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The Philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*

MERCEDES VALMISA
Gettysburg College

> Because [Zhuangzi's words] respond to every transformation and are free of all
> bondage to specific things, even the guidelines within them are undepletable, giving
> forth new meanings without shedding the old ones. Vague! Ambiguous! We have not
> got the end of them yet.
>
> —*Zhuangzi* 33 "The Whole World" (Ziporyn 2020: 272)

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 teaches not a doctrine but an attitude to approach all doctrines and
address all situations by shifting perspectives and adapting our courses of action. A
classical and foundational work of Chinese philosophy, full of extravagant characters,
deviant and humoristic voices, unforgettable images, puzzling anecdotes, anti-authoritarian
playfulness, ironic teachings, skeptical questions, and poetic wanderings, the *Zhuangzi*
doesn't leave readers unchanged. And for a good reason: it's a text about transformation,
those that all entities necessarily undergo and those we can intentionally bring about in
ourselves.

FORM AND AUTHORSHIP

The *Zhuangzi* is one of the master texts (*zishu* 子書) from the classical Chinese period: the
corpus of philosophical texts with an origin in the Warring States (476–221 BCE) that
gained consistency, unity, and authority by their association with a master and a school of
thought. As it happens with all other master texts, such as *Mengzi* or *Han Feizi*, "Zhuangzi"
is a word with multiple referents. It refers to a real person Zhuang Zhou 莊周 who may
have lived in the Warring States period *c.* 369–286 BCE, also known as Zhuangzi (Master
Zhuang). According to Sima Qian's (*c.* 145–85 BCE) short biography of Zhuangzi in the
Shiji 史記, he was a contemporary of Mencius from Meng, in the state of Song, who wrote
over 100,000 characters. In cursive, the *Zhuangzi* refers to the collection of texts
traditionally attributed to Zhuangzi and his followers, which is the object of this chapter.
But Zhuangzi also refers to the singularly carefree character that appears in multiple
anecdotes throughout the *Zhuangzi*; the one criticized in the *Xunzi* for being too obsessed
with Heaven; whom Sima Qian depicts as a useless worthy who created empty words to
illuminate the teachings of Laozi and defame the Confucians and Mohists; and in *Zhuangzi*
33 is portrayed as the author of uneven, strange, and monstrous writings, uncommitted to

any one position hence able to adapt to every single one of them. We must differentiate this persona from the real person who may or may not have existed, authored part of the text under his name, and displayed some of the traits of character and intellectual dispositions illustrated in the anecdotes and discussions around his figure. As Kern has explained, our received master texts are "composite works that stage their respective masters rather than being authored by them" (2015: 337). In classical China, author-figures such as Zhuangzi are retrospectively born out of the texts championing their names and staging their characters rather than the other way around. Ever since the *Shiji*'s creation of the schools of thought, the *Zhuangzi* has been classified as a Daoist text, although, as A. C. Graham (1981: 128) famously remarked, Zhuangzi didn't know he was a Daoist.

The *Zhuangzi* we can read today is based on Guo Xiang's 郭象 (d. 312) edition in thirty-three chapters with commentary (allegedly abridged from a longer text with fifty-two chapters), classified into seven Inner Chapters, fifteen Outer Chapters, and eleven Miscellaneous Chapters. The most popular hypothesis until recently—the "evolving text theory" (Hansen 2014)—held that the Inner Chapters contained the core of Zhuangzi's philosophy written by his hand, whereas the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters included illustrations, applications, and interpretations of the core teachings authored by different factions of followers. In light of recent developments in our understanding of preimperial textual culture, mostly facilitated by the study of excavated and found ancient manuscripts, the "anthology hypothesis" represents today the most likely scenario for the formation of the *Zhuangzi* (Klein 2022). Shifting the inquiry from original authorship to socially informed models of textual production, the anthology hypothesis says that (1) much of the material contained in the *Zhuangzi* was probably composed during the Warring States period, but (2) we cannot ascertain the relationship of this material with Zhuangzi, and (3) in any case most if not all of pre-Han texts are composite and have multiple authorship; finally, (4) the *Zhuangzi* material was transformed and combined in multiple ways across the centuries along with the idiosyncrasies of particular users and compilers, with at least three points of inflexion during the Qin (221–206 BCE), early Western Han (*c.* 85 BCE), and then finally with Guo Xiang's edition that we enjoy today (late third century CE).

The loss of Zhuangzi as a real person and certain author (of, at least, the Inner Chapters) that results from the current interpretive paradigm can be emotionally and intellectually disturbing for the many devoted readers who identify with, even love, Zhuangzi (Defoort 2016). Addressing this issue, Klein (2022) points out that the *Zhuangzi* advocates for equanimity in the face of changes, so a way of showing respect and loyalty to Zhuangzi involves accepting transformations to the extent of welcoming his disappearance—much as Zhuangzi is said to have joyfully welcomed the death of his beloved wife after an initial mourning reaction (*Zhuangzi* 18).

If the *Zhuangzi* is an anthology of materials written, selected, combined, edited, and collected in different ways and by multiple hands over centuries, finally closing up in the third century CE as Guo Xiang's edition became authoritative, we can expect plurality to take over unity: a multiplicity of views and styles; different emphases, questions, and approaches; even contradictory positions populate the text. And in fact, we discover upon reading that the *Zhuangzi* is a text with multiple and contradictory voices where no position is prioritized, not even that of the author's; a text which induces and performs uncertainty about who is saying what and whether they mean it seriously; a text that fictionalizes facts and factualizes fiction so we end up abandoning the (we now realize) unnecessary and misguided motivation that led us to attempt a sharp distinction between fictional and factual in the first place. Such an agglomerate of dissonant perspectives, as

an aberrant landscape of *objets trouvés* (which don't go together except for the fact that they *can* be placed together, and yet a harmonic symphony emerges from their togetherness), arguably is the ideal textual form to present the messages that reverberate in the *Zhuangzi*: the celebration of noncentered pluralism and nonhierarchical diversity, and the use of relativism, skepticism, and perspectivism to trigger challenges to authority, certainty, rigidity, narrowness, self-centeredness, sociocultural parochialism, and dogmatic views and emotions.

From this perspective, we don't lose anything by displacing Zhuangzi as the certain philosopher-behind-the-text. The author as reigning subject of meaning, coherence, and authority executes his own deconstruction twice: by the intentionally juxtaposed voices that relativize, question, and ultimately dissolve the author's perspective into an endless sea of mutually replacing waves, doubled by the accidents of history that turned the *Zhuangzi* into a multiphasic and multiauthored textual kaleidoscope (Ziporyn 2020: ix–x; Graziani 2021: 5–6; Moeller 2022: 290–1). Both purposefully and by accident, the text's form and content enjoy a happy mutualist symbiotic relationship.

