真). It enacts a consummation (*cheng* 成) interpretable as a relational individuation or singularization that is a constancy and tranquility in the midst of flux, and freedom in the midst of the endless happening of things.<sup>4</sup> Although early Daoism relies on and employs strategies of aporia, paradox, and skeptical negativity, it is not limited or exhausted by them. It is accordingly not only an aporetic or negative ethics but an immanent ethos or religiosity of nurturing the life of things and others. As an ethos of cultivating and consummating life in free and easy wandering and enacting openness to things in an immanent this-worldly context, early Lao-Zhuang Daoism is more concerned with a nonmoralistic and still deeply ethical attunement, disposition, and practice than with metaphysics or ontology. It naturalistically contextualizes by decentering and recentering the human within the immanent relational dynamics of responsive singularization while neither impersonally ignoring nor anthropocentrically reifying the human.

## II. THE TROUBLE WITH ZHUANGZI

The *Zhuangzi* has long been a contested text in East Asian philosophy. The *ru* 儒 (Confucian) tradition has formulated a number of criticisms of early Daoism and the *Zhuangzi* from Xunzi to Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 and the Joseon thinker Jeong Dojeon 鄭道傳. First, Zhuang Zhou 莊周 is depicted as impersonally suppressing instead of morally cultivating and properly balancing human desires. Zhuangzi thus inappropriately takes the perspective of nature as a whole (*tian* 天) instead of the position

of humanity (*ren* 人).<sup>5</sup> The early Confucian thinker Xunzi remarked in the “*Jiebi*” (解蔽) chapter on dispelling blindness or obsessions: “Zhuangzi was blinded by nature and was insensible to men” (Zhuangzi *bi yu tian er bu zhi ren* 莊子蔽於天而不知人).<sup>6</sup>

Second, the *Zhuangzi* has been interpreted as promoting an aesthetic literary escapism, excessive individualism, or mystical nihilism. These criticisms express how Zhuangzi is thought to devalue the human and the moral order in promoting the arbitrary free-play of desires in which one irresponsibly and selfishly does as one pleases rather than following conventional social norms and virtues deemed essential for the family, community, and state to flourish.<sup>7</sup> This line of criticism joins Zhuangzi to the social irresponsibility of unworldly mysticism and the decadent aestheticism associated with the questionable categories of “literati Daoism” and “Neo-Daoism” of the late Han dynasty and subsequent periods.<sup>8</sup>

The expression “Daoism” (*dao jia* 道家) is a retrospective label found in the *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 《史記》) of the Han dynasty 漢朝 historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (140–86 BCE). What can be called Lao-Zhuang Daoism—in contrast with the more politically oriented Huang-Lao 黃老 Daoism of the Han<sup>9</sup>—appeared from the Confucian perspective simultaneously impersonal and egotistical, and consequently, on both grounds, unethical and detrimental to the proper cultivation of moral personality and charisma (*de* 德). The issues that emerge in these personalist criticisms of early Daoism, which continue to be repeated in Western philosophy from Immanuel Kant to the ecological thinker Murray Bookchin, cannot be said to be only external or anachronistic developments.

Questions of the personal and the impersonal, morality and amorality, responsibility and irresponsibility already appear in the *Daodejing* (《道德經》) and the *Zhuangzi* themselves. The *Daodejing* simultaneously speaks of being “without desire” (*wuyu* 無欲) and of “having desire” (*youyu* 有欲) in acting effortlessly, naturally, or spontaneously in the sense of *ziran* (自然); that which—akin to water—generatively follows its own course of its own accord.<sup>10</sup> Analogous questions occur with the *Zhuangzi*. On one hand, one should likewise be without desire and preference in cultivating embodied biospiritual practices such as the fasting of the mind that empties it of particular contents. On the other hand, one can act “freely” without coercion or as one pleases in free and easy wandering (*xiao yao you* 逍遙遊) within the world. In each text, there occurs a decentering of the ordinary everyday self and its calculative and anxious self-concern while simultaneously emphasizing another kind of basic care and concern for oneself and one’s worldly embodied life, including an ethos of its nourishment and furthering its longevity.<sup>11</sup> This is not as incoherent as it initially

appears. The conflicting objections raised above can be answered to the extent that Lao-Zhuang Daoism does not forget but rediscovers “the human” in recognizing its embodied situatedness within “the inhuman” or “natural.” This ethics of the cultivation of the openness of the relational self to its world is implicitly presupposed by both skeptical and mystical-religious interpretations of Zhuangzi.<sup>12</sup>

The *Zhuangzi* suggests an art of existing or an ethos of self-cultivation and relationalizing singularization in accord or attunement with *dao* 道. *Dao* is not a conscious method or purposive technique to be mastered as it is recognition and unfolding of individuality (without “the individual”) of the way that runs through the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) and oneself.<sup>13</sup> “Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the myriad things and I are one” (*Tian di yu wo bing sheng er wanwu yu wo wei yi* 天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。). In the context of the play between oneness and multiplicity, this statement need not suggest the monolithic unity associated with metaphysical monism. It is perhaps its ironic undermining through the recourse to the need for an “I” to be co-present along with heaven, earth, and the myriad things.<sup>14</sup>

