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THE DARKER SIDE OF DAOIST PRIMITIVISM

Among the numerous voices in the heterogeneous *Zhuangzi*, two are most conspicuous. The first belongs to Zhuang Zhou 莊周, purported author of the “Inner Chapters.” In his writings we find most of the ideas associated with the *Zhuangzi*: Freedom and spontaneity, equanimity toward life and death, the relativity of human experience, the traps of public life, etc. The style of writing and the brilliance of thought are unmatched in the rest of the book. Yet buried in the outer chapters is the voice of another conspicuous contributor, whose individuality has not escaped the attention of textual scholars.¹ This author is responsible for four short articles that comprise the chapters “Webbed Toes,” “Horses Hooves,” “Rifling Trunks,” and the introductory section of “Restrain and Contain.” A.C. Graham called him the “Primitivist,” as shall I. In this article, I present a novel interpretation of the Primitivist’s writings.

The Primitivist has largely been neglected in Western surveys of early Chinese thought, most probably because he has been read as just another exponent of the *Laozi*. A.C. Graham devotes a few pages to the Primitivist in his *Disputers of the Tao*, mostly limiting his discussion to the Primitivist’s take on morality, and skimming over the Primitivist’s greatest preoccupation—the consequences of civilization and the dangers of luxury and sophistication. Benjamin Schwartz, in *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, quotes a single passage from one of the Primitivist’s articles, and then only to gloss the *Laozi*.² While these sets of Daoist writings share certain similarities, it is precisely this association with the *Laozi* that has, I think, done more to enervate a sustained analysis of the Primitivist documents than any other single factor. Indeed, the Primitivist is often treated as simply a more radical or more temperamental “Laoist.”³

This is a shame, because the Primitivist is an idiosyncratic thinker whose theories do not simply reiterate those found in the *Laozi*. He warrants more sustained and detailed analysis if only for the fact that he seems to have membership in what must be a very exclusive group:

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He is a Daoist who thinks the world can only be bettered by *doing something*—indeed, doing a whole lot of unpleasant things. Or so I will argue.

To properly understand the Primitivist, then, we need first pull him out of the long shadow of the *Laozi*. The best place to begin is with the extended parallel that occurs between chapter 80 of the *Laozi* and a passage in the Primitivist's "Rifling Trunks."

I. UTOPIAS AND GOLDEN AGES

The small utopian community described in chapter 80 of the *Laozi* engenders diverse responses in its readers. Some find it inspirational, others find it dubious. For the latter, skepticism arises when they read of folks who are surrounded by labor-saving implements and yet fail to use them, or when they ponder folks so content with their rudimentary food, clothing, and customs that they no longer desire novelty, failing to communicate with neighbors who live in plain sight—a mere stone's throw away. This is a remarkable state of affairs. Who among us would hoist a heavy load on our backs when a wheelbarrow lay unused nearby? Who would eschew a calculator in favor of making computations with pencil and paper? How can these folks be so disinterested in the world around them that they fail to move about and explore? The type of transformation described in *Laozi* 80—where we stop using our tools and technology, stop pursuing our desires and interests, and revert to eking out a rudimentary, labor-intensive existence—seems incredible. For certain individuals, this may be an ideal (or challenge) worth pursuing. But entire communities? And how, exactly, are people made (or "caused" *shi* 使) to be this way? At any rate, here's the description in full:

Shrink the country; lessen the population.
 Make it so—that there are implements for "tens" and "hundreds" yet none use them;
 Make it so—that people take death seriously and put traveling far from their minds.
 They have boats and carriages, yet none ride them;
 They have armor and spears, yet none wield them.
 Make it so—that people revert to putting knots in ropes and use them [for counting];
 They find their foods delicious;
 They find their clothing beautiful;
 They find their customs delightful;
 They find their households safe.
 Neighboring states may be in sight of one another,
 The sounds of their dogs and chickens are overheard,
 Yet the people grow old and die,
 With no comings and goings between them.⁴

As Benjamin Schwartz noticed,⁵ the ideal society depicted in *Laozi* 80 cannot be of the primitive past; it contains many signs of civilization (such as boats, carriages, and armor). What's more, there is no indication whether such a society exists, has ever existed, or ever will exist. These peculiarities should caution us from labeling *Laozi* 80 as either primitive or historical. Instead, it describes an imagined utopia, someplace that never was nor perhaps ever will be. As a utopia, though, its nonexistence is trivial, for it can nonetheless excite the imagination and serve as an important heuristic and critical devise to focus political energies toward an impossible but alluring goal. (Depictions of utopias often have such functions.) *Laozi* 80 depicts what the world *would* look like if rulers were to consistently follow the *Laozi's dao*, reversing the trend toward expansion, accumulation, growth, and sophistication.