There's a long tradition of including disclaimers to scholarly discussions of the *Zhuangzi* (Levinovitz 2018). Most famously, Burton Watson confessed, "Whenever I sit down and try to write seriously about *Zhuang Zi*, I seem, somewhere in the back of my head, to hear Zhuang Zi cackling away at the presumption and futility of such an endeavor" (1983: ix). The Zhuangzi I've come to imagine wouldn't think that my (or any) reading is too forceful as long as we understand its contingent and limited character, and hence don't aim at final descriptions or definitive truths. The main challenge in writing this chapter isn't how to find satisfactory evidence to substantiate my interpretation, but the inescapable fact that I can find sufficient evidence for alternative readings of the text, too. As the *Zhuangzi* remarks, when it comes to providing justification for truth claims the problem isn't one of lack but of excess: we can find frameworks of justification for as many claims as can possibly be raised. Awareness of this excess prompts the realization that no single standard can ever be universal or final, as embodied in the story of the River God in *Zhuangzi* 17. Overflown by autumn rains, the River God delights in his beauty and power until his encounter with the Northern Sea, Ruo, who makes him feel small and insignificant in comparison. The Sea takes this relativizing experience as an opportunity to instruct the River that "there is no end to the comparative measuring of things, no stop to the changing times, no constancy to the ways things can be divided up, no fixity to their ends and beginnings" (*Zhuangzi* 17; Ziporyn 2020: 135; Meyer 2015; Valmisa 2023; Connolly forthcoming).

There is no final account that will settle the *Zhuangzi* once and for all, no sage who will show up "after thousand generations who knows how to resolve this" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Ziporyn 2020: 20). My goal is to offer readers an account that is textually, historically, and philosophically valid. Also, an account that identifies a Zhuangist constructive, guiding proposal along with the therapeutic project of deconstruction, and which provides coherence and unity across plurality and difference without the need to simplify, reduce, ignore, or establish hierarchies within the text.

ALL-TOO-HUMAN TENDENCIES

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the

flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Now surely Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities, as two quite different beings! And just this is what is meant when we speak of transformation of *any* one being into another—of the transformation of all things.

<div align="right">—Zhuangzi 2; Ziporyn 2020: 21</div>

The Butterfly Dream closes *Zhuangzi* 2 "Equalizing Assessment of Things," a chapter that challenges the possibility to establish any fixed, perspective-independent, and universal grounds on which to make value judgments, settle issues regarding truth claims, and even ontological questions of being and identity. As Ziporyn has put it, "The impossibility of disentangling any position from its negation, embedded in the deepest structures of language and thought, leads not to solipsism of the ordinary skeptic but to the mutual transformation of any tentatively posited identity and its putatively paired opposite, the opening up of each position into every other. This enables an openness to transformation that has large and attractive consequences" (2020: xii–xiii). Everything that we can affirm as "this" already includes its conceptual opposite "that" on which "this" depends to emerge as discrete and distinct. This is what the *Zhuangzi* calls the "mutual generation of opposites" or the "theory on mutual co-dependence" (*fang sheng zhi shuo* 方生之說). The concept of life depends on the concept of death, hence death is both a constituting part of life and what permits for life to appear as discrete and distinct—their separation and opposition merely putative. To posit myself as real and the butterfly as imaginary I must rely (even if I don't want to accept it) on the existence of an equally valid, yet opposite, position where I'm imaginary and the butterfly real. Being open to transformation means to enjoy each and every state we presently find ourselves in, each perspective we come to embody, any social roles we play, all physical alterations our bodies undergo, as well as our changes in identity. Each of these temporary positions, and the worlds that open up from them, has equal primacy, given that there's nothing grounding, essential, or original from which to deviate or to which aspire. The Butterfly Dream wants to persuade us to embrace all states of being and all of our becomings. To be fully a butterfly when we are a butterfly and fully a person when we are a person (Möller 1999; McLeod 2018: 51), and to welcome the journey from one to the other, so we can enjoy a more intense, creative, fulfilling life (Puett 2016: 150–2; Chung 2021a).

But the Butterfly Dream also makes another point. While the butterfly (whether it's Zhuang Zhou dreaming to be a butterfly or a physical butterfly who later dreams of being Zhuang Zhou) can be *just* a butterfly, fully present and fluttering around with no concern for beginnings nor ends, there's something about humans that prevents us from such sort of "carefree wandering" (called *xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊 and which the *Zhuangzi* so much encourages). As a person, Zhou can't help doubting himself, and this self-doubt appears to be as central a part of being human as following one's whims may be to a butterfly. There's an invitation to be fully present in whatever state we find ourselves, yet it also seems that, unlike butterflies, what humans do when they are fully present *as* humans is to question and undermine their very presence—who am I, is this real, what am I supposed to do—and to anxiously anticipate their dissolution in death. How pathetic is the human predicament, sighs Zhuangzi. Not only do we continuously doubt ourselves but we also try desperately to bring ourselves out of the abyss by giving in to fabricated certainties, fixed values, and posited identities—just like stranded fish may spit on each other in a vain attempt to keep themselves alive against the inevitable (*Zhuangzi* 6, 14).

As any other entity (*wu* 物), humans have *tendencies* (*qing* 情), which involves exhibiting anticipatable behaviors given certain conditions. The most salient human tendency that the *Zhuangzi* identifies consists in affirming some things are right and negating others as wrong, as well as accepting some things are possible and rejecting others as impossible (*shi-fei* 是非 judgments, where *shi-fei* stands for the pairs "right vs wrong" and "accepting vs rejecting"). Our tendency to engage in dichotomic thinking, establishing two mutually exclusive poles and ascribing opposite values to each one of them, is precisely what troubles and burdens us, what prevents us from conceiving that we can be *both* a butterfly *and* a person, and so strongly urges us to affirm one side while negating the other: I am real and the butterfly is just a dream! I am right and you are wrong! The problem with these tendencies to solidify some identities in exclusion of others, and to understand positions as binary opposites where only one side can prevail, is not that indulging in them we fail to represent the world accurately. The problem is that *shi-fei* judgments often lead to (1) living limited and unhappy lives; (2) conflict, risk, and harm; and (3) the perpetuation of exclusionary societies.

SHI-FEI JUDGMENTS AND LIVING NARROW LIVES

An example of the limitations that *shi-fei* judgments pose to our own fulfillment and happiness appears in the story of mythical proportions that welcomes us in the opening section of chapter 1 "Wandering Far and Unfettered" ("Xiao yao you" 逍遙遊). As we set to read the *Zhuangzi*, we encounter a huge fish named Kun who transforms into an even more enormous bird named Peng. Given his size, the Peng bird needs high altitude and great masses of air to support his wings and take flight. Witnessing what must have been an impressive event, little flying animals including a cicada, a dove, and a quail laughingly dismiss the unusually large flight of the Peng, saying "where does he think he's going?" (*Zhuangzi* 1). From their relatively small world, the Peng's flight seems extravagant and showy, despite it not being an arbitrary choice but a necessary response to the bird's physical conditions. The chapter denominates the little flying animals' attitude "small knowledge" (*xiaozhi* 小知).

