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**PHILOSOPHIES OF ARCHERY**

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# PHILOSOPHIES OF ARCHERY

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates how different philosophical traditions and schools of thought have understood the practice and the discipline of archery. Whereas the scholarly literature on the history, the techniques and the uses of bows and arrows is diverse and extensive, my aim is to contribute to the less developed research on the relationship between philosophy and archery. Specifically, I will explore in what terms philosophers have employed the bow as a metaphor for both their standpoints and, more generally, significant aspects of everyday life.

## **Keywords**

Archery; philosophy; everyday life; bow; arrow.

*That I may one day be ready and ripe in the great noon; ready and ripe like glowing bronze, clouds pregnant with lightning and swelling udders of milk – ready for myself and for my most hidden will; a bow burning for its arrow, an arrow burning for its star.*

*Friedrich W. Nietzsche*

## **1. Introduction: How Do Philosophers Understand Archery?**

The origins of archery are lost to time. Archaeological finds and cave paintings demonstrate that in almost every corner of the planet the human being developed the techniques and tools to build and control a “bent stick” and use it as a weapon. Shooting a projectile – the arrow – with strength and from distance played a crucial role in hunting prey or predators, and thus contributed to the survival and the development of the human species.

At the same time, until the invention and spread of firearms, such as guns, pistols and rifles, the bow was employed by many civilisations in warfare with success. Depending on various factors such as availability of material, purpose and climate, heterogeneous types of bows, techniques and construction methods emerged throughout the world: curved, short composite bows, made from a fusion of different materials such as wood, horn and sinew, employed by the civilisations and empires of Asia and the Middle East; simple bows, made of a single piece of wood, such as the yew longbow in the United Kingdom; short bows made of Osage orange wood in North and Central America, to name a very few.

Alongside hunting and warfare, archery has been part of the everyday life of the human being through contests, rituals, literature, mythology and philosophy. If the spread of firearms has made the bow obsolete for warfare and, partly, for hunting, nevertheless this weapon is still used today by hundreds of thousands of people all over the world in multiple contexts, such

as recreational and competitive activity, historical re-enactment, trick shooting and spiritual discipline. If we narrow the focus to competitive archery, we can appreciate disparate types and styles: hunting simulation with paths in the woods and 3D targets placed at unknown distances, including moving targets, uphill and downhill shots, limited times and in certain occurrences also negative scores if the arrows merely wound instead of killing; tournaments in which the archer always shoots at the same target from the same distance indoor or in an open field, like the Olympic games; and mixtures of the two. Going even deeper, with the same bow one can practice different shooting styles, from instinctive shooting to split vision, gap shooting, bow and peep sights... In short, one can easily get lost in the variegated universe of historical and contemporary archery. The topic is even larger and more complex than what I have just hinted at, but this article does not aim to investigate the history, the types, and uses of archery. The reader can already find a rich literature on these topics.<sup>1</sup>

What I believe is lacking from the archery studies literature is an examination of how philosophers have dealt with it. Most of the scarce scholarly literature on philosophy and archery revolves around Confucius' teachings, the practice of kyudo, and the book *Zen and the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, in which the German philosopher reflects on his experience with the Japanese kyudo teacher Awa Kenzo.<sup>2</sup> My aim here is to expand this discussion by including further figures, such as the *Zhuangzi*, the *Daodejing*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Cicero, Heraclitus and Nietzsche. Starting from this article, my overall goal is to rekindle interest in how philosophers have understood and presently understand archery, hoping to ignite a discussion that will provoke further research and inquiry on the topic.

The common thread on which my analysis builds is based on one research question: in what terms have philosophers and thinkers understood archery?<sup>3</sup> Through my analysis I will show that philosophers have predominantly referred to the bow and arrows as a metaphor for their philosophical systems, and yet this does not imply a detachment from the practical domain but, on the contrary, an attempt to articulate the human condition in its multiple aspects.<sup>4</sup> This broad research question is informed and sharpened by another one: what is the goal of archery? This might appear a trivial question: is not the goal of archery to hit the target? For its very physical structure and its use over the millennia, is not the bow essentially a weapon that allows somebody to shoot a projectile in the direction of a given target? If this is true, we will see in this article how on a philosophical level alternative interpretations have been proposed regarding this claim. These interrogatives are tangent to other crucial issues for our everyday life, such as: why do we do what we do? Do we do it in sight of a result, to achieve a goal? Or ought/should we do it simply to do it, considering the goal as a by-product, or not even considering it at all? Ultimately this article aims at a reflection on the idea of action and agency through

the metaphor of the bow and arrows. If a significant pool of philosophers have focused on the definition of “action”, here the focus is restricted to those who have specifically pointed at archery as a key discipline to understand and become aware of different aspects of everyday life.