Now, an extended parallel of *Laozi* 80 can be found in the Primitivist's essay "Rifling Trunks":

Throughout that time the people made use of knotted cords, found their own food sweet enough, their own dress beautiful enough, were happy in their own customs, content in their own abode. Neighbouring countries saw each other in the distance, heard the sounds of each others' cocks and dogs, but the people grew old and died without ever coming and going.⁶

I want to contrast this depiction with the utopia described in *Laozi* 80. Notice that the opening lines of *Laozi* 80, which note the existence of technological innovation, are absent. Unlike *Laozi* 80, the Primitivist's ideal society contains no weapons, boats, carts, or any other objects of the sort. In "Horses' Hooves" he writes,

The mountains had neither paths nor trails,
The marshes had neither boats nor bridges . . .
The beasts and birds had undepleted flocks,
The grass and trees grew to their full height.⁷

The only signs of civilization are rudimentary functional items such as clothing, knotted ropes, implements for weaving, and ploughs. This suggests that the Primitivist is not describing an imagined utopia but is instead recounting history. Indeed, all of his descriptions of the ideal society (including the parallel with the latter half of *Laozi* 80) are accompanied with unambiguous statements linking it to the past.⁸ In "Rifling Trunks," for example, he provides the names of no less than twelve leaders (*shi* 氏) under whom this "golden age" flourished. (He even provides accounts about the daily lives of the people under one of these leaders—He Xu.) The Primitivist was also fond of contrasting

“formerly” (*xizhe* 昔者) with “nowadays” (*jin* 今), and “the age of utmost power” (*zhide zhishi* 至德之世) with “the time since the arrival of the sages” (*jizhi shengren* 及至聖人). All of this suggests that the Primitivist is recounting a past epoch of order, a historical golden age.

This golden age was an era in human society when progress was at a standstill and the people were content with the little practical knowledge they had accumulated for sustaining the time-consuming tasks of feeding and clothing themselves. The people were ignorant not because they spurned education or had some learning disability but because there was simply nothing for them to learn. And yet the Primitivist admired their natural and intuitive way of living. He compared them to animals in the wild,

The horse has hooves to tread the frost and snow, and hair to ward off wind and cold, it champs the grass and drinks the waters, lifts the knee high and prances. Such is the true nature of the horse, and even if it had lofty terraces and great halls it would have no use for them.⁹

Luxurious and extravagant objects are artificial constructions that have no practical use. If the necessities of life could be readily obtained through hard work and agriculture, what need was there to waste resources and energy on anything else?

Identifying the wild horse with the people of the golden age highlights the concept of *de* 德, which is the inner power or potency of a thing, its characteristic function or ability. The term appears throughout the Primitivist’s writings. Before humans were distracted by pleasurable objects, musical instruments, elaborate art, and abstract argumentation, they had a pristine and unhewn (*pu* 僕) inner power that allowed them to live in harmony with the myriad creatures:

So one could tie up a bird or animal on a lead and take it for a walk, or pull down a branch and peep into a crow’s or magpie’s nest. In the age when Power was at its utmost, men lived in sameness with the birds and animals, side by side as fellow clansmen with the myriad creatures; how would they know a gentleman from a knave?¹⁰

The people lived in harmony both with the natural world and with one another—“in oneness and without faction.”¹¹

The differences between the Primitivist’s golden age and the ideal state described in *Laozi* 80 should be clear. Put succinctly, the Primitivist’s golden age was an era in history, whereas *Laozi*’s utopia was a nonexistent expression of desire. The difference may seem minor. Yet, as I will argue, in this difference lies a key to understanding the rest of the Primitivist’s writings.

II. PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS . . .

The equanimity and equilibrium of the golden age were the products of ignorance—a lack of sophistication or innovation. This would end with the arrival of meddling “sages.”¹² The Primitivist blames the Yellow Emperor 黃帝—Shen Nong’s successor and a legendary “sage” who invented government institutions, warfare, and marriage (among other things)—for triggering a prolonged dissent into disorder. According to the Primitivist, he was the first to “meddle” with the hearts of men. (Other “sages” he singles out for criticism include the *Ru* [or “Confucian”] heroes Yao 堯 and Shun 舜.) With their emphasis on innovation, culture, and refinement, these “sages” inspired future artisans such as Li Zhu, Craftsman Chui, and Master Musician Kuang to create works of art and orchestrate elaborate compositions, deranging people’s senses and generating mutated, unnatural desires. By creating moral laws and proliferating rituals, the “sages” facilitated the proliferation of debate and disputation, which would eventually lead men to “fatuously admire useless propositions”¹³ and give rise to the logical abstractions of the Sophists (*mingjia* 名家) and the disputations of the hundred schools (*baijia* 百家). The “sages” developed standards and measures and other methods of enumeration, fuelling greed and jealousy; objects became categorized, objectified, isolated from their surroundings and removed from the natural order. Armed with new abilities and technologies, people’s desires no longer had any natural checks and balances, leading to a breach in the harmonious balance that existed before artifice was introduced into the world.