Small knowledge isn't "small" on account of being limited and bounded, as this is an unavoidable feature of any entity. It's small because, unaware of its own limitations, it takes itself to be the *only* correct and authoritative standard. As Van Norden has commented of the small flying animals, "Because of the narrow perspective that leads them to ridicule the Peng, they lead narrow lives" (Van Norden 1996: 255; Valmisa 2019). Because they posit their own *shi* as necessarily excluding (*fei*) its opposite, they can't affirm themselves without arrogantly rejecting alternative forms of being and living. In contrast to the self-congratulatory air of small knowledge, "larger knowledge" (*dazhi* 大知) points at the realization that any perspective from which to establish one's own *shis* and *feis* is necessarily partial and relative—a position of epistemic humility (Ryan and Lai 2021: 673–5). As a result, one may become more open to accept and even adopt alternative perspectives, including those we can't initially understand and value (Connolly 2011). Imprisoned in their rigid *shi-fei* judgments, the little animals of small knowledge lose the opportunity to open themselves up to learning from difference, expanding their horizons, discovering value in unfamiliar things, and experiencing transformation in themselves—to leading more varied and fulfilling lives.

Another popular illustration of the limiting effects of getting stuck in rigid and narrow perspectives is the fable of the big gourd. In this fable, Zhuangzi's adored friend and

intellectual adversary, the logician Huizi, is given a gourd so large that it can't fulfill its socially ascribed function as drinking vessel. Frustrated, and attempting to force the unusual gourd to fit his preconceptions, Huizi (or Hui Shi 惠施 370–310 BCE) breaks it into smaller pieces, which also turn up to be unfit for carrying liquids, eventually destroying all possibilities of potential use (or we should rather say "human" use, for the smashed gourd still shall become soil fertilizer and food for a variety of animals). Zhuangzi describes his friend's epistemic attitude with the expression "having a heart-mind full of weeds" (*peng zhi xin* 蓬之心; *Zhuangzi* 1). Weeds are the conventions that prevent us from seeing things through the thick operative network of preconceived functions and expectations. If we were to wipe our heart-minds clean of weeds, so to speak, we could imagine fitting uses and courses of action in collaboration with the unique features, tendencies, and affordances of the things that are presently given to us—a form of effective relational co-action that the *Zhuangzi* and other texts denominate "adapting" (*yin* 因; Valmisa 2021a).

At the end of the fable, Zhuangzi suggests that such a large gourd would have made a nice boat to relaxingly float over rivers and lakes—a discovery that was unavailable to Huizi given his narrow-minded fixation on a socially prescribed set of *shi-fei* judgments. "When the understanding forgets rights and wrongs, the heart-mind fits comfortably" (*Zhuangzi* 19; Ziporyn 2020: 155; Fox 2003: 213). This "forgetting" or "active oblivion" (*wang* 忘; Kohn 2014: 127–9) is also a sort of intentional nonknowing (*wuzhi* 無知): a deconstruction of the conventional model of knowledge via fixed distinctions, categories, and hierarchies that are mistakenly endowed with ontological necessity, and so facilitating detachment from conventional norms, standards, and values. The fable suggests that, by paying attention to the features of the things we're dealing with and adapting to those features with a creative open mind, we can enjoy more possibilities, paths, modes of agency and being, and overall lead happier and more fulfilling lives.

SHI-FEI JUDGMENTS AND CONFLICT, RISK, AND HARM

Disputation (*bian* 辯) offers a privileged context to display the risks posed by *shi-fei* judgments. Facing the chaos, violence, and suffering of the Warring States period, philosophers such as Mengzi and Mozi sought to identify the bases for establishing a peaceful and harmonic society wherein everyone could flourish. Their engagement in moral and political debates regarding ideals of ethical interrelations and humane government is presented in the *Zhuangzi* as a paradigmatic case of the vicious circle of disputation, where "each affirms what the other denies and denies what the other affirms" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Ziporyn 2020: 14). A notorious problem with disputation is that, behind openly declared ethical or intellectual motivations, disputers often hide an exhibitionist ambition of social recognition and a thirst for power. But even when disputers genuinely attempt to elucidate relevant issues, they are limited in their ability to do so. Zhuangzi compared disputers to frogs in a well who have never lived in the open sea and summer insects who have never experienced ice and snow—each of them drastically bounded by their perspective yet fully unaware of their epistemic limitations—yet another case of "small knowledge" (*Zhuangzi* 17; Jiang 2021: 287–338).

As a counterexample to the rigid and narrow-minded attitude leading to these unresolvable conflicts, the *Zhuangzi* tells us a story about a monkey trainer who offers the

monkeys three chestnuts in the morning and four in the evening. Seeing the monkey's angered reaction, the trainer switches the offer to four chestnuts in the morning and three in the evening, to which the monkeys react with delight (*Zhuangzi* 2). As De Reu has noticed in his detailed analysis of this passage, the conflict arises because of the existence of two mutually exclusive positions or *shi-fei* (3/4 and 4/3), where the monkeys can only see one position as valid and strongly feel that it has to prevail. In harmonizing *with* the monkeys, the keeper also *harmonizes* the monkeys—that is, appeases their wrath, hence promoting peaceful coexistence and avoiding risk for himself (De Reu 2017). "Three in the Morning" suggests that many of our conflicts are similarly superficial and insubstantial, and yet, like the monkeys, we get upset when things don't go our way and engage in emotional dogmatism: we take our anger as sufficient justification for our belief that we have been wronged, and vice versa, take our delight as proof that the righteous path has been enforced. Remember that Huizi's gourd isn't inherently a drinking vessel—its function is conventionally imputed, just a *shi* judgment—and, as a result, it can potentially transform into anything else as long as it fits the gourd's features. Similarly, our positions and emotions are only correct or adequate from a certain framework, and have the potential to transform simply by switching perspectives. If we were more like the keeper, the *Zhuangzi* suggests, we'd avoid much of what makes our interpersonal relationships complicated and harmful.

A dogmatic adherence to our views, beliefs, and emotional responses, far from helping us achieve our goals, only generates further conflict and puts us at unnecessary risk—a worried Confucius struggles to explain in order to save his disciple Yan Hui's life in chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi*. Emboldened by his moralistic self-righteousness and his desire to make a name for himself, Yan Hui intends to pay a diplomatic visit to Wei to reform its cruel tyrant. But, as Confucius persuasively argues, his disciple's inflexible perspective would be confronting the ruler's equally inflexible perspective, so a clash is sure to ensue. Given Yan Hui's position of inferiority relative to the Wei ruler's authority and power, his mission can only end, at best, in failure and, at worst, in death. Later in the chapter, other figures confronting similar diplomatic missions of political and moral reform with a *shi-fei* attitude are compared to the praying mantis who "flails its pincers around to stop an oncoming chariot wheel, not realizing the task is beyond its power" (*Zhuangzi* 4; Ziporyn 2020: 40).