## **2. The Two Sides of Chinese Archery: The Rhythm of Nature and Political Authority**

Beyond the archaeological evidence, primitive Chinese writing dating back to over 3500 years ago<sup>5</sup> and early manifestations of folk and mythical tales show that archery is deeply rooted in the Chinese world. The first testimonies, handed down to us through fragments in later texts, illustrate that there was a close link between archery, magic and divination. To begin with, one of the most ancient and well-known legends on the topic is that of Yi the archer. There are numerous and heterogeneous fragments relating to the mythical deeds of this archer, from the poems of Qu Yuan to the *King of Huai Nan* and the *Shan Hai Jing*. These records represent works of the Chinese folklore especially belonging to the Western Zhou Dynasty (1027–771 BCE). One of them informs us that in a mythical past, at the dawn of time, the world was visited by monsters that inflicted misery upon Chinese population. Then an archer intervened to change the situation: “The Heavenly Emperor had pity on mankind, and so he gave his servant, the Archer Yi, a cinnabar-red bow and wooden fowling arrows with the power to defeat monsters”. As the interpreters have shown<sup>6</sup>, the supernatural monsters defeated by Yi, such as the “Ten Suns”, “Dafeng”, “Hebo” and others, are personifications of natural disasters. For example, the Ten Suns would represent a period of extreme drought, ceased thanks to the intervention of Yi who extinguished nine out of the ten suns with his bow; or also Dafeng, a stormy wind “destroyer of houses”, or Hebo, the Water Sprite who caused river inundations. On this topic this passage is worth quoting at length:

Further on his travels, Yi ventured into the land of the Water Sprite. Usually, the Water Sprite lived as a spirit at the bottom of the Great Yellow River. From time to time, however, he would rise from there, take on the form of a white dragon and menace the people of China with great floods. It so happened that at the time Yi was nearby, the Water Sprite had transformed itself into a white dragon and was ravaging the countryside. Yi immediately took up his great bow and fired, hitting the Water Sprite in the left eye. The Water Sprite was mortally wounded, and he called to the Heavenly Emperor, ‘Yi has wronged me! Kill him for me!’ The Heavenly Emperor asked, ‘How did you come to get shot?’ The Water Sprite replied, ‘I happened to be swimming in the guise of a white dragon.’ The Heavenly Emperor said, ‘I commanded you to patrol the depths of the spirit world. Had you done so, how would Yi have harmed you? But instead, you transformed yourself into

a wild beast. As such, mortals would be bound to shoot at you – what could be more natural? Can I really hold Yi to blame?’<sup>7</sup>

On a figurative level, the Water Sprite represents a river flooding that was taken care of by Yi. On a deeper and more ideological level, though, Yi mortally wounded not so much an evil and wandering spirit but a subordinate of the Heavenly Emperor himself. For this reason, the Water Sprite invokes the Emperor in search for vengeance. Nonetheless, the Emperor claims that Yi did nothing wrong insofar as the actual problem was the Water Sprite itself who was not carrying out his assigned task. This places Yi in an ambivalent position: on the one hand he is the one who restores order and balance, on the other hand he is also ready to kill someone who is directly under the authority of the Emperor.

Alongside this representation of the archer as the guarantor of imperial power and as the ruler of the elements, there is a more obscure and ambiguous one in the Chinese folklore. In fact, if we look at the *Book of Changes*, and generally speaking at the Zhou dynasty records (1046–256 BCE), we see that the bow is closely associated with divination and shamanism. Specifically, as Stephen Selby points out, both white and black magic go hand in hand with archery in Chinese folklore. For example, the Shang King Wu Yi, king of the Shang Dynasty from 1147 to 1112 BCE, once built a puppet figure and called it the “heavenly spirit”, and then competed with it in archery contests. Another time he built a leather sack containing blood, threw it in the air and ordered his archers to shoot their arrows. In this way from the blue of the sky the bag exploded in gushes of blood, as if heaven itself had been wounded by the arrows.<sup>8</sup> This and other episodes also link archery to despotic rulers who challenge and outrage the cosmic order, by disregarding the discipline of heaven. It should be noted, however, that heaven in the Chinese tradition – as Hans-Georg Moeller suggests – does not involve the traditional western metaphysical conception of a world *beyond, after, or above* this world. It is instead “the course of celestial bodies and thus the course of the seasons and the course of time itself”.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when the term ‘heaven’ (*tian*) is employed within the Chinese tradition of thought, it evokes the cyclical, natural and physical processes that constitute the functioning of the whole universe. Acting with what recalls the Greek *hybris* (insolence), the above-mentioned ruler believed himself above the “decree of Heaven”, which in turns can be understood as nature’s overall process of birth, decay, withering and death.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, the archer in ancient Chinese folklore was an ambivalent figure: a friend of light and institutions but also a friend of darkness and occult practices. On one side the archer brings harmony and control, on the other disharmony and insolence. The power of the bow and arrows seems to be limitless – it is then up to the archer to weigh this power and choose their path, balancing between these opposites. Is not the bow itself a tensile structure based on the paradoxical co-presence of opposing forces, held together by a taut string? From these very first

fragments of the Zhou Dynasty folklore, archery involved at least two aspects that will then remain on a philosophical level: a) control over calamities which, by extension, implies the human dominion over the surrounding world, and b) the reinforcement of hierarchical power. The cosmic balance will influence the Daoist tradition more, and the political and social balance will have greater weight for the feudal one as well as for the Confucian.

Within the Daoist tradition, the two texts I am examining are the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. The former contains an explicit reference to the bow:

The way of *tian* [heaven] is like archers drawing their bows.