### III. RECONSIDERING NATURE AND HUMANITY

Even if the *Daodejing* can be read as denying the human in rejecting conventional human attitudes and virtues and favoring nature as an impersonal and indifferent order, as in legalist interpretations of the remark about “straw dogs,” it criticizes the conventional from a concern for the relation between humans and their wider worldly context. The *Daodejing* accordingly affirms the prominence not only of the impersonal and inhuman but of the human in the context of the fourfold forces or powers of life (*Yu zhong you sida* 域中有四大).<sup>15</sup>

This fourfold process proceeds through a modeling of one upon the other in which each are mutually implicated. Both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* address human concerns in the context of a world that is more than and not exhausted by human concerns, projects, and purposes. This is anti-anthropocentric yet not thereby inhuman or inhumane, as each text suggests in its own way an ethics of encountering the world even as they problematize limited moralistic perspectives. They concern ethics (understood as ethos, as disposition and attunement) instead of the morality (and its external rules and prescriptions) that they ethically or normatively diagnose as the decay and eventual loss in contrast with the effortless and spontaneous flourishing of the way.<sup>16</sup>

The two distinctive yet overlapping works of Lao-Zhuang Daoism address individuals who are called to biospiritually cultivate and realize themselves in order to respond to and nonanxiously care for people and the myriad things, “turning none away.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to being absorbed and lost in an impersonal nexus or web of forces, the sage is the one who can say “I alone unlike others” precisely in embracing and being individuated in relation to the one and the whole.<sup>18</sup> Just as Laozi requires the human while rejecting limited conceptions of the human in order to cultivate the *dao*, in an almost preemptive response to Xunzi, Zhuangzi notes how “the sage is adept in dealing with heaven but clumsy in dealing with humanity,” whereas “it is only the genuine person (*zhenren* 真人) who can be adept in dealing with heaven and humans.”<sup>19</sup> That is: “When neither heaven nor humanity wins over the other, this is called being a genuine person (*zhenren* 真人).”<sup>20</sup>

The *dao* of heaven and humanity are repeatedly radically distinguished in the *Zhuangzi*, leading to its anti-humanistic interpretation, and yet they are one in the consummation (*cheng* 成) of cultivation as a relationalizing singularization of one’s own “nature”—interpreting *sheng* 生 and *xing* 性 as living generative processes rather than signifying a fixed principle or original essence that represents a lost arche to be retrieved and recovered.<sup>21</sup> There are two aspects of the discussion of “this and that” in chapter two of the *Zhuangzi* that indicate that: (1) the whole is necessary for there to be me, yet without me nothing would be selected out and particularized; and (2) this perspective of the whole is one that allows the recognition of each in its own most self-so-ing without dividing or completing and consequently injuring it.<sup>22</sup>

In response to criticisms that Zhuangzi did not appropriately recognize humans (*ren* 人) in obsessively and one-sidedly pursuing heaven understood as nature (*tian* 天), and privileged one aspect of the way to the exclusion of the others, it can be justifiably argued from the whole/individual relation introduced in the previous paragraph and the *Da Zong Shi* chapter (〈大宗師〉) (the “Great Venerable Teacher”) that the model or exemplar of the sage and the genuine person (*zhenren* 真人) is not one that entails being absorbed in the *dao*, or nature understood as an impersonal monistic force, much less shattered by its power, violence, and sublimity.

In the conversation between Great Overseer Shang and Zhuangzi in chapter fourteen, that is, the turning of heaven, humans are consummated in the context of the turning of heaven (*tian* 天) and transformations of nature (*wuhua* 物化) as much as animals are. For Zhuangzi, genuineness is a process of transformation but it does not transcend humanity as the sage remains within embodied worldly existence.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, his reply to conventional morality here is not that

the genuine person transcends but does not even reach the affection and the basic Confucian affective virtues such as filiality (*xiao* 孝).<sup>24</sup> The thesis that the sage or genuine person is not depersonalized accordingly appears questionable given remarks such as:

故曰，至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名。

It is said: the genuine person (*zhenren*) has no self; the spiritual person (*shenren*) has no merit; and the sagely person (*shengren*) has no name.<sup>25</sup>

As some translations and commentaries illustrate, this “no” means “not concerned with” or “not captivated by” self, merit, and name. Instead of constituting a negation or a nought, the *Zhuangzi* uses such negative language to unfix and open up the dynamics of the human person (*ren* 人), such that it can potentially become genuine (*zhen* 真). Since *zhen* is not absorption, or quietist isolation, such genuineness is to cultivate and individuate oneself in independent and effortless and yet responsive attunement with the myriad things and the way enacted through them.