In contrast, "forgetting" *shi-fei* judgments by "fasting the mind" (*xin zhai* 心齋), as Confucius suggests, is a form of nonknowing that goes beyond the discovery of value and the expansion of our existential options to help us exercise effective action under the constraints, risks, and dangers posed by the human world of political power. Birds have no preestablished conception of right and wrong, and precisely due to this nonknowing they can keep away from the harm of arrows by flying high (whereas a soldier, we may add, acting under the oath of loyalty for the benefit of his state, faces the arrows that will rip apart his chest). A ruler governing by means of regulations, standards, judgments, and measures (i.e., with *knowledge*) is compared to "a mosquito trying to carry a mountain on its back" (*Zhuangzi* 7; Ziporyn 2020: 69). As we will see, there is a way to acknowledge difference without it leading to disputes, to make evaluative choices and adopt positions without generating conflict and harm, and even to persuade and transform others effectively without risking one's life. The way to "wander within the cage" (*you qi fan* 遊 其樊; *Zhuangzi* 4) in this manner, says the *Zhuangzi*, involves overcoming our tendency to make *shi-fei* judgments.

SHI-FEI JUDGMENTS AND
EXCLUSIONARY SOCIETIES

All societies need a certain degree of conformity and homogeneity which are achieved by the creation and enforcement of norms and their subsequent notion of "normality." "Ultimately, the dream of order is the dream of eliminating any form of ambivalence" (Galvany 2019: 1; Bauman 1991: 1–17). We can eliminate ambivalence by firmly applying the socially prescribed *shi-fei* judgments regarding what is normal, valuable, useful, good, beautiful, desirable, acceptable, possible, or true. But in doing so, societies leave outside those who don't conform to the norm. Namely, socially and culturally promoted *shi-fei* judgments necessarily involve the creation of outcasts—marginalized figures who have lost (or never had) access to the benefits of belonging. Throughout the *Zhuangzi*, we get to know many of these outcasts in the form of monstrous animals such as the Peng bird, eerie worthless trees, outlaws like Robber Zhi, eccentrics like the madman Jieyu, the deformed like Sir Transport and Outspread the Discombobulated, amputated criminals such as Kingly Crowbait, Shen Tujia, and Toeless of Unk Mountain, and extremely ugly men like Sad Horsehead Humpback. As Galvany has explained, these figures incarnate "radical alterity"—the threatening subversion of the established norm—hence are painted as "monsters" in order to justify their collective abandonment and rejection by those affirming themselves as normal (Galvany 2019: 2).

Monsters are demonstrative: a sign that signifies something other than itself, whose meaning is to be found in what they reveal and warn us about (Cohen 1996: 4). In their imposed character of outsiders, Zhuangist monsters reveal the coercive social structures that reinforce and perpetuate a society's *shi-fei* judgments and which allow for praxes of exclusion, silencing, and destruction of the different. Take the unintended murder of Chaos (*hundun* 渾沌), the parable that closes the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, as exemplary illustration of the destructive effects of *shi-fei* structures of normalization and homogenization. In the parable, Chaos, the emperor of the Center, often entertains Swift and Sudden, emperors of the Southern and Northern Sea—a parody of Warring States diplomatic relations, where kings and high mandataries were received in highly ritualized and lavish ceremonies. Obligated by ritual propriety to reciprocate Chaos's kindness, the obliviously coercive Swift and Sudden decide to drill seven holes on him over seven days, "as all humans have for the purpose of seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing," and so carve him a face and formed identity (*Zhuangzi* 7). As an unintended result of this operation, Chaos dies; becoming, perhaps, a standardized human with human tendencies (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017: 78–85; Galvany 2019: 3; Valmisa 2021a: 64–6). Swift and Sudden's normalizing desire is the criminal projection of certain given values elevated to the category of absolute, in turn animated by a sociopolitical apparatus governed by ritual hierarchies and discrimination (Levi 2003).

But, in their disturbing ambiguity, Zhuangist monsters also warn us about the contingency and instability of our fabricated categories, distinctions, valuations, hierarchies, and identities (Galvany 2019: 2). For the most part, the parade of deviant characters we meet in the *Zhuangzi* aren't presented as victims of an exclusionary system. Indeed, they evade the one-dimensional moralistic function that could be easily attributed to them by effortlessly displaying a power (*de* 德) which "normal" people must strive to cultivate. Kingly Crowbait has as many disciples as Confucius, despite being an amputated ex-con and purposefully not teaching anything. Sad Horseback Humpback is grotesquely ugly, holds no position of authority nor wealth, yet he attracts men and women "without

initiating anything of his own with them, instead just chiming in with whatever they're already doing" (*Zhuangzi 5*; Ziporyn 2020: 48). Precisely as a result of their social marginalization, these figures have evaded all conventional standards of thinking, feeling, and valuing. Their outsider's perspective, free and unbound by dominant norms, allows them to navigate life with unlikely ease without perceiving their condition as an anomaly, their capacities as deficient, or their status as an impediment for flourishing in spaces and excelling at activities that, in principle, aren't meant for them (Lai 2021: 8).

Rather than simply transgressing certain given standards or values, Zhuangist monsters undermine the validity of the foundations upon which we can create any fixed standards of normality, while also questioning their desirability (Galvany 2019: 6). In this way, the concept of the "useless" (*wuyong* 無用) presents a critique to the capitalist instrumentalization of beings for profit. The conventional notion of utility involves the capacity to be used for the sake of others' benefit, in the way an able-bodied person can be deployed to fight in a war or a tree can be cut off to use its wood. Deformed persons like Outspread the Discombobulated and monstrous trees of harsh wood and twisted branches find their own personal utility (self-preservation) precisely in their lack of utility from a human instrumental perspective, which is how they can "live out their years" (*zhong qi tian nian* 終其天年; *Zhuangzi 4*; Galvany forthcoming).

The *Zhuangzi* encapsulates this theme in the expression "the utility of the useless" (*wuyong zhi yong* 無用之用; *Zhuangzi 4*). The useless figures that lie at the outskirts of productive society also invite us to discover value in what we normally, by social convention, deem unworthy: modes of being, perceiving, and acting that are different from the standardized ones. Which is to say that Zhuangist monsters offer liberation (*jie* 解) from the tyranny of normality, allowing us to see value and existential possibilities beyond the myopic options provided by our dominant socioethical framework. In other words, *shi-fei*-based societies are not only detrimental for their marginalized members, but also, in a nontrivial sense, for those who most loyally and unequivocally perform the values and standards that their society promotes, as they are slavishly tied to narrow and rigid standards of a good life that limit their self-expression and self-efficacy.