To hit something high in the air, they pull the string downward;

To hit something lower, they pull the string upward.

When they have drawn the string too far back, they let some go,

And when they have not drawn it far enough, they pull harder.<sup>11</sup>

The bow is used in metaphorical terms to indicate the work of balancing the world. As noted by Moeller<sup>12</sup>, like the wheel, the bow and the world operate according to a principle of reversal, a continuous movement in which what is high will be low, what is low will rise, to then return to the original state and start the whole process again. The wise archers know if they are pulling the string too much or not enough, and balance their shooting accordingly. Likewise, the Daoist sage follows the way of the bow, which implies an attunement with the surrounding world, nature, and the never-ending cycle of the elements. As heaven works to harmonize the imbalances of human fallibility, so the image of the drawn bow serves the *Daodejing* to show the aimless and spontaneous course of heaven. A crucial characteristic of this spontaneity can be detected in its cyclical and rhythmical agency: just like the reversing movement of the bow the Dao of heaven is constituted by a continuous interflow and exchange of opposites. Phenomena alternate and turn into their opposites, but the Daoist is conscious that this does not mean they are interchangeable entities where all differences are flattened out. On the contrary, it implies the awareness and the acceptance of this rhythmical sequence, including at a practical and everyday level. If everything is liable to turn into its opposite, this means that it is impossible to ascertain and know what is good or bad once and for all. To possess or not possess something we desire, to hit or miss the target, represent of course different and distinct happenings in our own lives. But what is at stake in the Daoist perspective is our judgement toward them. The Daoist's paradoxical conclusion is that we cannot judge if achieving or failing to achieve our goals is good or bad in itself, precisely because events transmute unceasingly and what is apparently bad luck can become its opposite.

The *Zhuangzi* contains more explicit references to bows and arrows. In several scenes, Yi the archer is the main character involved. Even the *Zhuangzi* highlights the ambivalence of this figure: while he was extremely gifted and technically talented in hitting any possible target, at the same time “he was clumsy in not preventing people from praising him for it”.<sup>13</sup> Yi enables the *Zhuangzi* to define the place of the individuals and their relationship to heaven. If the archer Yi is skilled in the realm of humans, he instead is “clumsy” in that of heaven because in his search for recognition, fame and glory he is entangled by mere worldly concerns and can easily go off the tracks, as this quotation exemplifies:

When you’re betting tiles in an archery contest, you shoot with skills. When you’re betting for fancy belt buckles, you worry about your aim. And when you’re betting for real gold, you’re a nervous wreck. Your skill is the same in all three cases – but because one prize means more to you than another, you let outside considerations weigh on your mind. He who looks too hard at the outside gets clumsy on the inside.<sup>14</sup>

The *Zhuangzi* thus claims that being concerned too much about what happens “outside”, i.e. in the world, makes people clumsy “internally” – that is, towards the spiritual attunement between oneself and the natural order. The *Zhuangzi* also outlines the contrasting figure of the sage who, though in harmony with heaven, appears clumsy in the realm of humans. This is perhaps the typical and stereotyped image of the sage and the philosopher, who, completely absorbed in their own thoughts, does not watch their steps and falls on the ground. Finally, the *Zhuangzi* depicts a third figure, who synthesizes both the mundane and the heavenly aspects just outlined. This is the “complete man”<sup>15</sup>, who succeeds in encompassing both the ways of the world and the ways of heaven. This figure paradoxically “hates” the very distinction between man and heaven, since s/he believes that each distinction is asserted by the arbitrary and partial perspective of an “I”. The “I” is the all too human root of desire, beliefs and ideologies, to which the Daoist sage opposes a radical attitude of dehumanization and detachment. Although one can wonder if these beings have ever appeared on earth, it seems worth noting how this in-between condition has also been developed by heterogeneous traditions and schools of thought in the Western world, such as the schools of the Stoics and the Jesuits. For instance, the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine emphasised the crucial significance of a lifestyle in which the “I” disappears. Bellarmine devoted a treatise precisely to the idea that in order to live well, one must learn – so to speak – how to die while still living: “it is necessary, in the first place, that we die to the world before we die in the body”<sup>16</sup>. Not only, for Bellarmine, must one live well in order to have a good death – for him, the inverse is also true. Bellarmine claims that we can be *in* the world while at the same time not being *of* the world. A seemingly small change in prepositions hides a much more complex and subtle perspective. It implies the paradoxical

attitude of living as if nothing that we do, possess, or taste actually belongs to us – that is, a general indifference which enables the individual to be skilful in the mundane things of the world while at the same time avoiding being enslaved by them.

It seems then that for both the Daoists and the Jesuits, a crucial aspect of one's own liberation is first and foremost the liberation from the pressure of the ego. Nonetheless, a crucial difference lies in the fact that for the Daoists there is no "I" nor "other", whereas for the Jesuits the "I" is suspended precisely to make room for the utmost otherness, i. e. the will of God.