How then can this transformation and cultivation, which is an ethical relationalizing singularization in becoming receptive to things, involve being “without desire” and “doing as one pleases”? Lao-Zhuang Daoist discourses concerning desires and emotions do not suggest their mere elimination or suppression. They address their transformation through the self-cultivation of a spontaneous naturalness (*ziran* 自然).<sup>26</sup> This spontaneous self-realization is the fulfillment of humanity in a condition of unforced accordance.<sup>27</sup> The ordinary desires and preferences that are assumed to constitute being human are transformed through the destructuring cultivation of the self-sonness (*ziran*) of oneself and others, as one’s disposition and heart-mind (*xin* 心) becomes unattached and disinterested—in the sense of being impartial and unworried—and fundamentally open, caring, and nourishing of life (*yang sheng* 養生).

The conditional and anxious character of everyday desire is ethically transformed through forgetting/letting be (*wang* 忘) in freedom (*xiaoyao* 逍遙). The genuine person (*zhenren*) does not oppose nor separate things and instead balances and harmonizes human activities within natural processes.<sup>28</sup> When one is no longer tied to one-side or the other, to this or to that, one can endlessly respond to things from the pivot of the way.<sup>29</sup> The mutuality of the natural and the human is described as genuineness, which means a process of open and responsive relationalizing singularization rather than a fixed culmination, in chapter six:

知天之所為，知人之所為者，至矣。知天之所為者，天而生也；知人之所為者，以其知之所知，以養其知之所不知，終其天年而不中道夭者，是

知之盛也。雖然，有患，夫知有所待而後當，其所待者特未定也。庸詎知吾所謂天之非人乎？所謂人之非天乎？且有真人而後有真知。

To know what is done by nature, and also what is done by humans, that is genuineness (*zhen*). Knowing what it is that nature does, one lives in accordance with nature. Knowing what it is that humans do, one uses the knowledge of what one knows to nourish the knowledge of what one does not know, and lives out the years that have been given without being cut off midway—this is the genuineness (*zhen*) of knowledge.

However, there is a difficulty: Knowledge must wait for something before it can be applicable, and that which it waits for is never certain. How, then, can I know that what I call nature is not really human, and what I call human is not really nature? There must first be a genuine (*zhen*) person before there can be genuine (*zhen*) knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

This passage indicates the need of unfolding an awareness of what is human and what is nonhuman in their mutuality. Such a boundary breaking awareness, or the enacting of a nontheoretical or nonconceptual knowing, can only transpire in the self that is the realization of their balance and harmony and thus one who perceives naturally (i.e., in accordance with constitutive vital forces and processes). Perceiving one's world naturally and effortlessly "like the infant" is only possible through a bodily, emotional, and mental self-cultivation that surpasses method, technique, and calculation.<sup>31</sup> There is accordingly no way (i.e., *dao* as the whole) without the one who makes the path by wandering it (i.e., *de* 德 as the singular being within the world, its focusing of the field, and its virtuosity).<sup>32</sup>

This suggests the priority of an ethical enactment of a comportment and disposition rather than a mystical or metaphysical claim about an object designated heaven or nature. In this naturalistic yet nonreductive ethics of the singular, or "ethics of difference" as Yong Huang has described it, the natural world, as an interconnected web of processes and singularities, cannot be recognized without the cultivation and relationalizing singularization of the genuineness that encounters and recognizes it.<sup>33</sup> To the extent that Lao-Zhuang Daoism indicates a cultivation and culture of nature, it does not draw an absolute distinction between nature and culture but only between its more or less genuine and ingenuine modes.<sup>34</sup> It is not an impersonal or anonymous naturalism, nor a mechanistic or even organic naturalism, as it reorients and balances the human within the natural.<sup>35</sup> Nor is it naturalistic primarily in the sense of being skeptical and antimetaphysical.<sup>36</sup> Such moments in the *Zhuangzi* suggest an ethics of naturalness in which the human recognizes itself in recognizing its interconnectedness within the fabric of life-processes, and freely responds to and nurtures the natural bodily world and the myriad things.

Such free responsiveness brings to mind a tendency in German aesthetic thinking initiated by Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.<sup>37</sup>

Kant's categories of the beautiful and the sublime are circumscribed by the human imagination, and their use in aesthetics and the reflectively guided study of nature in contrast with the seriousness of theoretical and practical rationality. These restrictions are not in place in the *Zhuangzi* insofar as it involves the full play of human capacities and faculties in their bodily and worldly context.<sup>38</sup> Zhuangzian relationalizing singularization immanently transcends without abandoning or rejecting the environing natural world in not being absorbed in it while responding to and nourishing things with freedom and ease.