A HUMAN WITHOUT HUMAN TENDENCIES

Deviant figures such as the ugly man and the amputated ex-cons "have the physical form of a human being but not the tendencies of a human being" (*wuqing* 無情; *Zhuangzi 5*)— that is, the tendency to engage in *shi-fei* judgments. A person without human tendencies does not "allow likes and dislikes to damage her internally" (Ziporyn 2020: 51). She's detached from social valuation categories and practices that posit certain things as inherently good and others as inherently bad, so as to liberate herself from those judgments and live life unobstructed (*tong* 通; Hong 2013). The *Zhuangzi* argues that all conditions and states of being are equal in that they all come with a set of possibilities and limitations. Therefore, what damages us is not, e.g., to lose a foot, but the social judgments we have internalized and deem this physical transformation a negative loss as opposed to a new opportunity. In this way, we are encouraged to "discombobulate our power" (*zhili qi de* 支離其德; *Zhuangzi 4*)—to shake our cognitive and axiological capacities out of their standardized shape. As a result of this detachment from conventional standards, the person without human tendencies makes it her constant practice to "adapt to the so-ness of each thing" (*yin ziran* 因自然; *Zhuangzi 5*), to their features, tendencies, and behavior, without adding preconceived and fixed *shi-fei* judgments to them. Take, for example,

Master Yu 子輿, who, experiencing a sudden tumor, refuses to evaluate his physical transformation according to the social conventions that call for fear and resentment, and instead affirms and adapts to the new opportunities offered by his deformed body in a most charming and amusing manner: What is there to not like? If my left arm were to be transformed into a rooster, I'd use it to keep watch on the night! (*Zhuangzi* 6; Graziani 2021).

PERSPECTIVISM

As we said above, these all-too-human tendencies are problematic because of the existential and practical impediments we encounter when indulging in them and not because they fail to accurately represent the world. The *Zhuangzi* is interested in the guiding power of our knowing practices, while it rejects the view that knowledge is a neutral instrument to transparently represent the world. This normative approach to knowledge is informed by perspectivism, the recognition that all knowledge and value claims are both facilitated and limited by a perspective: "Among things, there's none that cannot be seen from *that* position, and none that cannot also be seen from *this* position. From *that* position, *this* position cannot be seen. Depending on which position you approach something from, you'll know an aspect or another of it" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Graham 1989; Hansen 1992; Van Norden 1996; Lai 2006; Connolly 2011; Ziporyn 2015; McLeod 2016). Knowing that something is true means being able to imagine, formulate, and justify a claim from a uniquely bounded ground (a frame of reference) afforded by one's temporarily adopted or relatively stable perspective. Perspectives are the place (*fang* 方) from which we experience, perceive, know, interpret, and interact with the world. A window into reality that conditions what we are able to see and imagine (and what remains hidden in plain sight, inaccessible and inconceivable), what we are willing to accept as possible and right, and ultimately what our world becomes (Valmisa 2021b; 2023).

The claim that knowledge is perspectival is made from within a particular human perspective. The *Zhuangzi* understands that any claims regarding the status of reality (e.g., whether there's an ultimate or absolute reality independent from our perspectives) would be dogmatic, since we can never have evidence for it beyond our own perspective. While remaining skeptical about the status of reality, we can recognize that, for human practical purposes, things become what we make of them. Things become so (*ran* 然) just by calling them so, and they become possible and acceptable (*ke* 可) by their very emergence as possible and acceptable (*Zhuangzi* 2). Things afford all possible experiences and assertions that can be made about them, and accommodate any two opposite points in a dichotomy: "To be a *this* is in fact also to be a *that*, and every *that* is also a *this*. *That* is itself already both *this* and *not-this*, both a right and a wrong. But *this* is also already both *this* and *not-this*, both a right and a wrong" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Ziporyn 2020: 14). There's no authoritative nor definitive manner to carve out the world with our distinctions and valuations; there's no final discourse or *dao* (Yearley 1983; Hansen 1983; Hansen 1992: 268–9; Connolly 2011; Valmisa 2023).

PERSPECTIVISM AND TRUTH CLAIMS

By virtue of appearing so, things are justified *from within* the perspective that affords their appearing so: "Each thing necessarily has some place from which it can be affirmed as thus and so, and someplace from which it can be affirmed as acceptable. So no thing is

not right, no thing is not acceptable" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Ziporyn 2020: 15). And things appear to us in radically different and even contradictory ways. This plurality is irreducible: opposing views, beliefs, values, perceptions, experiences, and truth claims all have their own grounds on which to be formulated and an equal right to be affirmed, their own field of justification inherent to the perspective that affords its emergence. At the same time, this irreducible plurality of coexisting truths, realities, and paths (*daos* 道) implies that no single one of them has the right to claim itself absolute and ultimate. In other words, the very fact that our perspective allows us to see and affirm the world in a particular manner entails the possibility and justification for our view from within our epistemic framework. But since there's an endless number of coexisting perspectives from which to perceive things and make claims about them, there's no single standpoint from which to know the world or unitary standard from which to justify our truth claims (Valmisa 2023). Language and language-based truth claims have a problem of excess, not of lack of means of justification. There are many "guiding discourses" (*daos*; Hansen 2014) that coexist and in which we can thrive. While some people may be able to live all their lives comfortably within just one epistemic discourse, most often this one-sided reliance on a single *dao* results in the kind of narrow-mindedness and dogmatism that leads to conflict and harm, as we've seen in the previous section.

PERSPECTIVISM AND WORDS

An essentialist and reifying approach to language can easily delude us into thinking that the conventional ways in which we carve up the world reflect how reality is in a universal, perspective-independent manner. Which is why Zhuangzi would enjoy more a conversation with someone willing to "forget words" in the celebrated Fishnet Allegory:

> A fish trap is there for the fish. When you get the fish, you forget the trap. A snare is there for the rabbits. When you get the rabbit, you forget the snare. Words are there for the intent. When you get the intent, you forget the words. Where can I find a person who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with them?
>
> —*Zhuangzi* 26; Ziporyn 2020: 224, modified

"Forgetting words" (*wang yan* 忘言) doesn't mean to entirely discard verbal language as a tool for communication. After all, the *Zhuangzi* is made out of words and Zhuangzi himself speaks words that his friend Huizi qualifies as "big and useless" (like the Peng bird, the trees, and the gourd). Zhuangzi's words seem "to not say anything" (*bu yan* 不言) because they disregard the conventions of our socially induced linguistic habits, which push us to endow posited linguistic distinctions with ontological necessity. Namely, to take a firm hold of reality, much as we take hold of rabbits by using a snare (De Reu 2015). Informed by perspectivism, the *Zhuangzi* suggests that there is no final or superior formulation for our ideas, which can be expressed via multiple linguistic means: stories, dialogues, allegories, metaphors, expository language, etc. And yet, some ways of talking and writing are more fitting and productive than others for particular situations (Chung 2017). In this way, "goblet words" (*zhiyan* 卮言; *Zhuangzi* 27) offer an alternative to speak without employing reified and deeming forms of speech: like a goblet that alternates between distinct states of being emptied and filled up, we can employ temporary distinctions that are cognizant of their lack of universality and finality, hence susceptible to shift and transform. This form of unstable and indeterminate "nonspeech" (*wuyan* 無言; *Zhuangzi* 27) reflects an adaptive

approach to linguistic expression: "Just as the course of water adapts to the topography of the land, so the language of the sage [goblet words] follows along with the situation it encounters" (De Reu 2017: 97; Watson 1968: 303). As things transform along with our views on them, an adaptive use of language that enables us to adopt different metaphors effectively produces, in turn, a transformation in our worlds and our own identities (Wu 1990; Lee 1996).