Another passage of the *Daodejing* can further develop the assertions made so far. While not explicitly referring to archery, this quotation tackles the same topic in a tangent way:

I really have three prized possessions that I cling to and treasure:

The first of these is compassion,

The second, frugality,

And the third is my reluctance to try to become preeminent in the world.<sup>17</sup>

These "prized possessions" consist in not being *of* the world while at the same time being *in* the world. If on the one hand it is essential to feel compassion towards others, to understand and face the reasons of poverty and misery, on the other hand it also is pivotal to step out from the ego-centred chain of desires. Like a boomerang, fame, competitiveness, coveting the first place and so on, seems to the Daoist a blind attitude: today's victory will be a defeat tomorrow.

Whoever hits the target aiming at ego-centred goals only achieves a pseudo-victory; on the other hand, whoever shoots while taking care only of the "inside" and disregards shooting technique, experience, and context is at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum: a clumsy sage detached from reality. The outlined traditions do not elaborate the doctrine of a powerless and impotent figure who despises everyday mundane life and considers it inferior to the pure and contemplative one. On the contrary, they should be considered philosophies of action, in which the first step to success lies precisely in practicing the abandonment of the ego, which equates success with victory and defeat with loss.

Alongside the Daoist perspective, literary evidence shows that several feudal states, starting from the Zhou period, linked archery to political and military authority through court rituals. From Zuo's *Commentary of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, to the *Book of Odes*, the *Record of Rituals*, and Confucius' *Analects*, just to mention the most famous examples, we can observe that archery was part of the moral and military education of young men. These rituals had two main objectives: on the one hand they implied the observance of codes of conduct, revolving on notions such as chivalry, respect, solemnity and appropriateness; on the other they were selection and evaluation processes in which the candidate court officials were ranked and chosen through their



archery performance.<sup>18</sup> Confucius himself was an archer and held the discipline in high respect, including it in the “six arts” along with rites, music, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, a first starting element can be grasped here: when Confucius and other commentators and ancient historians write about the bow and arrows, they do not mean hunting or warfare but a discipline inscribed in the moral framework of the ideal conduct of the noble man.

Concretely, archery was involved at the level of rituals which were primarily meant to evaluate members of the upper-class who wanted to pursue a career in the aristocratic and military hierarchies. Archery was a skill through which candidates were “tested” in the archery halls. Therefore, the archery ritual was a passage through which the gentleman’s ideal behavior was screened and assessed. As Rina Marie Camus summarizes, several criteria mattered most: “proper bearing, correct execution of standard steps, gracious movement, and keeping time with music”.<sup>20</sup> To put it briefly, the rituals involved complex and frequent bows, specific gestures towards certain directions, demonstrations of correct technique, movements in time to the music, and generally speaking the observance of ceremonial protocols and procedures. Detailed descriptions of these rituals can be found in Stephen Selby’s well-documented book *Chinese Archery*. Here I would like to underline the following aspect, which outlines the rituals’ ideological and authoritative framework:

In the schooling of the nobility in ancient China, music and ritual came together as a form of social indoctrination. [...] indoctrination was: educating the officials, timeliness in attending the ruler; adherence to the doctrines and not failing in duties. The aim of the education process was to round out skills and establish virtuous conduct. Skills assured national security, while virtuous conduct assured peaceful coexistence. Archery permitted these intangible qualities to be observed, and so we can regard it as the quality control test of the education system.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, respect of the protocols was equated to respect and observance of authority. This in turn would have promoted, according to the Confucian ideal, balance and harmony through the recognition of hierarchies and powers. Precisely because rituals involve a *display* of performances, codes of conduct and gestures, the purpose of the examiners was to check and assess the protocol observance through manners, etiquette and aesthetics. In Chinese archery rituals, the target to be hit is very remote and abstract. What matters is the respect shown for elaborate and formalized expressions of deference. This conclusion might open wider questions on the Confucian ideal of order, balance and peace within society, that is, a ritual perspective in which obedience was often performative and visual, but my aim here is to stress the point that, according to Confucian ritualism, the centre of the target is not so much the actual physical target as

the correct execution of the ceremony in the eyes of one's superiors. As Behuniak Jr argues, these types of rituals, which marked the pinnacle of aristocratic male education, were in fact intended to manifest the "thrust" of personal character.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in the broader framework of Confucian philosophy, archery had a political and ethical target, since the cultivation of the ceremony and the rituals implied the willingness to act appropriately in order to fulfil one's role.

To conclude, both the Daoist and the feudal/Confucian ideal are developments of conceptions that can be traced back to the ancient Chinese folklore: on the one hand archery as a metaphor for the natural harmony, and on the other, the archer as an agent of political authority.

### 3. The Western Prejudice Against the Bow and Stoic Virtue

In the Greek world, cradle of Western civilization, the literary and folkloristic tradition on archery is also large and influential. However, as I will explain shortly, its influence has mainly consisted in a prejudice *against* the bow and arrows.