How would we know this is so? If there is too much knowledge of bows, crossbows, bird-snares, stringed arrows, triggered traps, the birds are disordered in the sky. If there is too much knowledge of hooks, baits, nets and basket-traps, the fish are disordered in the water. When there is too much knowledge of pitfalls, springs, snares, traps and gins, the animals are disordered in the woodlands. When we have too much of the vagaries of cunning and deception, of wrenching apart “the hard and the white” and jumbling together “the same and the different,” the vulgar are perplexed by disputation. Therefore, if the world is benighted in utter confusion, the blame rests on those who lust after knowledge.¹⁴

At an earlier stage in human history, people’s behavior and desires were orderly and humans lived in harmony with nature because they lacked both the knowledge and the means to lead themselves to ruin. Yet the “sages” littered the world with artifice that would stimulate the minds of the masses, generating mutations and cravings that proved difficult to remove. (“Even someone with webbed toes will weep when they are ripped apart, even someone with a sixth finger will scream when it is bitten off.”¹⁵)

Through their technological innovations, the “sages” enabled the production of luxurious and pleasurable objects, rare commodities that became the focus of men’s desires, which led to “gluttony for honours and riches.”¹⁶ People became “centered on profit,”¹⁷ and moved to and fro to keep up with the Joneses. “Nowadays things have gone so far that the people lift their heels and crane their necks, tell each other ‘In-such-and-such a place there’s a good one,’ and pack up provisions and head for him.”¹⁸ This led to incessant struggle among the peasants and rampant paranoia among the privileged—the “haves” living in fear of the “have-nots”: “The result is that men of worth hide away under the great mountains and craggy cliffs, while the lords of 10,000 chariots go on trembling with anxiety up in the shrines of their ancestors.”¹⁹

The “sages” and their followers not only deranged senses, mutated desires, and confused minds, they also provided the means for petty thieves to become great robbers. The Primitivist reminds us that virtues such as duty, wisdom, and goodwill could serve the base as well as the noble. He used the infamous Robber Zhi as a spokesman for the benefits of studying the *daos* of the “sages”:

A shrewd guess at where the things are hidden in the house is the intuitiveness of the *sage*. Being first man in is *courage*. Being last man out is *duty*. Knowing whether or not you can bring it off is *wisdom*. Giving everyone fair shares is *goodwill*. Without these five at his disposal, no one in the world could ever make a great robber.²⁰

The Primitivist recounts the fate of Qi 齊, a well-ordered state both rich in resources and governed according to the rules, regulations, and rites of the “sages.” Yet in a single morning Tian Cheng (a thief and bandit) killed the lord of Qi and stole his “sagely” state, which was now put to his service. The irony did not escape the Primitivist: “Then isn’t it on the contrary that he stole the state of Qi complete with all its wise and sagely laws and used them to keep safe his robbing, thieving self?”²¹ Common sense dictates that valuables are best stored in trunks or secured in safes; the Primitivist reminds his reader that any safeguard could be overcome by a thief strong enough to make off with both the valuables and the safeguards themselves (i.e., lock, stock, and barrel). Indeed, Tian Cheng was no more secure in his state than the previous lord of Qi, and in turn would fall victim to the ruler of Qin in his conquest of the empire.²²

The man who steals a buckle is put to death, the man who steals a state becomes a prince, and at the gates of a prince you’ll see the *benevolent* and the *dutiful*. Then isn’t this stealing *goodwill* and *duty*, *sagehood* and *wisdom*? So for the man who, succeeding as a great robber, wins the throne of a state and steals *goodwill* and *duty*, and annexes the pecks and bushels, scales, tallies and seals for his own

benefit, even the rewards of high-fronted carriage and cap of office cannot induce, the terror of the executioner's axe cannot deter.²³

Many of the Primitivist's contemporaries were also trying to address the same disorder. They "sprung up in all their variety," attempting to order the world through further meddling and intervention, aping the sage kings instead of censuring them, blind to their own faults and vices.

Everyone in the world has enough sense to inquire into what he does not know, yet we do not have the sense to inquire into what we already do know. Everyone knows how to condemn what he judges to be bad, yet we do not know how to condemn what we have already judged good. This is why we are in utter disorder.²⁴

According to the Primitivist, "what we already know" is that the world used to be in order and that it is currently in disorder. "What we already know" is that the innovations of all sorts of creative, ambitious, and clever individuals left the world filled with artifice that forever preoccupied the multitudes with *some other thing*. "In the case of the knave, he sacrifices himself for profit; of the knight, for reputation; of the noble, for family; of the sage, for the world . . . all are as one when it comes to injuring one's nature and making a sacrifice of oneself."²⁵ To many *shi*, the goodness of culture was left unquestioned; to the Primitivist, it seemed they were trapped in a fruitless way of thinking. Further sophistication and laws, more rules and standards, ever more suggestions about how individuals ought to live—these just compounded the problem.

Cui Zhu asked Old Dan, "Without governing the empire, how are we to improve men's hearts?" "Be careful not to meddle with man's heart. Man's heart sinks when spurned, soars when promoted, when down is a prisoner and when up is an executioner. Gently it goes on yielding to the harder and stronger, yet it has corners and it jabs, it is engraved, it is polished. When hot it is a scorching flame, when cold it is congealed ice. . . . Is there anything as eager and proud and impossible to tie down as the heart of man?"²⁶

Like the carpenters who hack, chop, bend, and straighten wood to make it fit their standards of beauty and utility, the "sages" sought to improve humankind according to some artificial standards, yet only succeeded in violating human nature. "If you compare the libation vessel with the chips in the gutter, in beauty and ugliness they are wide apart, but in losing the nature of wood they are as one."²⁷ Again, the Primitivist uses the wild horse to cement an image.