Chapter four of the *Zhuangzi* portrays accordingly how it is by knowing without knowledge and by emptying the self through the "fasting of the mind" that one empties the contents of one's mind and thereby opens oneself to the spontaneous responsiveness of one's vital energy or force (*qi*), receiving in sincerity and generously responding without coercive assertion or external imposition.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, chapter twenty-three of the *Zhuangzi* intriguing moves from portraying bio-spiritual practices of cultivating, preserving, and nourishing the self to what might best be described as "bioethical" practices of appropriateness according to a "this." That is to say, it involves a "shifting rightness" (*yishi* 移是) with respect to nourishing rather than controlling and regulating one's own and other beings' life-processes.<sup>40</sup>

#### IV. RELIGIOUS OR NATURALISTIC ETHICS IN THE *ZHUANGZI*?

Standard naturalistic ethics, whether nature is interpreted metaphysically or scientifically, has been criticized in the Kantian tradition for undermining individuality, freedom, and responsibility in reducing the person to an anonymous network of forces and an impersonal necessity. If the "ought" is reducible to the "is," and "norms" addressing individuals to "facts" about them, then there can be no ethical obligation that calls humans to a higher duty and vocation. Although early Confucian ethics ties ethics more closely to existing society and moral anthropology, it also has contested a naturalistic moment in the *Zhuangzi* that potentially forgets the human. An alternative to the debate between impersonal nature and a personhood that transcends nature has begun to emerge through the free and easy spontaneous religiosity of naturalness articulated in the *Zhuangzi*. Such naturalness is not deterministically given by nature. It is an achievement of cultivation. As a cultivated genuine condition and disposition in relation to the world, Zhuangzian naturalness discloses a different perspective on the issue of what it is to be human. Becoming genuinely human

requires not evading or avoiding nature (*duntian* 遁天) and the immanent transcendent freedom of free and easy wandering.

Despite numerous interpretations maintaining that Zhuangzi views nature as amoral and has a “value-free attitude toward the natural world,” the *Zhuangzi* is primarily an ethical text.<sup>41</sup> It is undoubtedly right, as Chad Hansen argues, that: “The perspective of nature makes no evaluative judgment at all.”<sup>42</sup> However, it is questionable whether this implies the value-neutrality of nature and whether ethics requires making cognitive evaluative judgments or whether the ethical can be understood as a pre-cognitive and pre-theoretical encounter with and responding to things. In the *Zhuangzi*, cognitively or discursively oriented ethical theories of principle, such as the early Daoist interpretation of Confucian and Moist ethics, are implicitly rejected for turning oneself and others over to calculation.<sup>43</sup> Moral judgment, construction, and calculation distance one from rather than approximate the *dao*, doing violence to both self and things. This critique of moral convention does not exhaust but rather presupposes an ethical orientation.

Furthermore, if the ethical cannot be fittingly understood moralistically as obedience and conformity to commands, codes, and abstract principles, as early Daoism interprets conventional and Confucian morality, then we are in a position to recover the ethical dimension of the *Zhuangzi* as enacting as a kind of responsibility through “free and easy” receptiveness to and nourishing of the myriad beings that constitute the world.

The Confucian accusation against “decadent Daoist literati” notwithstanding, the freedom of the *zhenren* as nonmoralistic ethical responsiveness does not consist in that case in an aesthetic or nihilistic playfulness or a libertine selfishness feared by skeptics of early Daoism and its later appropriations.<sup>44</sup> Nor is the genuine person absorbed without relationalizing singularization into an undifferentiated and violently monistic nature, the *dao*, or the knowledge thereof. The human is the enactive site or the pivot of the *dao* through which the way of nature (heaven and earth) comes to awareness and can be recognized, as the relationalizing singularization of the sage proceeds through the nonavoidance, recognition, and nourishing of the human within the natural without an appeal to one external or transcendent metaphysical or religious source. The religiosity present in the *Zhuangzi* is this-worldly, naturalistic, and immanent.

Whereas European thinkers such as Kant and Schiller stressed the nonconceptual and yet still universal satisfaction enacted in the nonattached and free play of forces in aesthetic judgment, the *Zhuangzi* articulates a nonconceptual and nonattached play that involves transitions between myriad shifting perspectives. This diversity includes

that which is often excluded such as the contra- or counter-purposive that Kant finds displeasing in the beautiful, despite the role he gives it in the sublime and his noting the beauty of the useless and hence free object.<sup>45</sup> Instead of limiting this multiplicity and variability of transitions and perspectives to the freedom of the imagination and play in the aesthetic domain, and ultimately subordinating it to morality as in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the Daoist sage is depicted as responsively free and at ease amidst shifting environments and perspectives.

Realizing the interruptive perspective of the diversity and equality of things (齊物論) destabilizes the notion of an unchanging unitary perspective that would not attend to the singularity and transience of things. Such cultivation of reality entails that humans can transform their limited perspectives to realize the fundamental equality of all that strives within the world. From one's own perspective, only one's own self and things related to it seem valuable; from the more extensive perspective of *dao*, each different being is equal and equally valuable in being itself.