PERSPECTIVISM AND ACTION

In previous sections, we have discussed concepts such as the utility of the useless and speaking without words. The best-known of these seemingly paradoxical Zhuangist concepts is *wuwei* 無為: nonaction or acting without actions. We can better understand *wuwei* in the *Zhuangzi* when we place it within a series of similar structures in the linguistic form *wu* + v/n that share a speculative function: *wuwei* (nonaction), *wuyong* (useless), *wuming* (nonnaming), *wuji* (nonself), *wuzhi* (nonknowing), *wuqing* (no tendencies), and *wuyan* (nonspeech). In all of these structures, the negation *wu* challenges conventional notions of utility, identity, social roles, and knowledge, among others, and opens up space to detach ourselves from these dominant views and expand our horizons of possibility (what Puett calls *as-if* scenarios; 2016: 152). Since each one of these negative structures incorporates a positive proposal, we can see that the deconstructive project reflected in the negative form is just a necessary first step to make room for alternative modes of performing our humanity. The philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* is concerned with expanding, not with reducing. But for expanding something, we first need to call into question the actual conditions under which it's reduced, only then it becomes possible to overcome their boundaries and effect a transformation.

Wuwei invites us to entertain alternative forms of agency, where actions can *also* be (1) ateleological as opposed to goal-oriented; and (2) spontaneous as opposed to controlled by the conscious mind.

WUWEI AS ATELEOLOGICAL ACTIONS

The most representative form of *wuwei* as ateleological action is the type of wandering (*you* 遊) qualified as free and unfettered (*xiaoyao* 逍遙), which enables the agent to roam beyond normative bounded spaces (*fang zhi wai* 方之外, *Zhuangzi* 6; Peterson 1988; Sikri 2022). Such a wanderer doesn't necessarily abide by norms and conventions, and so casually yet effectively transgresses *shi-fei*-informed modes of action. At least temporarily, the wanderer isn't dependent on discrete and prescribed epistemic frameworks, discourses, languages, or *daos*: "Suppose you were to chariot upon what is true both to Heaven and to earth, riding atop the back-and-forth of the six atmospheric breaths, so that your wandering could nowhere be brought to a halt. You would then be depending on—what?" (*Zhuangzi* 1; Ziporyn 2020: 5). A person participating in ateleological wandering has "no definite identity" (as they merge and change along with things, open to transformation), "no particular merit" (as there's no intention to produce any particular outcomes), and "no one name" (as they don't subscribe to prescribed social roles nor functions; *Zhuangzi* 1).

In contrast to conventional forms of action, ateleological wanderings aren't directed at attaining particular goals, so they can be said to disturb the capitalist economy of production, where actions must produce some form of profit. Think of the extravagant character Vast Obscure 鴻蒙, who describes his sparrow-like hopping and buttock-slapping

as "drifting and floating, not knowing what seeking. Reckless and mad, not knowing where headed. It is play alone that holds the reins, enabling my prospectless gaze" (*Zhuangzi* 11; Ziporyn 2020: 94). Any outcomes or benefits derived from ateleological wandering (such as joy, epistemic flexibility, existential comfort, or risk avoidance) are a by-product that cannot be attained as a result of a premeditated course of action (Sikri 2022: 354). As other forms of creative play, unbound by rules and goals, free and unfettered wandering may still have a purpose (Suits 2005; Nguyen 2020). We may induce the conditions for wandering and/or playing because we enjoy those states, to generate feelings of relaxation and satisfaction, facilitate detachment, experience the loss of the self and self-centered perspectives, or simply to have a new experience. And yet, paradoxically, to achieve these purposes via ateleological wandering or nonnormative play we must surrender all set goals (e.g., winning, getting to a destination, learning or feeling something in particular, etc.), much as our dependence upon particular frameworks or *daos* wherein those goals are meaningful and valuable.

Both the playfulness and the unfettered character of ateleological wandering make it conducive to perspective shifting, to avoid getting stuck in just one position and identity, and to expand and transform. Like in the free playing of a child and the non-(deeming) speech of goblet words, there's an exercise of distinction making but one that is seriously light-hearted, knowingly temporary, and nonfoundationalist; one where all posited distinctions, norms, and identities are easily revocable; where entire universes are nonchalantly overthrown and replaced by others similarly ready-to-shift-and-disappear.

WUWEI AS NON-MIND-DIRECTED ACTIONS

There is another crucial alternative to conventional understandings of action encompassed by the term *wuwei*: a form of agency where an unyielding control of the conscious mind over the body becomes an obstacle for the fluid performance of the activity. This is the case in the performance of activities that strongly rely on cultivation of know-how and mastery of skills, such as playing a musical instrument, playing sports, and crafts like carving and cooking. And yet, the mind isn't fully absent in the way we may imagine it to be in automatic and instinctual actions, such as closing our eyes when an object approaches our face. In this form of *wuwei*, the agent necessitates holistic awareness and attentiveness to effectively respond to situational shifts and conditions. Take as an example an expert ocean swimmer, who doesn't let her conscious mind dictate her every move (or she'd end up disharmonic and out of flow), and relies on her muscle memory and the mastery of skills cultivated through years of intentional training. Yet, it's her holistic awareness which facilitates the effective engagement with all changing conditions in her environment, say as a larger wave approaches her or she encounters a rock.

Think of yourself playing piano, reading a book, fully engaged in a conversation or any creative activity—when immersed in *doing* these things we aren't conscious of taking action and don't feel separated from the activity itself (there's not *me* doing but just *doing*). These are cases wherein we seem to know what to do precisely by not effortfully attempting to guide and control the activity. In turn, when we separate ourselves from the activity by consciously externalizing it, the effectiveness and fluidity of the performance disappears. We are in control without a feeling of conscious, mind-directed, deliberate, overt control (Bruya 2022: 48–64). This alternative form of agency has often been portrayed as "cultivated spontaneity" because skillful masters can perform their art in a seemingly self-caused and effortless manner, as a result of years of intentional and effortful

training as well as the accumulation of theoretical knowledge flexibly applied to particular situations. As Lai has summarized it, these are "*unreflective* skilled actions that are enabled by *reflective* cultivated habits" (Lai 2022: 661), of which we find many exemplars in the *Zhuangzi*: a cicada catcher, a wheelwright, a wood carver, artisans, swimmers (*Zhuangzi* 19), and the famous Butcher Ding who taught a king how to live well by explaining his *dao* for carving an ox (*Zhuangzi* 3).

PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION: ADAPTING

Wuwei and the rest of the speculative negative forms present a challenge to conventional values and standardized ways of knowing and acting, by identifying alternatives and demonstrating their counterintuitive utility and value. Nevertheless, this liberating project doesn't lie with a simplistic rejection of the conventional in favor of the countercultural. The risk of such logic of polarization (as we have seen with *shi-fei* thinking) is that agents may get trapped in yet another fallacy which equally constrains them by limiting their capacity for creative thinking and responsive interactions with the world. As the story of the useless tree and the useless goose shows—where the first preserves its life due to its lack of instrumental worth, while the latter gets killed for dinner—no fixed value or mode of action (not even the alternative ones suggested in the *Zhuangzi*, such as uselessness, nonaction, or nonknowing) will always serve us well (*Zhuangzi* 20; Valmisa 2021a: 13–17).

The *Zhuangzi* invites us to be always open to discover, along with things, which path might suit better a situation, hence to adapt our ways. The philosophy of action derived from the acknowledgment of pluralism, the application of perspectivism, and the rejection of foundationalism (dogmatic claims to absolute knowledge certified by a perspective-independent reality) is called "adapting." Adapting is a meta-model of action, by which I mean that it's not limited to or defined by particular courses of actions, and can accommodate all kinds of goals. What adapting indicates is a procedure for co-raising courses of action along with things and responding to the specificities of a situation. Adapting is a structure to produce endless courses of action which can never become constant standards, define the agent, or replace the structure itself. In this way, there's no single model for acting adaptively, and all sorts of actions can be adaptive as long as they are an ad hoc response to situational factors (Valmisa 2021a: 22–5). In the *Zhuangzi*'s words: "Thus the Radiance of Drift and Doubt is the sage's only map. He deploys no single definition of what is right, but instead entrusts it to the everyday function of each thing. This is what was meant by 'using the Illumination of the Obvious'" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Ziporyn 2020: 16).

What perspectivism illuminates as "obvious" is that there's no privileged form of knowing, valuing, describing, or being in the world. The variety of exemplars and anti-heroes that the *Zhuangzi* presents us with can be understood as a catalogue of available embodied perspectives. None of them represents a final or superior ideal that we should aspire to attain. Rather, all of them are simply possibilities at hand, available to be temporarily adopted when they are fitting responses to a set of circumstances, then left behind in favor of yet another transformation (an adaptive attitude also termed "using your heart-mind as a mirror" *yong xin ruo jing* 用心若鏡; *Zhuangzi* 7). There are situations where we can truly benefit from the courageous naïveté of the mantis confronting a carriage, and others where such an attempt only amounts to ignorant, futile valor. When coping with the death of a loved one or a physically taxing illness, we can certainly use the perspective of the Spiritlike Person or the True Person (*shenren* 神人, *zhenren* 真人;

Zhuangzi 1, 6), so entirely detached from conventional valuations that they don't experience suffering or pain. And there are also situations when it's not the time to flutter around like a butterfly, to relax the effortful and intrusive guidance of the conscious mind, or to display a lack of instrumental utility (remember what happened to the goose). Any of these exemplars, even those presented in a positive light, becomes constraining and self-defeating when reified as an absolute ideal in exclusion of other possibilities, for even the certainty of the worthiness of such aspiration would eliminate "the Radiance of Drift and Doubt" that affords our constant transforming and adapting along with things.

The image par excellence for the all-embracing position of the adaptive person is the Course-Axis (*dao shu* 道樞): "A state where 'this' and 'not-this'—right and wrong—are no longer coupled as opposites is called Course as axis, the axis of all courses. When this axis finds its place in the center, it responds to all the endless things it confronts, thwarted by none" (*Zhuangzi* 2; Ziporyn 2020: 14–15). The *Zhuangzi* suggests that pluralism doesn't need to entail conflict. The myriad perspectives and epistemic frameworks from which we can perceive, construe, describe, evaluate, and act in the world need not be mutually exclusive nor enter in opposition with one another. The position of the "center of the circle" (*huan zhong* 環中) represents an empty location without commitment to any particular perspective, from which we're potentially able to access them all and use them adaptively according to situational demands (De Reu 2010; Ziporyn 2015; Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017: 114–15; Valmisa 2021a: 25–30). Even more than the possibility of peaceful coexistence between plural and incommensurable frameworks and perspectives, the *Zhuangzi* argues that each one of these might be particularly useful under certain circumstances, so why not take advantage of this diversity of available epistemic, moral, aesthetic, and existential options, instead of faithfully identifying with the contingent and limited perspectives that we happen to be lodged in? (Lee 1996).

The position of the Course-Axis is also called Heaven the Potter's Wheel (*tian ni* 天倪; *Zhuangzi* 2, 27). As Ziporyn comments, the *Zhuangzi* uses an image of instability and invites us to "rest" in it despite its lack of grounding terrain, to find stability in our shifting perspectives, to find "tranquility in turmoil" (*ying ning* 攖寧, *Zhuangzi* 6; Ziporyn 2020: 26). Where other philosophers want to settle issues with unmovable positions, distinctions, and values, the *Zhuangzi* responds that there aren't any definitive solutions nor fixed guidelines to inform our lives, but that, counterintuitively, we can find existential comfort and effective agency in our constant shifting and becoming. As discussed above, if things are both *this* and *that*, they permit a multiplicity of perceptions, distinctions, assertions, and judgments, all of which can potentially become valuable for certain situations. Adapting encourages us to find the best fit among all available options at any given time and within a particular relational context.

The *Zhuangzi* has no universal prescriptions to make. All it does is to *illuminate* (*ming* 明) the advantage of this adaptive attitude to effectively and happily live in a world of irreducibly plural, contradictory, and changing manifestations. Such advantage, nevertheless, cannot be demonstrated at an argumentative, theoretical, expository level or justified in a universal manner. Interestingly, the *Zhuangzi* itself addresses this apparent contradiction which has troubled and entertained generations of scholars (framed as the contradiction between the text's skepticism and relativism, and its positive claims; Hansen 1983, 1992; Allinson 1989; Raphals 1994; Kjellberg 1996; Schwitzgebel 1996; Eno 1996; Ivanhoe 1996; Wong 2005, 2017, 2022; Fraser 2015; Chung 2017; Lai 2018). Discussing his imminent death, Zhuangzi discourages his disciples from giving him a lavish funeral, for "above ground I'll be eaten by crows and vultures, below ground by

ants and crickets. Now you want to rob the one to feed the other. What brazen favoritism!" (*Zhuangzi* 32; Ziporyn 2020: 264). The chapter concludes with the following reflection on the perspective-bound, partial, and biased character of all claims, including claims such as Zhuangzi's very own that aim at making things equal (*qiwu* 齊物):

> And yet if instead you try to impose such evenness [*ping* 平] by means of something that is itself uneven, the resulting evenness will still be an unevenness. And if you try to demonstrate [that evenness] by means of something that is itself undemonstrable, the resulting demonstration demonstrates nothing. Clear understanding of it is only a way to control it, but the imponderable, the spiritlike, is its very demonstration.
>
> —*Zhuangzi* 32; Ziporyn 2020: 264

The *Zhuangzi* illuminates that an adaptive attitude is preferable to others because it allows the agent to effectively adopt different perspectives, positions, values, ways of speaking, and courses of action that are fitting for different situations, hence adapting, as an empty meta-model of action, is *always* fitting (Valmisa 2023). But the preference for fitness (or efficacy or existential comfort) can only be justified from *one* perspective. Any attempt to demonstrate it in an objective, universal manner would need to prove that there's such a thing as a universal standard of assessment—an option that the *Zhuangzi* strongly challenges. At the same time, as the passage above suggests, the preference for adapting can still be conveyed via nonexpository language, grasped, and *preferred*; the very possibility of its practice, compatible with all potential positions, values, and courses of action, being "its very demonstration" (*Zhuangzi* 32; Ziporyn 2020: 264–5; Connolly 2011; Ziporyn 2015; Fraser 2022; Valmisa 2023).

IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There's no position from which to affirm, with any certainty, whether reality is independent from how we perceive and conceptualize it to be, or whether it changes along with our perspectives on it. This unresolvable uncertainty, nevertheless, doesn't amount to the claim that all reality is mind-dependent and socially constructed. Such a claim would be dogmatic, and it would place all the weight on the side of the (social, collective) subject within the person–world relation wherein both persons and world are constituted—a move that we don't see in the *Zhuangzi*. On the contrary, we find numerous passages concerned with analyzing the processes by which beliefs and other propositional and dispositional attitudes are formed, and with exploring the ways in which truth discourses, valuations, norms, and emotional states emerge *from* given networks of interconnected factors. Different networks of relations provide conditions that make possible, invite, encourage, and legitimize the emergence of certain claims, positions, values, and *daos* while discouraging and even hindering the possibility of emergence of others.

Things appear to us in their so-ness (*ziran* 自然), which includes their features, tendencies, and behavior. The so-ness of things is plural and often affords conceptually contradictory experiences (what I construct as appealing and desirable, you may construct as off-putting and unacceptable). But, as David Wong has remarked, the openness and multiple availability of possibilities that we find in things isn't infinite. The world constrains the range of viable conceptualizations (2022: 642). We can't make things become *anything* we want them to be. Remember that Huizi's gourd had the potential to become a boat but couldn't be forced to act as a drinking vessel. Things are open-ended and afford multiple

constructions—therefore the realization that there's no final vocabulary to describe things or a single correct system of organization and normalization—but not *any* constructions.

These constraints explain why, in the emergence of reality, not everything falls on the side of the subject. Therefore, whereas epistemic flexibility and creativity (such as those facilitated by perspective shifting) are a central part of any Zhuangist conception of freedom and relational autonomy, these are also not enough. To live free and autonomous lives, agents engage in the transformation of their social and material contexts in order to shift them to be more conducive for their personal flourishing, facilitated by, but not limited to, modifying the ways in which they think and feel about them. As I have written elsewhere, "freedom in the *Zhuangzi* requires psychological or epistemic autonomy, but ultimately lies in an exercise of control in response to one's external circumstances"; where *control* is understood in a nonforceful manner as the purposive, responsive, and creative refashioning of one's conditions to the agent's flourishing and well-being (Valmisa 2019: 4, 6).

These constraints also explain why, despite the acknowledgment of pluralism, the equalizing consequences of perspectivism, and the open skepticism toward foundationalism, not all perspectives and courses of action are considered equally good (or *fitting*) for an agent to respond to a given situation. Why some positions, values, standards, and ways of speaking and acting can be said to situationally fit better than others. As Chris Fraser has also noted, it's the interaction between context and agents and circumstances that makes some paths better or worse; more likely to go well for all (2022: 576). And why there's no self-defeating types of skepticism and relativism that may leave us stuck and unable to make choices and take positions. As many have remarked, the skepticism that we find in the *Zhuangzi* is not doctrinal but therapeutic or constructive—meant to trigger epistemic transformations that are considered conducive for a good life (Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996; Wong 2005, 2017, 2022; Chung 2017). As for the relativism that we encounter in the *Zhuangzi*, it's of the kind that notices that everything depends on (is *relative* to) something else by which it's partly constituted; be this applied to questions of knowledge, value, efficacy, or identity. This sort of ontological relativism can better be termed "relationality," and it doesn't hinder the agent's capacity to act, evaluate, and prefer. On the contrary, it enables more self-aware and flexible forms of belief and value formation, along with more effective ways of constructing meaning and collaborative actions, such as adapting.

What things *are* arises in relations; their features, affordances, tendencies, behaviors, and networks of emergence being just as constitutive as the heart-minds (embodied subjects of experience) that encounter them. As noted above, actors construct reality under constraints of different kinds: (1) things' so-ness: their physical features, behaviors, tendencies, affordances, etc.; (2) physiological, sensorial, perceptual, and psychological constraints due to our physical and neurological makeup; (3) the networks of relations wherein we encounter things: contexts, situations, processes, interconnections, events, etc.; (4) and, crucially too, epistemic constraints due to our limited perspectives. Our perspectives are formed by the beliefs we commit to and the values we endorse, but also by social norms, roles, and relationships; political and ethical views; our sense of identity, personal aspirations, motivations, and expectations; preferences, fears, and dislikes; physical capabilities and limitations; formation, education, and skills; transitory moods; and no less importantly, biological features, needs, and tendencies (Valmisa 2023). It is the case that Lady Li can be constructed both as an attractive beauty by other humans and as a threatening danger from which one must escape by fish and birds (*Zhuangzi* 2). These are species-relative modes of co-construction of reality. But then, within a single

species such as the human, different perspectives will allow us to identify and appreciate certain affordances of things while neglecting many others (Valmisa 2019).

This relational approach has other important implications. First, it suggests that our identities aren't individual but constituted by many *others*, and that who we are constantly changes along with our interactions with those others that participate in the constitution of ourselves, in the emergence of our identities. Therefore, we owe no loyalty to who we currently happen to be, or to social expectations or personal aspirations about who we should become. Indeed, a certain identity fluidity (preserving the state of emptiness facilitated via forgetting), and a lack of seriousness and commitment toward one's own perspectives may prove useful in navigating life's contingencies, as it facilitates the agentive plasticity necessary for adapting (D'Ambrosio and Moeller 2018; Chung 2021b; Valmisa 2021a; Connolly forthcoming). Second, a similar process is involved in evaluating the desirability of different courses of action, as we realize that all of our actions are collectively constituted rather than individual. If we never act alone, but as co-agents immersed in networks of relations and co-dependencies that both facilitate and constrain our possibilities, we may become more motivated to learn how to act-along-with-things in more effective ways. This perspective illuminates the crucial role that the so-ness of things (their features, tendencies, and behavior) plays in our agency; its emergent power—a power we can use in co-raising courses of action along with them. It pushes us toward finding the right fit for a particular configuration of actors-in-situation, rather than acting in individualistic and forceful ways. And it calls for a philosophy of action such as adapting that is relational, that accounts for the entangled and collective character of human agency, and which also invites us to pay more attention to the agentive capacities of nonintentional entities (what things do).

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