The Homeric poems contains abundant references to archery, as a recurrent weapon used both by mortals and deities. For instance, Apollo and his sister Artemis are associated with bows (Apollo known as the "lord of the shining bow"). The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus recounts the myths of Heracles and his bow, handed down to Philoctetes, and also of Apollo who "as the discoverer of the bow he taught the people of the land all about the use of the bow".<sup>23</sup> The figure of Ulysses also is surrounded by references to archery. He names his son Telemachus, translatable as "far fighter", that is, he who fights from afar. In addition, in at least two occurrences during and after the Trojan war the bow plays a crucial role, not to mention the killing of Achilles by Paris through an arrow that hit his vulnerable heel. First, when he and Neoptolemus try to relinquish Philoctetes' bow in the belief that it will help them winning the war. Here Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus "By capturing my bow (*bios*) you have unstrung my life (*bios*). / Give it me back, I beg you, give it back, I say. / By your ancestral gods, do not, my son, deprive me of my bow, my life [*bios*]"<sup>24</sup> Sophocles plays with the ambiguity of the word *bios*, meaning both 'life' and 'bow' in archaic Greek, to underline how the bow is essential for Philoctetes life. Second, in the 21<sup>st</sup> book of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus participates in an archery contest in order to win back his wife Penelope, with the bow signifying not only hierarchical leadership but also a *demand* of recognition to the other, in this case Penelope.<sup>25</sup>

However, as Caroline Sutherland notes,<sup>26</sup> the bow in the Greek mythology – especially when used by mortals – is above all a symbol of cowardice, treachery and lack of honor. Killing with the bow seems to have been condemned for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, it was seen as a breach in the heroic code, under which warriors ought to fight "honorably" in hand-to-hand combat. On the other hand, those who influence the earth from afar are the gods

themselves, and perhaps mortal archers were thought to be moved by *hybris*, the insolence/arrogance of imitating somebody who is inimitable.

This suspicion toward archery is detectable not only in the Greek world, both from a cultural and a military perspective (at least in classical Greece, hoplite infantry was prominent), but also in the Roman one and broadly speaking in the whole of the Western tradition. Those who sowed terror through the massive use of archers, especially on horseback, were precisely the sworn enemies of the Greeks and Romans: the Persians and the Parthians. This diffidence towards archery led the Western world to a long-lived prejudice against it that endured throughout the following centuries. As noted by Giovanni Amatuccio,<sup>27</sup> in the West the nobility has always had a bias against the bow and archers: the wealthy possessed expensive swords and armour, peasants and farmers cheaper armaments such as bows and arrows. The nobles used it as a recreational pastime,<sup>28</sup> for instance in hunting, but the legendary medieval English longbow, which made a crucial contribution in several battles such as those of Crécy in 1346 and Agincourt in 1425, was above all a mass and popular weapon, rather than a high-ranking one. This has had repercussions not only from a historiographical point of view but also from a theoretical and literary one. Legends such as *The Knights of the Round Table* are mainly populated by sword knights of royal, noble or aristocrat lineage. The Middle Ages especially feature the sword as the most coveted weapon: Excalibur, Durendal, Hruntin, just to name a few. Conversely, the figure who is most associated with archery is Robin Hood, an impoverished noble who becomes an outlaw, partisan of the lower class, with the bow figuring above all as a hunting weapon used for sustenance.

Therefore, if – broadly speaking – in the Asian continent an ancient, philosophical and political tradition is linked to archery, in the European context we have to wait until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for this situation to start changing, with the anonymous treatise written in French *L'art d'archerie* and the English *Toxophilus* by Roger Ascham.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, some philosophers both in the Greek and in the Roman environments focused on archery, especially in order to exemplify their ideals of virtue and good life. For instance, at the beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>30</sup> Aristotle clarifies the object of his study by comparing the ethical person to the archer, both sharing the goal of aiming for a target, whether it is a physical one for the archer or a spiritual one for the ethicists. Here, however, I will focus on Cicero's Stoicism by drawing a parallel between his thought and the Hindu scripture of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, before, in the final section, juxtaposing Heraclitus' fragments on archery with Nietzsche's philosophy.

In *On Moral Ends*, Cicero, through the mouth of Cato the Elder, expresses the following in order to refute the sceptical claims of Carneades:

Take the case of one whose task it is to shoot a spear or arrow straight at some target. One's ultimate aim is to do all in one's power to shoot straight, and the same applies with

our ultimate good. In this kind of example, it is to shoot straight that one must do all one can; none the less, it is to do all one can to accomplish the task that is really the ultimate aim. It is just the same with what we call the supreme good in life.<sup>31</sup>

This passage exemplifies Cicero's Stoic view on virtue through the technique of bow shooting. The goal of archery would lie not so much in hitting the target but in "shooting straight". Significantly to "shoot straight" is also one of the fundamental aspect of the practice of archery according to Ascham's *Toxophilus*, and in contemporary tournaments archers often wish each other good luck by using this expression. What all these heterogeneous occurrences of "shoot straight" share – I believe – is the focus on the *action* rather than the result, or, in other words, the idea that archers should do their best to perform the gesture correctly without getting distracted by the point of impact of the arrow. Once the arrow is released, it is no longer the archer's business – all manner of external factors might intervene, and a good and well performed shot can still end up missing the target. Still, the archer's job is to focus on the process, on the flow, on the fluidity of the movements. This of course does not mean that the archer is not responsible for their shot, but that once the goal is set and the action is performed, their mind should become indifferent whether the arrow hits or misses that very goal (in this indifference possibly lies one of the most difficult tasks for competitors).