If you put yokes on their necks and hold them level with a crossbar, the horses will know how to smash the crossbar, wriggle out of the

yokes, butt the carriage hood, spit out the bit and gnaw through the reins. So if even a horse's wits can learn to do mischief, it's the fault of Po Lo [the horse trainer].²⁸

Just as horses will rebel and grow clever when “manhandled” by their trainers, so too will men scheme, lash out, and revolt when faced with the oppressive and artificial regulations of the “sages” and their followers. It is not in the nature of man to be squared away, decorated, or tied down.

III. THE MESSY TRANSITION

The Primitivist was hardly unique in affirming a past era of peace and harmony. Many of his contemporaries acknowledged the very same golden age of Shen Nong. And they were steadfast that the world had changed irrevocably, rendering past methods of governance useless. For example, the *Shangzi (Book of Lord Shang)* notes that “the present age is crafty and the people dissolute, it imitates the time of T'ang and Wu; yet one enacts the policies of Shen-nong, and lets the current penalties fall into disuse. Hence states of a thousand chariots are deluded and disordered; it is because they are going about it the wrong way.”²⁹ There is a similar passage in the heterogeneous *Huainanzi*:

In former times, under Shen Nong there were no orders or restrictions but the people followed him. . . . Coming down to the present age, men are shameless and careless of disgrace, greedy for gain and seldom embarrassed; if you wish to put them in order by means of the Way of Shen Nong, their disorder will be inevitable.³⁰

These texts plainly denounce the way of Shen Nong—that is, ruling without interference or restrictions—as antiquated and anachronistic; the world had outgrown its primitive britches and needed new clothes. They reflect a shared orientation of many late Warring States theorists who advocate formulating appropriate strategies based on prevailing circumstances. For example, the “Five Vermin” chapter of the *Han-feizi* (mid-late third century BCE) depicts the sage as one who “does not try to practice the ways of antiquity or to abide by a fixed standard, but examines the affairs of the age and takes what precautions are necessary,” concluding with the dictum, “as circumstances change the ways of dealing with them alter too.”³¹ This principle is perhaps best formulated in the “Scrutinizing the Present” chapter of the *Lushi Chunqiu* (ca. 240 BCE).

The standards of the former kings all answered some need of the time. The time doesn't come down to us with the standard; and even

if the standard does come down to now, it can't be taken as standard. Dismiss, then, the formulated standards of the former kings, and take as standard the reasons why they made standards.³²

I believe the Primitivist, who flourished during the same decades, shared this orientation of having circumstances and standards “fit.” He would agree that the methods of He Xu or Shen Nong would be tragically anachronistic if paired with his contemporary world. After all, what would they know about the troubles of the late Warring States period? During the time of He Xu, for example, the people, “when at home were unaware of what they were doing, when traveling did not know where they were going, basked in the sun chewing a morsel or strolled drumming on their bellies. This was as far as the people’s capabilities went.”³³ Not exactly a difficult bunch to govern. Living in an environment free of conceptual abstractions and desirable objects, the people led benign, instinctual lives. Indeed, before the arrival of the meddling “sages,” there was no need for ruling or governing whatsoever. (This is why the Primitivist is so un-preoccupied with methods of ruling, why some—such as Graham and Liu—take him to be an anarchist.) Just as He Xu ought not be praised for ordering the golden age, so too the various rulers of the Warring States ought not be blamed for disordering the Primitivist’s age. Order and disorder are largely products of man’s social environment; so long as the people were surrounded by artifice, stimulated at every turn by alluring music, exotic objects, and sophisticated ideas, the people would never be able to recover the “essentials of their nature and destiny.”

At the outset of this article, I made the claim that the Primitivist was idiosyncratic in being a Daoist interested in *doing something*. This is because, in spite of the prevailing belief that the world had changed irrevocably, the Primitivist realized that something could yet be done to recapture the lost power and order of the golden past, and his understanding of widespread social conditions put him in the proper epistemic condition required by the prevailing strategy of making circumstances and models “fit.” After providing much of his social analysis in “Webbed Toes” and “Horses Hooves,” we find his prescriptions in the third article—“Rifling Trunks.” Here, we see the theory of making circumstances and standards fit at work. However, instead of simply devising new models to deal with changed circumstances, he seems to have thought that circumstances might also be changed to fit past models. Put briefly, while he believed it futile to try and govern the world *as it was*, he thought two strategies could allow the world to perhaps govern itself: (i) obliterate artifice and silence those promoting it; and (ii) follow this with a program of containment and restraint to suppress their reappearance.