Zhuangzi's often playful and anarchic discourses showing perspectival shifts and transitions is more than ironic playfulness and a skeptical linguistic strategy to the degree that it enacts and calls for a change in perspective from one's own ordinary and small self-centeredness to that of the different (unconventional humans) and alien (other animals and ways of being). As Chad Hansen describes, there is continuousness between humans and animals, even in knowledge, which "Zhuangzi then exploits . . . to undermine our assumption that even human unanimity in guiding preference provides a basis for absolute value distinctions."<sup>46</sup> However, this denial of fixed hierarchical values and their associated preferences does not exclude the valuing that consists in the nourishing of the boundless common body (*tongti* 同體) of life and its singular foci.<sup>47</sup>

The biospiritual transition from egoistic self-assertion—including calculating and mutilating things according to one's own morality and sense of purpose—to the uniqueness and equality of multiple changing perspectives marks a transformation from blind unreceptive assertion to yielding openness and receptiveness toward the immanent spontaneity of things themselves (*ziran*) in order to let them occur relationally through the contextual, embodied, and relational "self."<sup>48</sup> As part of this emancipatory strategy, Zhuangzi reverses conventional opinions by praising the useless, the unusual, and the malformed as opposed to common anthropocentric attitudes about what constitutes the natural and the order of heaven and earth. These attitudes and judgments lead one to misjudge things according to their calculative and instrumental value for conditional human purposes and uses:

“Everyone knows how useful usefulness is, but no one seems to know how useful uselessness is.”<sup>49</sup>

What can the measure be if not the category of usefulness? According to Zhuangzi, one can do the most by doing nothing coercively. *Wuwei* 無爲 is typically translated as “nondoing” or “nonaction.” It signifies unforced and noncoercive action. This deferential activity occurs in relation to: (1) an anarchic knowing or understanding without overly relying on calculation or deliberation (*wuzhi* 無知) and (2) nonpreferential or nonattached desire (*wuyu* 無欲). This point suggests the minimalism of doing, knowing, and desiring less in contrast with the maximalism of constantly doing, knowing, and desiring more. Such is the difference between the wandering in the openness of things that cultivates and perfects the self (genuineness) and the restraint that confines and limits the self to its limited existing perspective. Consequently, this is a primarily ethical—and nonmoralistic—transformation of human dependence into the free and easy genuineness and receptiveness of the genuine person (*zhenren*):

體盡無窮，而游無朕。盡其所受乎天，而無見得，亦虛而已！至人之用心若鏡，不將不迎，應而不藏，故能勝物而不傷。

Embody endlessness and wander where there is no path, fully realize whatever is received from nature but do not take it to be anything. It is just being empty, nothing more. The genuine person's [*zhenren*] mind is like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing; responding without storing, thus handling all things without harming them.<sup>50</sup>

This skeptical and playful ethos and religiosity of immanent naturalness is contested as impersonal or lacking moral personality by Confucian thinkers such as Xunzi. It is evident from Xunzi's other comments concerning early Daoism what this critique involves. It does not express the ethical dimension of the processes of life but rather the domination and exploitation of a natural world divested of any ethical qualities and open to unrestricted human activity and devastation:

大天而思之，孰與物畜而制之！從天而頌之，孰與制天命而用之！望時而待之，孰與應時而使之！因物而多之，孰與騁能而化之！思物而物之，孰與理物而勿失之也！願於物之所以生，孰與有物之所以成！故錯人而思天，則失萬物之情。

You glorify nature and meditate on her, why not domesticate and regulate her?

You obey nature and sing her praises, why not control and use her?

You look on the seasons with reverence and await them, why not respond to them by seasonal activities? You depend on things, marvel at them, why not unfold your abilities and transform them? You meditate on what makes a thing, why not so order things that you do not waste them? You vainly look into the causes of things, why not appropriate and enjoy what they produce?<sup>51</sup>

We find here that Xunzi cannot be accurately portrayed as rejecting “responsiveness to things” as such. Xunzi critiqued its early Daoist interpretation as incomprehensibly encompassing responsiveness to the inexhaustible (*wuqiong* 無窮) and boundless (*wuji* 無極) that is, nothingness (*wu* 無).<sup>52</sup> Xunzian responsiveness or fittingness does not require recognizing the “inexhaustible” or immanent ethical character in things independent of the moral cultivation of the self. Xunzi’s conception of moral cultivation necessarily applies and imposes its order, measure, and firmness of purpose onto the chaos and disorder of external things and internal desires.<sup>53</sup> There is no ethics intrinsic in things, their emptiness, or in the natural heart-mind, independent of disciplined moral cultivation; there is only the morality of ritual propriety (*li* 禮).