This attitude provides an example of the Stoic worldview and hints at their conception of virtuous action. Virtue, for the Stoics, consists in understanding what they called *Logos*, or reason, which is the ordering principle of reality. To some extent similar to Laozi's Dao, the *Logos* permeates the world and orders the cosmos. Inside this theoretical framework, the aims and goals of our small egos should be de-centred and re-centred according to an accurate assessment of what is up to us and what is not. Hence, according to their philosophy, individuals should be concerned only by what is under their power, and should therefore be able to distinguish what falls within or outside of their control. For instance, a man can live the healthiest possible life, exercise every day and eat well, and yet he can get involved in an accident or get sick anyway. The unpleasant or pleasant outcomes of our actions do not ultimately depend on us and should not therefore be the main goal of our lives. On the contrary, indifference is the key term: "And if it is about one of the things that is not up to us, be ready to say, 'You are nothing in relation to me'".<sup>32</sup> The archer can train patiently, take care of their equipment and develop a spontaneous and fluid technique: their arrow may still miss the bull's eye or even the target completely.

This experience also emerges in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a 700-verse scripture, part of the epic *Mahabharata*, which is considered one of the highest points of Hindu religious tradition. The action takes place before the decisive battle between two rival families, the just Pandavas and the usurping Kauravas. Specifically, the Pandavas' prince and general Arjuna feels

overwhelmed imagining the massive loss of life that will result if the battle takes place, and asks Krishna for guidance. The discussion between the two covers fundamental concepts such as *yoga*, *karma* and *brahman*. Significantly, the distinction between aims and goals recurs: Arjuna, the most gifted and talented archer, is faced with the dilemma of the consequences of his actions. Without descending into the ethical perspective that emerges from the text, I would like to bring to the attention of the reader the following short extracts:

He who, having totally given up attachment to actions and their fruit, no longer depends on anything in the world, and is ever content, does nothing at all, though fully engaged in action. [...] The Karmayogi, who is contented with whatever is got unsought, is free from jealousy and has transcended all pairs of opposites like joy and grief, and is balanced in success and failure, is not bound by his action.<sup>33</sup>

These passages align with the claims developed so far in this article. Like the Daoist, the Jesuit and the Stoic, the Karmayogi is “fully engaged” in the world but at the same time s/he is not *of* the world. This does not mean that these figures are not capable of recognizing a gain from a loss, or a victory from a defeat. The main issue concerns the problem of action. If we do not act, we deny life itself; we are therefore forced to act. But how? According to the *Gītā* there is a way, and it consists in acting without representing the fruit, that is, without being bound by results and consequences. This agency arises beyond success and reward and is independent of one’s self. Interestingly, a link is also detectable in the *Gītā* that connects effectiveness and indifference. In order to succeed, one has to act counterintuitively through a selfless agency. In the highlighted passage of the *Gītā* this appears clearly: it is not a matter of focusing on the self, but the contrary, of being/becoming a means, an instrument, an intermediary of the world. By downsizing oneself one makes room for the world: indifference makes the difference of history possible. It describes a radical de-subjectivization whereby one’s ego is suspended and the world in its multifarious manifestations is opened.

#### **4. Facing Adversity: Heraclitus and Nietzsche**

The schools of thought examined so far show – among other things – a sensitivity to the notion of *opposition*. In this final section I explore this very idea in the reflections of Heraclitus and Nietzsche. Again, the bow will be our key guide and metaphor. Let us start with Heraclitus’ fragments:

They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement [or fitting together] turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre. [...] The name of the bow is life; its work is death.<sup>34</sup>

These enigmatic aphorisms should be understood within the broader framework of Heraclitean cosmology. Heraclitus ponders the bow as a metaphor exemplifying his whole worldview. The bow and the lyre are examples of how harmony and balance can emerge by way of a state of tension that holds together the forces at play: the string that stretches and flexes the bow; the taut strings of the lyre that produce notes and chords. It should also be said that – as Heidegger reminds us<sup>35</sup> – the bow and the lyre are the two signs of Artemis, Apollo’s sister, goddess of emergence, light and play who at the same time brings death. Humans “do not comprehend” the underlying principles of things, namely the harmony produced by opposites. In the first aphorism, this harmony can be found in the tension of the bow at full draw, in which two opposite tendencies are present at the same time: the archer’s arms pull in opposite directions, one hand pushing the bow in one direction while the other draws the string in the opposite. For Heraclitus, this exemplifies the general principle of opposition, in which a system of tensions, even conflict, contributes to the realization of a unity: harmony as an “intelligent structure or purposeful activity, a unified whole whose essential parts (or stages or tendencies) are related to one another by polar contrast”.<sup>36</sup> Understanding the functioning of the bow, and above all the principles it represents, would help humans to understand and more vividly recognize the world as a unity comprised of parts in perennial conflict. On top of that, Heraclitus plays on the homonymy between the archaic Greek word bow (*bios*) and life (*bios*), and highlights its paradox: the arrow is what hits and kills, but the weapon that throws it has the same name as life. On the one hand the killing of the prey or the enemy in war, on the other hand the survival of the archer and the individuals s/he represents. Here, too, one of the Archimedean points of his philosophical style emerges: not just the unceasing conflict, but the coexistence and co-presence of opposites. And, yet, precisely this coexistence of contradicting instances is the unifying structure of the cosmos. But more specifically Heraclitus meant the most profound connection that links life and death, as indicated in other aphorisms.