As noted above, the Primitivist believed that so long as ordinary people found themselves amidst artifice they would be unable to curb their desires. The only consistent course of action was to *purge* the world of artifice to whatever degree possible, to destroy the objects causing disorder, and silence those propagating them. Any attempt to order the world without first taking such actions would be quixotic. The Primitivist's diagnosis is unmistakable, his solution unambiguous: Bows and crossbows, bird-snares and basket-traps, pitfalls and snares, pearls and jade, peck-measures and scales, organ-pipes and zither-strings, emblems and designs, compass and L-square, goodwill and duty, laws and rituals—destroy them all if you want order.³⁴ Here, we move beyond what Graham describes as Daoist ideas in a different temperament;³⁵ this is more than an especially ticked-off “Laoist.” When he writes, “kill the sages” or “cudgel the sages,” we should consider the possibility that he means just that. When he recommends blinding artists, deafening musicians, crippling artisans, imprisoning craftsmen, and gagging intellectuals,³⁶ we should not dismiss these as too repulsive to be taken seriously but rather examine whether they might reflect the considered opinion of an intellectual writing in times of unparalleled chaos, disorder, violence, and death. In such dire circumstances, recreating order might entail silencing such individuals one way or another, and banning, outlawing, or destroying their artifice. Such a reading gains some plausibility when we consider that the Primitivist found other tools of ordering, such as imperatives or legislation, fruitless. As he puts it, “Zeng and Shi, Yang and Mo, Music-master Kuang and Craftsman Chui and Li Zhu were all men who situated their powers outside themselves, and so dazed and confused the world. *These are matters for which laws are useless.*”³⁷

In the present age the condemned to death lie back to back, the shackled in cangues and stocks are elbow to elbow, there is always a mutilated man somewhere in sight, yet it is just now that the Confucians and Mohists start putting on airs and come flipping back their sleeves among the fettered and the manacled.³⁸

Desperate times call for desperate measures. How else to stop people from making sacrifices of themselves? How else to prevent them from craning their necks, packing their provisions, and trekking around in search of ever greener pastures? To borrow a phrase: If you want to *insure* that a person does not go off to see her neighbor's barking dog—well, you *kill the dog*.

Consider an analogy from evolutionary theory. In our evolutionary past, those members of our species who craved sweet and salty goods were at an advantage compared to those lacking such

cravings. After all, salt and sugar were scarce goods propitious to survival, having many beneficial qualities; those who desired them would be at an advantage over those who did not, since their desires would spur them to locate (and even fight over) these beneficial resources. Over time, these individuals would prove more fit (i.e., produce more offspring). Eventually, this particular trait of craving sugary and salty goods would come to be widespread among the species. Today, these cravings—once life-preserving and life-prolonging—have become disadvantageous. It is not that sugar and salt have ceased to have beneficial properties to humans, it is that *they are no longer scarce*. This change in the *environment* has caused a once beneficial trait—namely, to desire sweet and salty goods—to become harmful, and hypertension, diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and a score of other health problems are now the bane of many present day humans.

Now, how can we recover the health and vitality that we enjoyed before such goods were so cheap, plentiful, and readily available? One way would be to try to get the population to reduce their cravings for these foods. Perhaps we can “disvalue” these goods and promote healthy alternatives instead. Perhaps a ruler can use his moral suasion to make it so that the people will naturally not desire such foods, will not find them tasty. Will such a strategy succeed? For certain individuals no doubt it will. But skepticism about the masses may not be unwarranted. If the masses are unlikely to transform themselves, how can we bring about a state of affairs where people no longer consume the sweet and salty foods that plague their health? Perhaps, if the situation were dire enough, we might consider an alternative strategy. Perhaps it would be better to situate them in an environment where sugary and salty foods are rare and hard to come by, and where the producers of these goods are censured, taxed, or otherwise heavily regulated by those in power. (Of course, I am not endorsing these measures, but merely pointing to an analogy that might strike closer to home.) Similarly, I maintain, the Primitivist believed that we once lived in balance with the world not because we had better desires or better leadership but because we lacked the means to let our desires run amok and cause strife: We could catch only so much fish, hunt only so much game, cut down only so many trees, desire only so many goods. Just as obesity is unlikely to occur in calorie-poor environments, so too the Primitivist believed that struggle, strife, and large-scale warfare are unlikely to occur in artifice-poor environments. Yet the masses had easy access to the artifice causing such disorder, and he was not sanguine about the prospects of transforming them while such access remained readily available. Stern action was needed to restore order and settle the populace.

IV. ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Of course, calling for the elimination of intellectuals and the destruction of all cultural artifacts does not seem a particularly Daoist solution to any problem. Most Daoist thinkers from this period, while acknowledging the invidious effects of culture and sophistication, tended to focus on individual salvation. The “Inner Chapters,” for example, emphasize personal transformation, suggesting individuals adapt and find a knack for spontaneous living while escaping societal bonds and conventional beliefs concerning fulfillment, obligation, and meaning. The *Laozi* stresses simplicity and authenticity, and contains aphoristic messages that can lead to transcendence and self-understanding. For example, the *Laozi* links desires and *daos*, and suggests that re-ordering the evaluative terms in our *daos* could theoretically reorder our desires, undoing the effects of the harmful, artificial *daos* of the moralist schools.³⁹ In theory, a ruler could promulgate a negative *dao* and transform the people’s desires and values, causing them to “not value goods hard to come by.” The Primitivist balks at this suggestion. Many of our desires are not solely (or perhaps even mostly) the products of our practices of evaluation, or the way we fix the referents of our evaluative terms. Rather, artifacts can attract us in spite of how they fit in our evaluative schemes, and tools and weaponry and other implements have utility apart from our practices of evaluation.