The differences between the approaches of Zhuangzi and Xunzi lie between ethical freedom and moral obligation and their corresponding constructions of the person as according with or imposing upon naturalness. It is the difference between *shu* 儻 and *hu* 忽 helpfully seeking to correct, and thereby killing *hundun* 混沌 (“chaos” or “muddled confusion”) by puncturing him full of holes, and letting Hundun flourish according to his own nature.<sup>54</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION: FROM SKEPTICISM TO DAO-ETHOS

Zhuangzi’s wandering without regulating, responding without retaining, acting upon without harming, is more expansive than any conditional and limited goal or purpose that limits the self to one firm and measured perspective without recognizing its own inherent transience and multiplicity. Zhuangzi’s responsiveness does not—to speak Kant’s language—presuppose and is not restrained by a determinate concept, even though it employs concepts and words that are unfixed yet not therefore meaningless. Liberation from the determinate purpose and the instrumentally useful is the possibility that human beings can relate to things and their context in a fundamentally different noncalculative and nourishing way.

Zhuangzi and his literary executors employ aporia, paradox, and negativity with a transformative ethical effect.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Zhuangzian communicative strategies do not exhaust or consummate the ethical implications of the *Zhuangzi* insofar as it encompasses a material ethics of encountering, responding with, and nourishing the myriad things and oneself. This immanent ethos or religiosity of nourishing and nurturing life is enacted through the aporetic, deconstructive, paradoxical, or negative communicative strategies in the *Zhuangzi*. They break through the partial and restricted perspectives in which life is restricted to an abstract individual self. As an anti-moralistic ethos

and immanent religiosity of caring for life (*yangsheng* 養生), the *Zhuangzi* cannot be reduced to a purely skeptical philosophy of language that brackets or escapes from worldly material life and its nourishment. “Feeding life,” to adopt François Jullien’s expression, is not an exodus from but into the world.<sup>56</sup>

Zhuangzi’s way cultivates personhood (*ren*) in its holistic relationality without fixating and reifying what it is to be human or non-human. It cannot be properly called egotistical, since the genuinely human is selfless and called to individuate itself relationally and responsively amidst things. It is naturalistic, if naturalism is not equated with modern conceptions of the scientific reducibility of nature or the instrumental domination of nature, without being anti- or in-human, as the human is cultivated within the way instead of contrary to it. That is to say, the way entails a humanistic and transformational religiosity or ethos if it is human to be oriented by and respond to the turnings and living generative processes interconnecting the fourfold of heaven, earth, humans, and the myriad things.

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#### ENDNOTES

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1. The expressions “Early” or “Lao-Zhuang” Daoism are used in this article for the sake of convenience. This convention does not imply that there is an underlying unity or school between them nor does it necessarily exclude other forms of Daoist thought and practice.
2. The *Zhuangzi* (莊子) passages are cited by chapter. We have consulted the *Library of Chinese Classics* Chinese-English edition of the *Zhuangzi* by Wang Rongpei, Qin Xuqing, and Sun Yongchang (Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House and Foreign Language Press, 1999); 杨柳桥, 庄子译话 (上海: 上海古籍出版社, 1991); 劉榮賢, 莊子外雜篇研究 (台北: 聯經出版事業股份有限公司, 2004); Burton Watson’s *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Martin Palmer and Breuilly, *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1996); A. C. Graham’s *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001); Hyun Höchsmann and Yang Guorang, *Zhuangzi* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007); Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998); and Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009). Chinese quotations are from the Chinese Text Project: <http://ctext.org/>.
3. Martin Buber, *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang Tse* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1910). Published in English translation in Martin Buber, *Chinese Tales: Zhuangzi, Sayings and Parables and Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*, trans. Alex Page (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1991) and in Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Dao: Martin*