The co-presence of opposites can also be detected in Nietzsche’s philosophy. The German philosopher, too, uses the metaphor of the bow to describe it:

The essential point is: the greatest perhaps also possess great virtues, but in that case also their opposites. I believe that it is precisely through the presence of opposites and the feelings they occasion that the great man, the bow with the great tension, develops.<sup>37</sup>

Beware! The time approaches when human beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl! I say to you: one must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star. I say to you: you still have chaos in you.<sup>38</sup>

These passages connect the image of the bow with the idea of inner tension, and especially the projectile-like movement of self-overcoming. To clarify this central Nietzschean idea it is useful to briefly examine the chapter “On the Teachers of Virtue” from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the figure of the wise man of virtues is outlined. To sum up, the wise man claims that the true lord of virtue is sleep, as it represents a proper test to virtue itself: “if the virtuous man achieved a conciliated mind before bedtime, he will thus be reconciled with sleep and will have a peaceful and sound night; Ten times you must reconcile yourself again with yourself, for overcoming causes bitterness and the unreconciled sleep badly”. In order not to inflame one’s own spleen, one must always – the wise man continues – honour authority, be at peace with God and the neighbours, practice obedience and so on. In order to sleep well, one must live according to “poppy-blossomed virtues”,<sup>39</sup> which in turns means for Nietzsche that one exchanges sound sleep for a life with its engines switched off. In addition, it is not just everyday life which – for Nietzsche – is infected by this attitude, it is also the very idea of sleep, because in turn this lifestyle promotes a “sleep without dreams” – that is, a sleep in which the repressed content never returns. Here the tension of the bow comes into play: for Nietzsche only the “last man” can think that life is reconciliation and sleep without dreams, while the great man, “the bow with the greatest tension”, arises “through the presence of the opposites and the feelings they occasion”. Therefore, a central issue lies in the way in which the problem of the opposite is experienced in one’s own lifestyle: the opiate-virtuous man resolves every contrast in a final harmony; the great man, the free spirit, acts beyond all conciliations. Zarathustra criticises the wise man because he has a decadent, reactive, contemplative vision of existence. The wise man teaches that happiness can be obtained cheaply by living with a clean conscience at the end of the day, and that what matters most is ultimately the well-being of one’s corner. In so doing sleep, lord of virtues, grants its gifts. On this topic, according to Meyer, Nietzsche’s aphorism should also be understood as the sublimation and the release of our drives outwards instead of letting them stagnate inward, which would then generate *ressentiment*.<sup>40</sup> Archery would teach us, among the other things, that in facing adversities there are always potential outcomes leading the subject to repression and violence, and that it is our effort to sublimate them through creative energy into something beyond ourselves. Nietzsche, Heraclitus, and the other thinkers investigated in this article, invite us to deal with, face, and challenge these tensions – even to aestheticize them. The individual’s task is therefore to reintroduce the tension in the bow, to put the string back on it, to embrace their own tensions and accept them as an inherent aspect of everyday life since the dawn of mankind.