These will continue stimulating the senses and generating desires. True, there are instances in the writings where the Primitivist invokes individuals to practice *wuwei* and put an end to the program of sophistication and advance. For example, in his final article, “Restrain and Contain,” he counsels gentlemen to regulate and moderate their appetites, resist being seduced by greed, knowledge, or pleasurable objects, and otherwise eschew artifice for nature. This advice, echoed in other texts from the period, seems to be the reasonable response one might expect from a Daoist reactionary. Graham, the greatest advocate of the Primitivist in the West, seems to focus on these passages when he claims that the Primitivist’s “lively polemic might well be a force for personal liberation and the minimalisation of the scope of government . . . impressing everyone with the dangers of meddling and advantages of leaving things alone.”⁴⁰ Clearly, Graham does not take the Primitivist’s positive project seriously. He most likely reads the passages calling for the destruction of artifice and the silencing of their makers rhetorically. (Graham devotes much of his discussion of the Primitivist in *Disputers of the Tao* to reproducing chunks from his articles, yet he includes none of the passages calling for destructive action.) On Graham’s interpretation, the Primitivist takes the *wuwei*

strategy of leaving things alone as sufficient to “remove people from the artificial stimulations which make them grow in the wrong direction.”⁴¹ Yet such a strategy, where “the sage exerts no force and maintains the equilibrium of the order by the influence of his wisdom alone”⁴² is not shared by the Primitivist; what Graham calls “minimal interference to maximum effect”⁴³ is anathema to him. (Of course, in a world purged of artifice, this “minimal interference” finds expression in the Primitivist’s *zaiyou*—restraining and containing. Yet *wuwei* is not the same as *zaiyou*.⁴⁴ First you “fix” the world, then you “do nothing” save periodically “restraining and containing” when necessary.)

In other words, while we find similar values expressed in the Primitivist’s writings and in parts of the *Laozi*, it would be a mistake to read the Primitivist through the *Laozi*’s lens, as many have done. Textual parallels between the two are suspect,⁴⁵ and the use of shared terminology—such as the “uncarved block” (*pu* 僕), and “doing nothing” (*wuwei* 無為)—while suggestive, should not blind us to the distinctiveness of the Primitivist’s own thinking. For the Primitivist, doing nothing—that is, not interfering with or stimulating the people—might prevent *further* advance and sophistication. Discouraging the pursuit of material wealth and artifice, disvaluing precious goods, refusing to educate, discriminate, or otherwise stimulate the population—all these strategies may affect the people to *some* degree. But enough to instill order? Enough to quell desires and dissuade individuals from pursuing luxury, pleasure, and fame? Enough to subdue greed and jealousy? The Primitivist remains unmoved. He believes that certain individuals might be able to reshape their own values and try to escape the deleterious effects of artifice. He does not deny this possibility. But he is realistic about the odds of such a transformation taking place on a scale sufficient to escape the horrid situation of the late Warring States period. He finds it incredible that individuals filled with mutated, intractable desires could somehow be transformed en masse while the objects inciting those desires lay in their midst. This may be an unflattering view about the potentials of ordinary individuals, but it is not an unreasonable one.

Put another way, one might wonder which of the proposed alternatives—that of doing nothing save passively encouraging new values, or that of forcefully ordering the population by silencing critics and artisans and removing artifice from their midst—ought to be considered the more realistic or plausible alternative given the Primitivist’s own historical context. It may be tempting to favor the former on the grounds that it seems more palatable to our own sensibilities. But we should exercise caution in letting our values decide between these alternatives interpretations. After all, even if we approve of the

vision of the *Laozi* and the *wuwei* strategy, it is not at all obvious how its methods can bring about its ends on a large enough scale without requiring serious interference with the population. The *Laozi* suggests that the people will naturally value what the ruler values, that the people will become docile and obedient once the ruler practices *wuwei*, yet how would that actually work? In a chaotic and bloody world, where human life is unbearably cheap and wars and assassinations are ubiquitous, exactly how reasonable would it be to maintain (as most interpreters of the Primitivist have done) that the correct solution would be to just leave things alone? It seems equally (if not more) plausible to consider using force—even violent force—to order the world, rather than relying on a cultivated sage to do nothing and instill different values and transform the desires of the population through his moral example alone.

Of course, each alternative is plagued by difficulties. However, barring any clear argument in favor of one over the other, wholly denying the more literal interpretation of the Primitivist's writings (and "Rifling Trunks" in particular) seems unwarranted. The Primitivist's articles were the product of the last century before the Qin unification, when practical and tough-minded philosophers gained currency. (Consider, e.g., the influence of Xunzi, Hanfeizi, and the emergent pragmatic syncretism of Huang-Lao Daoism.) As conditions deteriorated, traditional approaches to reform through sagely rule, ritual practice, or top-down moral influence were exasperated, and thinkers sought to link their theoretical or moral positions with government institutions or praxis. The Primitivist should be read as reflecting this trend.