- Buber's Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Buber's "afterword" (*Nachwort*) to the selections from the *Zhuangzi* is also published in English in Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1990), 31–58. Although Levinas did not discuss Chinese philosophy, there are significant intersections. See, for instance, on Levinas's ethics of alterity and Daoist self-cultivation: Leah Kalmanson and Sarah Mattice, "The De of Levinas: Cultivating the Heart-Mind of Radical Passivity," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 10, no. 1 (2015): 113–29.
4. On Cheng and Zhen, compare Kim-chong Chong, "Zhuangzi's *Cheng Xin* (成心) and Its Implications for Virtue and Perspectives," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10, no. 4 (2011): 427–43; and Kim-chong Chong, "The Concept of *Zhen* 真 in the *Zhuangzi*," *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 2 (2011): 324–46.
  5. Interpreting *tian* 天 in the more Zhuangzian sense of *tiandi* 天地 and *tianxia* 天下, as heaven cannot be approached without earth just as *yin* 陰 cannot be approached without *yang* 陽; compare Dan Lusthaus, "Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. S. Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 200–1. On "nature" in early Daoism, and its ecological implications, see the discussion in Eric S. Nelson, "Responding with Dao: Early Daoist Ethics and the Environment," *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 3 (2009): 294–316.
  6. *Xunzi*, 21.5; 21.4 in *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. John Knoblock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–1994), vol. 3, p. 102/Chinese/English edition: *Xunzi*, ed. and trans. John Knoblock and Jue Zhang (Changsha: Hunan ren min chu ban she, 1999), vol. 2, p. 679. For a discussion of the issues involved in Zhuangzi's assessment of Zhuangzi, compare Danesh Singh, "Zhuangzi, Wuwei, and the Necessity of Living Naturally: A Reply to Xunzi's Objection," *Asian Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2014): 212–26.
  7. For a problematic classic account of this view, see Etienne Balazs, "Nihilistic Revolt or Mystical Escapism: Currents of Thought in China during the Third Century A.D.," in *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy*, trans. H. M. Wright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 226–54. Compare Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 209–10. Also, note Ge Ling Shang, *Liberation as Affirmation: The Religiosity of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 3.
  8. See, for example, Charles Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 127–29; and Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, 51–52, who distinguishes a sober Daoist inner cultivation tradition associated with the *Neiye* 內業 from Zhuangzian "useless words" and irresponsibility.
  9. See Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master (He guan zi): A Rhetorical Reading* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 38; Shan Chun, *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy: Dao of Inner Saint and Outer King* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 20–21.
  10. Compare Ddj, 1, which suggests both eliminating and having desires. On *ziran* as spontaneity, see Dainian Zhang, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* (2002), 162; as nature, see Hans-Georg Moeller, *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory* (2004), 107; on *ziran* as water-like, see Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (1997), 116.
  11. Compare Ddj, 13; for a phenomenological approach to the bodily basis and embodiment of *zhenren*, see Rur-Bin Yang, "From 'Merging the Body with the Mind' to 'Wandering in Unitary Qi,'" in Cook, *Hiding the World in the World*, 88–127.
  12. See the discussion in Eric S. Nelson, "Questioning Dao: Skepticism, Mysticism, and Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," *International Journal of the Asian Philosophical Association* 1 (2008): 5–19.
  13. Although he focuses on language rather than ethics, this argument is in agreement with Steve Coutinho's statement that "If Zhuangzi is advising us to transcend the human altogether, then this is an altogether unhelpful philosophy" in *Zhuangzi and*

- Early Chinese Philosophy: Vagueness, Transformation, and Paradox* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 167.
14. Compare Harold Roth, “Bimodal Mystical Experience in the ‘Qiwulun 齊物論’ Chapter of the Zhuangzi 莊子,” in *Hiding the World in the World*, 20.
  15. *Ibid.*, 25.
  16. *Ibid.*, 18–19. On the ethos of reversibility and transformation in early Chinese thought, see Eric Nelson and Liu Yang, “The Yijing, Gender, and the Ethics of Nature,” in Ann Pang-White, ed., *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 267–88.
  17. *Ibid.*, 27 and 2.
  18. *Ibid.*, 20 and 22.
  19. *Zhuangzi* chap. 23; Mair, 235.
  20. JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 172.
  21. This living generative dimension is fleshed out in particular in Ziporyn’s translation.
  22. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 2; especially useful translations for these points are Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 10 and 13, and Paul Kjellberg, “Zhuangzi,” in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, eds. P. J. Ivanhoe and B. W. V. Nordan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 216 and 218.
  23. Scott Bradley Cook, ed., *Hiding the World in the World*, 257.
  24. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 14; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 66.
  25. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 1; compare Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 85; Palmer and Breuilly, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 10 and 13; Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 32; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 6. For an interpretation emphasizing the religious context of these terms, according to which humans adopt themselves to heaven and take on divine qualities, see Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 122.
  26. On *zhen* as the self-cultivation of reality or life, see Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, chapter 5. Kirkland differentiates two different models of how to empty oneself of desires and thoughts: (1) self-cultivation and (2) guarding and preserving one’s life-forces as seen in texts such the *Taipingjing* (太平经) and in the writings of Gehong 葛洪. On the function of the *zhenren* 真人 in the *Zhuangzi* in contrast to later Daoism, see Daniel Coyle, “On the *Zhenren*,” in *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Roger Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 197–210.
  27. Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 79.
  28. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 2; note Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 91; Kjellberg, “Zhuangzi,” 217; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 12.
  29. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 6; compare Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 116–17; Palmer and Breuilly, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 47–48; Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 77–78; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 39–40.
  30. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 6; this is a revised version of Burton Watson’s translation, 77.
  31. Early Daoism and Confucianism both emphasize self-cultivation and even—especially in Mengzi—of that which is natural, at ease, and spontaneous. However, this should not lead to the conflation of the two. Compare Weiming Tu, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 9; Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 131–32. On technique and technology in Daoism and its Western philosophical reception, see Eric S. Nelson, “科技和道：布伯、海德格尔和道家”，《长白学刊》2014年第1期，第5-12页 (*Changbai Journal* 1 [2014]: 5–12), published in English as E. S. Nelson, “Technology and the Way: Buber, Heidegger, and Lao-Zhuang ‘Daoism,’” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41, no. 3–4 (2014): 307–27.
  32. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 2; note Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 92; Kjellberg, “Zhuangzi,” 218; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 13. Compare Ames’s interpretation of *de* as singularization and focusing with Hansen’s and Ziporyn’s