- <sup>1</sup> See for instance: Waldorf, D.C., 1985, *The Art of Making Primitive Bows and Arrows*, Mound Builder Books, Ohio; Latham, J.D., Paterson, W.F., 1970, *Saracen Archery*, The Holland Press, London; Klopsteg, P.E., 1987, *Turkish Archery*, Simon Archery Foundation, Manchester; Soar, H., 2009, *The Crooked Stick: a History of the Longbow*, Westholme, Pennsylvania; Loades, M., 2019, *War Bows*, Osprey, Oxford; Wadge, R., 2012, *Archery in Medieval England*, The History Press, Cheltenham; Laubin, R., Laubin, G., 1980, *American Indian Archery*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman; Hill, H., 2000, *Hunting the Hard Way*, Derrydale Press, New York; Onuma, H., 1993, *Kyudo. The Essence and Practice of Japanese Archery*, Kodansha International, Tokyo / New York; Grayson, C.E., French, M., O'Brien, M.J., 2007, *Traditional Archery from Six Continents*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London; Amatuccio, G., 1996, *Peri Toxias*, Planetario, Bologna; Cenni, A., 1997, *L'arco e gli arcieri nell'Italia medievale*, Greentime, Bologna. See also the issues of *The Journal of the Society of Archer-Antiquaries*.
- <sup>2</sup> On this topic, see also: Shōji, Y., 2016, "The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery", in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 28, 1-30. Interestingly, Shōji claims that Herrigel's famous account of Kenzo's teachings might be biased by coincidental circumstances and linguistic misunderstanding, upon which the German philosopher built his mythical and mystical understanding of Japanese-ness in the realm of archery.
- <sup>3</sup> Although we should keep in mind that the label of "philosopher" *stricto sensu* does not fully apply to non-Western thinkers and figures.
- <sup>4</sup> On this topic, also see Matthew P. Meyer's insightful and original contribution to a psychoanalytic understanding of archery titled *Archery and the Human Condition in Lacan, the Greeks and Nietzsche*, Lexington Books, London, 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> See Selby, S., 2003, *Chinese Archery*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong; J. Tian, J. Ma, 2014, *The Way of Archery. A 1637 Chinese Military Training Manual*, Schiffer, Atglen (PA).
- <sup>6</sup> See the first four chapters of Selby, S., 2003, *Chinese Archery*.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted in Selby, S., 2003, *Chinese Archery*, 18.
- <sup>8</sup> See Selby, S., 2003, *Chinese Archery*, 39.
- <sup>9</sup> Moeller, H.-G., 2006, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, Columbia University Press, New York, 17-18.
- <sup>10</sup> These episodes from ancient folklore may remind us of the scourging of the strait of Dardanelles (also known as the Hellespont) by Xerxes, when the Persian king had the water whipped by his soldiers, "guilty" of having destroyed the bridge that was meant to allow his army to cross.
- <sup>11</sup> Laozi, 2003, *Daodejing. A Philosophical Translation*, Ballantine Books, New York, eBook, Chapter 77.
- <sup>12</sup> Moeller, H.-G., 2006, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, 47-48.
- <sup>13</sup> Zhuangzi, 2013, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, Columbia University Press, New York, eBook edition, Chapter 23.
- <sup>14</sup> Zhuangzi, 2013, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, Chapter 19.
- <sup>15</sup> Zhuangzi, 2013, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, Chapter 23.
- <sup>16</sup> Bellarmine, R., 2016, "The Art of Dying Well." In *Saint Robert Bellarmine. Collection*, Aeterna Press, Kindle eBook.
- <sup>17</sup> Laozi, 2008, *Daodejing. A Philosophical Translation*, Chapter 67.
- <sup>18</sup> Several articles and book chapters have been written on this perspective on archery. See for instance: Behuniak Jr, J., 2010, "Hitting the Mark: Archery and Ethics in Early Confucianism", in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 37, 4, 588-604; Camus, R.M., 2017, "Comparison by Metaphor: Archery in Confucius and Aristotle", in *Dao*, 16, 165-185; Selby, S., 2003, *Chinese Archery*, Chapters 4 and 5.
- <sup>19</sup> See Confucius, 2003, *Analects*, Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Camus, R.M., "Comparison by Metaphor", 172.
- <sup>21</sup> Selby, S., 2003, *Chinese Archery*, 79-80.
- <sup>22</sup> Behuniak Jr, J., 2010, "Hitting the Mark", 590.
- <sup>23</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Book V, 47-84, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/diodorus\\_siculus/5d\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/diodorus_siculus/5d*.html), last accessed 2 July 2021.
- <sup>24</sup> Sophocles, 2015, *Oedipus the King and Other Tragedies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 186.
- <sup>25</sup> Meyer, M.P., 2020, *Archery and the Human Condition in Lacan, the Greeks and Nietzsche*, Lexington Books, London.
- <sup>26</sup> Sutherland, C., 2001, "Archery in the Homeric Epics", in *Classics Ireland*, 8, 111-120.
- <sup>27</sup> Amatuccio, G., 2010, *Gli arcieri e la guerra nel Medioevo. Bisanzio, Islam, Europa*, Greentime, Bologna, 157.
- <sup>28</sup> Contrarily to the Indian tradition – among several other ones – where bows and arrows are considered quintessential royal weapons. See also Coomaraswamy, A.K., 1943, "The Symbolism of Archery", in *Ars Islamica*, Vol. 10, 105-119.
- <sup>29</sup> Ascham, R., 2015, *Toxophilus: 1545*, Leopold Classic Library, Victoria, Australia. Again, this conclusion does not apply to the rich and heterogeneous schools and traditions of the Asian continent, not only China, Japan, India and the nomadic tribes of Central Asia, but also the Middle East. In fact, this area witnessed civilisations and cultures (such as the Byzantine and the Ottoman empires, the Saracens and the Mamelukes) where archery played a central role, especially in war but also from a religious and spiritual perspective (there are about forty *Hadit* which report Muhammad's perspective on archery).
- <sup>30</sup> Aristotle, 2009, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 3.
- <sup>31</sup> Cicero, 2004, *On Moral Ends*, Cambridge University press, Cambridge, 72.
- <sup>32</sup> Epictetus, 1983, *Handbook*, Hackett, Indianapolis, § 1.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Bhagavadgītā*, 2008, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 63-64.
- <sup>34</sup> Heraclitus quoted in Kahn, C.H., 1979, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 65. As stated above, the ancient term for 'bow' was 'bios', which was a homophone for the word for 'life' (they differ in the accent, which in Heraclitus' time was not used).
- <sup>35</sup> Heidegger, M., 2018, *Heraclitus. The Inception of Occidental Thinking*, Bloomsbury, London / New York, 14.
- <sup>36</sup> Kahn, C.H., 1979, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 200.



<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, F.W., 1968, *The Will to Power*, Vintage Books, New York, 507.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, F.W., 2006, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, F.W., 2006, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Meyer, M.P., *Archery and the Human Condition*, 177.