Finally, it is worth noting that there exists some corroborating evidence in the historical record that supports the plausibility that someone such as the Primitivist might have explored the possibility of undertaking such a violent project of censorship to re-order society. The Primitivist's writings can be dated to within a few decades of the founding of the Qin Dynasty. The dominant ideology of the Qin, both before and after unification, was Legalism, which stressed absolute power for the ruler facilitated through a system of rewards and (horrific) punishments. Another salient feature of this totalitarian ideology was an acute suspicion and revulsion toward intellectuals, and a willingness to silence them by any means necessary. For example, the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (Qinshi Huangdi) was once criticized by a member of the literati (Shunyu Yue) for refusing to model himself on antiquity, and warned that his reign would therefore not endure. Upon hearing this rebuke, Li Si (the emperor's Legalist high chancellor) recommended that all private copies of ancient texts such as the *Shijing* and *Shujing* be collected and burned, along with all the

writings of the various philosophical schools of the period. (Indeed, the only copies spared were those held in the bureau of academicians of the central government.) This certainly seems to parallel parts of “Rifling Trunks” that call for the destruction of cultural artifacts and the removal of sources of knowledge. Li Si also recommended that any who invoke the ancient sage-rulers in order to criticize the emperor be put to death, along with their relatives (typically the person’s immediate family, his father’s clan, his mother’s clan, and his wife’s clan), and any who harbored or failed to report them. The following year (212 BCE) witnessed one of the most lurid and reviled episodes in all of Chinese history—the execution of the literati—when the emperor killed 460 scholars for having censured him as being violent, cruel, and greedy for power.⁴⁶ This certainly seems to parallel parts of “Rifling Trunks” that recommend silencing, gagging, or crippling intellectuals.

The historicity of Li Si’s and Huangdi’s actions is suspect, and I do not intend to make any direct connection between the Primitivist’s writings and their actions. However, I do wish to highlight that his essays and these actions can be dated to within a few decades of one another, in a charged political climate where extreme forms of authoritarianism were entertained as plausible courses of conduct to end centuries of bloody strife. (Indeed, it was only through such violent suppressions and purgings that the Warring States period actually came to an end.)

It is possible, of course, that the Primitivist’s call for censorship, suppression, and violence is nothing but the cathartic rantings of an exasperated intellectual. Perhaps the Primitivist did not mean for the more destructive passages of “Rifling Trunks” to be taken literally. Or, perhaps he was not really endorsing such a program but merely stating a counterfactual: *If* you are really interested in ordering the world *this* is what you would need to do. Such possibilities cannot be ruled out. Even so, I have tried to make the case that once we understand his diagnosis and situate it in the context of his times there is no great difficulty in reading the Primitivist as believing that more drastic measures were required.

V. CONCLUSION: THE “SAGES” MUST BE CRAZY

The reader will forgive me for only now mentioning that, instead of reading this article, she could have just as fruitfully understood much of the Primitivist’s philosophy by watching the wonderful film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. The film is framed by a story about a primitive, isolated tribe of Bushmen living in the Kalahari Desert in Africa.

At the outset of the film, this tribe is described as “the most contented people on earth,” free of crime or punishment, violence or rules, and ignorant of jealousy, guilt, inequality, and the notion of “ownership” (there is simply nothing to own). Then, one day, a member of this tribe comes across a Coke bottle carelessly thrown out of a small passing plane. When he brings the bottle back to the tribe, almost every member is keen on touching or using it. It was the strangest and most beautiful thing they had ever seen! The tribe discovers that the hard glass is incredibly useful, that the sounds the bottle makes when blown into please the ear, that its shiny translucence is wondrous to the eye. They begin squabbling about who gets to use this “object hard to come by.” Soon, this small, isolated tribe is faced with turmoil, flooded with unfamiliar emotions such as anger, jealousy, hate, and shame. The bottle changes from a useful tool to a harmful weapon when a child uses it to strike another in a greedy fit. Disorder ensues. It seems there can be no peace with this object in their midst.

The leader of this tribe (until this point largely anonymous) sees all this and tries to instill order—first by mediating disputes and suggesting that individuals share it, next by taking the bottle away and hiding it where it cannot be seen (a strategy incidentally advocated by the *Laozi*). After these attempts fail to restore peace, the leader realizes what he must do: He sets off, bottle in hand, to rid his tribe of it once and for all. Several weeks (and adventures) later, the leader arrives at his destination—the end of the world (an impossibly high cliff dropping into a sea of clouds below). Only upon casting the bottle into this abyss is the leader convinced that his tribe could once again revert to its spontaneous, harmonious way of living.⁴⁷

In this film we can find much of the Primitivist’s philosophy. Perhaps a better leader would (as in *Laozi* 80) have caused (*shi* 使) it that his people simply go about their lives without ever thinking of the bottle in their midst. I doubt the Primitivist would have thought so. No, he would have found this leader’s actions exemplary.

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ENDNOTES

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Philosophy for many careful comments and criticisms on the submitted manuscript, which facilitated numerous revisions and improvements.