- translation of it as virtuosity to distinguish it from universalizing morality as well as from a sense that it involves a fixed or moralistic virtue.
33. Yong Huang, "The Ethics of Difference in the *Zhuangzi*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (2010): 65–99.
  34. Janghee Lee, *Xunzi and Early Chinese Naturalism* (City: Publisher, 2005), Albany: SUNY Press, 91.
  35. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China: Mathematics and the Sciences of 1959*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 414.
  36. Youru Wang, *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism* (City: Publisher, 2003), London: Routledge, 36.
  37. See the more detailed discussion of Kant's aesthetics in relation to the freedom of the *Zhuangzi* in Eric S. Nelson, "Kant and China: Aesthetics, Race, and Nature," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 4 (2011): 509–25. Also see the discussion of nature, feeling, and the self in Kant in Eric S. Nelson, "Language, Nature, and the Self: The Feeling of Life in Kant and Dilthey," *The Linguistic Dimension of Kant's Thought: Historical and Critical Essays*, eds. Frank Schalow and Richard Velkley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 263–87.
  38. On Kant's account of the responsiveness of feeling and imagination in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, compare Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 94, 106–7.
  39. See Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 103–4; Palmer and Breuilly, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 29–30; Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 57–58; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 26–27.
  40. This is Ziporyn's translation in his *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 101, of the passage: 有生，臧也，披然曰[移是]。嘗言[移是]，非所言也；雖然，不可不知也。臧者之有臧，骸可散而不可散也；觀室者周於寢廟，又適其偃焉，為是，舉[移是]。請常言[移是]。[是]以生為本，以知為師，因乘以是非；果有名實，因以己為質，使人以為己節，因以死償節。若然者，以用為知，以不用為愚，以徹為名，以窮為辱。[移是]，今之人也，是蜩與學鳩同於同也。
  41. Respectively, Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (City: Publisher, 2002), 141; Lisa Ann Raphals, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 86.
  42. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 290.
  43. Compare Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 201–2, and Raphals, *Knowing Words*, 70–71.
  44. Hyun Höchsmann and Christian Wenzel have addressed such concerns by stressing the practical-ethical character of freedom in both Zhuangzi and Kant in their respective articles: "The Starry Heavens Above: Freedom in Zhuangzi and Kant," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (2004): 235–52; and "Ethics and Zhuangzi: Awareness, Freedom, and Autonomy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2003): 115–26.
  45. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, vol. 5: 210–11; vol. 5: 245.
  46. Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, vol. 294. On the question of the animal in Zhuangzi, also see Mario Wenning, "Heidegger and Zhuangzi on the Nonhuman. Towards a transcultural Critique of (Post) Humanism", in Chloë Taylor and Neil Dalal, eds., *Rethinking the Non-Human* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 93–111.
  47. On the overlapping shiftless and boundless *ti* body, see Deborah Sommer, "Concepts of the Body in the *Zhuangzi*," in Victor H. Mair, ed., *Experimental Essays on Zhuangzi*, 2nd ed. (Dunedin: Three Pines Press, 2010), 223–24.
  48. This passage is informed by Dan Lusthaus's interpretation in "Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," 163–206.
  49. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 4, trans. Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 32; compare Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 109; Palmer and Breuilly, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 36; Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 67.
  50. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 7, modified translation of Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 54; compare Höchsmann and Guorang, *Zhuangzi*, 128; Palmer and Breuilly, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 64; Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 97.

51. *Xunzi* 17.13; translation modified from *The Works of Hsun Tzu*, trans. H. H. Dubs (London: Probstain, 1928), 236.
52. *Xunzi* 2.8. On early Daoist conceptions of *wu* and their philosophical implications, see David Chai, "Daoism and Wu," *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 10 (2014): 663–671; and David Chai, "Nothingness and the Clearing: Heidegger, Daoism and the Quest for Primal Clarity," *The Review of Metaphysics* 67, no. 3 (2014): 583–601.
53. *Xunzi* 1.15, 3.7.
54. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 7, Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 54.
55. On deconstruction and Daoism, see Chung-ying Cheng, "A Taoist Interpretation of 'difference' in Derrida," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (1990): 19–30; Chung-ying Cheng, "Deconstruction and Différance: Onto-Return and Emergence in a Daoist Interpretation of Derrida," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39, no. S1 (2012): 31–50. On aporetic ethics and Daoism, see Lusthaus, "Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," 163–206; Dan Lusthaus, "Zhuangzi's Ethics of Deconstructing Moralistic Self-Imprisonment: Standards without Standards," in *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought*, ed. Youru Wang (London: Routledge, 2007), 53–72; and Eric S. Nelson, "Levinas and Kierkegaard: The Akedah, the Dao, and Aporetic Ethics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2013): 164–84. Concerning the implications of Lao-Zhuang Daoism for critical social theory, see Mario Wenning, "Daoism as Critical Theory," *Comparative Philosophy* 2, no. 2, (2011): 50–71.
56. On "feeding" life, see François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007), 3, 31, 119, 122.