1. Luo Genze was perhaps the first to single out this author, describing him as a kind of radical Daoist. Similar descriptions would appear in the works of Guan Feng and Zhang Hengshou. See Xiaogan Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*. trans. William E. Savage (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1994), 84–85. More recently, Liu Xiaogan has identified these writings as the core writings of an anarchist group of Zhuangzi followers. See Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, 134–47. Liu treats these writings as well as chapters 28, 29, and 31 as representative of an “anarchist” strain in the text. The Primitivist is best known to Western audiences through the writings of A.C. Graham, whose textual study of the Zhuangzi followed that of Guan Feng. See, for example, A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).
2. Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 210.
3. See Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 198, and Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 80–81. The term “Laoist” has been used by A.C. Graham, Michael LaFargue, and others to distinguish the philosophy of the *Laozi* from that of the *Zhuangzi*, as they are both often subsumed under the blanket category “Daoist.”
4. My translation of the Mawangdui texts, as found in Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu: Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).
5. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 212.
6. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 209. Romanizations from this translation have been converted from Wade-Giles to Pinyin for consistency. I use Graham’s translation because he treats the Primitivist’s articles as a distinct group of writings within the *Zhuangzi*.
7. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 205.
8. Indeed, it is likely that both *Laozi* 80 and the Primitivist are borrowing from another source, possibly the *Shen-nong* classic. See A.C. Graham, “Reflections and Replies,” in Henry Rosemont, Jr., *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham* (LaSalle: Open Court Press, 1991), 271, and A.C. Graham, “The Nung-Chia 農家 ‘School of the Tillers’ and the Origins of Peasant Utopianism in China,” in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 82.
9. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 204.
10. *Ibid.*, 205. Cf. *Laozi* 55: “One who possesses virtue [*de*] in abundance is like a newborn babe: Poisonous insects will not sting it; Ferocious animals will not pounce on it; Predatory birds will not swoop down on it.”
11. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 204.
12. I use scarequotes to indicate those historical sage-rulers whom the Primitivist held in contempt.
13. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 200.
14. *Ibid.*, 209.
15. *Ibid.*, 201.
16. *Ibid.*, 201.
17. *Ibid.*, 206.
18. *Ibid.*, 209.
19. *Ibid.*, 213.
20. *Ibid.*, 208 (emphasis mine).
21. *Ibid.*, 207.
22. Graham believes that the Primitivist lived to see this event, and dates the Primitivist documents to the interregnum between the fall of the Qin and the establishment of the Han, circa 205 BCE. The key piece of evidence for this claim is an ambiguous passage: *Raner tianchengzi yidan shaqijun er . . . shiershi youqiguo* 然而田成子一旦殺齊君而 . . . 十二世有其國. The ambiguity lies in the verb *you* 有 in the final section. Graham translates this as “for twelve generations [Tian Cheng’s]

house possessed the state of Qi.” But, as Harold Roth and Liu Xiaoga have noticed, it is equally plausible to render it as “for twelve generations [Tian Cheng’s] house *has* possessed the state of Qi,” meaning that the Cheng house was still in possession. See Harold Roth, “An Appraisal of Angus Graham’s Textual Scholarship on the Chuang Tzu,” in *A Companion to Angus C. Graham’s Chuang Tzu*, ed. Harold Roth (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 199, and Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, 165. Roth goes on to make a convincing case that the Primitivist’s writings coincide with the compiling of the *Lüshi Qunqiu*, placing the Primitivist at the court of Lü Buwei just before he was removed from power in 237 BCE. Roth even finds a possible veiled barb against Lü himself in the text: “The man who steals a buckle is put to death; the man who steals a state becomes a lord, and at the gates of a lord you’ll see the humane and righteous,” the latter referring to the Confucians and Mohists called upon by Lü to contribute to his all-encompassing compendium. See Roth, “Appraisal of Angus Graham,” 198–207. Liu finds it unlikely that the references in the Primitivist chapters to the Confucians, Yangists, and Moists indicate a revival of philosophizing during the interregnum between Qin and Han, because the ban on philosophical activity imposed by the Qin was not lifted until Emperor Hui of the Han in 191 BCE. See Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, 165–66. The work of these scholars weighs heavily in favor of a pre-Qin dating, as does the frequent mention of disorder and strife among states in the writings themselves.

23. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 208.
24. *Ibid.*, 210.
25. *Ibid.*, 201.
26. *Ibid.*, 212.
27. *Ibid.*, 202. Dan Robins notices similarities between the craft images used by the Primitivist and by Xunzi. See Dan Robins, *The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China* (Diss./Thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2001), chapter 4.
28. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 205.
29. Graham, “Nung-Chia,” 73.
30. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
31. Burton Watson, *Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964) 97, 100.
32. A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1989), 214.
33. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 205.
34. *Ibid.*, 208–9.
35. *Ibid.*, 197.
36. *Ibid.*, 208.
37. *Ibid.*, 209 (emphasis mine).
38. *Ibid.*, 213.
39. My analysis of the *Laozi* here is indebted to Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
40. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 310.
41. *Ibid.*, 310.
42. *Ibid.*, 304.
43. *Ibid.*, 233.
44. See *Ibid.*, 310, where he seems to conflate the two.
45. For the textual parallel with *Laozi* 80, see n. 7, above. In addition, four glosses can be found in the Primitivist’s documents, each introduced with the phrase “hence it is said” (*guyue* 故曰), three of which are direct quotations from the *Laozi*. These might seem to suggest further parallels between the texts. However, these glosses all fit badly in their contexts, and were unlikely to have been included in the original articles. Rather, they were likely added by an early editor. (Graham omits all four from his translation.)
46. See Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, general eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 1* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 69–72, 95–96.
47. Of course, the Primitivist would want to get rid of the bottle’s producers as well as the bottle itself.