

Well-Being and Daoism*

Justin Tiwald

Daoism is one of the great intellectual and philosophical forces in China, originating in the classical period and attracting millions of adherents for more than two millennia, without pause and with no end in sight.¹ The traditional version of Chinese history holds that its two founding philosophers were Laozi 老子 (fl. 6th century BCE) and Zhuangzi 莊子 (fl. 4th century BCE), respectively the authors of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (also Romanized as *Tao Te Ching*) and the *Zhuangzi* (also Romanized as *Chuang Tzu*). Its influence has been tremendous, not least because the East Asian form of Buddhism most familiar to the larger world today—Zen, Seon or Chan Buddhism—is largely a hybrid system that blends Daoist views and concepts with Buddhist metaphysics and soteriology. Historically, much of the appeal of Daoist philosophy lay in its compelling vision of human well-being, which, broadly speaking, has been understood as a life relatively free of attachments and deeply in tune with spontaneous, unselfconscious dispositions and inclinations. As we will see, this is only a general description for diverse views of finer grain that can be found in specific texts and passages, but it is enough to glimpse what is distinctive and philosophically interesting about them.

For many centuries it has been customary to treat the *Daodejing* as a single-authored work. It has also been customary to call both the texts and their purported authors “Daoist,” suggesting that they belong to a single school of thought or philosophical lineage. In point of fact, the *Daodejing* (like the *Zhuangzi*) was pulled from multiple, probably like-minded sources, and it is doubtful that the authors of either text self-identified as Daoists, or even saw themselves as belonging to a school or tradition that spanned across both textual traditions.² There are some notable differences in the aims of the two texts. Much of the *Daodejing* reads as a call to social and political reform, aiming to reinstate what Philip J. Ivanhoe has described as a “primitive agrarian utopia” (2002: xxiv). The core chapters of the *Zhuangzi* show little interest in social and political reform and instead recommend a kind of personal, individual liberation within the social structures and obligations that one has inherited.³ The *Daodejing* prescribes a life spent in pursuit of basic, naturally achievable goods that require a minimum of training or education. In contrast, the *Zhuangzi* recommends a way of life which, however simple, we can only achieve through a great deal of practice, habituation and intellectual refinement (Kohn 1992: 57-58).

Still, there are reasons to discuss both texts together here. In terms of their historical influence they have operated as something of a unified force; reflective people who found one attractive have typically found the other attractive as well, and many have

* This is a preprint. The final version is published in the *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-Being*, Guy Fletcher ed. (Routledge 2016), pp. 56-69.

aimed to live in ways that they saw as consistent with both. Both propose that a certain kind of unselfconsciousness is a major component of well-being, most famously as a form of “nonaction” or *wúwéi* 無為 (also translated as “effortless action” and “non-purposive action”). And both share common cause against ways of life they construe as artificial, perhaps in distinctive senses. In what follows I will discuss each of the two Daoist classics in turn, describing their views about well-being and the basis for those views. In the course of doing so, I will discuss some of the implications of their views in terms familiar to contemporary welfare theorists, and describe Daoist treatments of major themes that they address more systematically, including the relationships between well-being and nonaction, desire fulfillment, skepticism and (for Zhuangzi) death.

1. Well-being in the *Daodejing*

To describe the text very roughly, the *Daodejing* comprises poetic and often pithy remarks that extol the simple life, propose limits to human knowledge and point to a cosmic force called “the Way” (or “Dao” 道).⁴ It presents at least two forms of life as good for people: the first is the primitive agrarian utopia mentioned in the introduction, meant at minimum for ordinary people and subjects of states; the second is a kind of sagehood that consists in having the right understanding of the Way and its implications, and an ability to influence others accordingly. One could be well off if one successfully adopts either form, but on one plausible reading, being a sage is preferable only in non-ideal circumstances, when one hasn’t had the benefit of growing up in a society without war, education and profit seeking. In any case, it is abundantly clear that the simple life of those living in the ideal agrarian society is an exceedingly good life for those who have it. Moreover, this is largely because those who live this way are well off—because it contributes tremendously to their welfare—whereas justifying the life of the sage might require appeals to independent ethical or religious values. For these reasons I will focus on theory of welfare implicit in the *Daodejing*’s primitive agrarian utopia.

According to Ivanhoe, the primitive socio-political order that the *Daodejing* idealizes is “a low-tech, highly dispersed society of independent village communities in which people found and were satisfied with simple pleasures” (2002: xxiv). Probably the most vivid and memorable description of this society is in chapter 80 of the text.

Reduce the size of the state;
Lessen the population.
Make sure that even though there are labor-saving tools, they are
never used.
Make sure that the people look on death as a weighty matter and
never move to distant places.
Even though they will have armor and weapons, they will have no
reason to deploy them.
Make sure that people return to the use of the knotted cord.⁵
Make their food savory,

Their clothes fine,
Their houses comfortable.
Make them find happiness in their ordinary customs.
Then even though the neighboring states are within sight of each other,
Even though they can hear the sounds of each other's dogs and chickens,
Their people will grow old and die without ever having visited one another.⁶

There are many striking recommendations here. Probably the most astonishing is that the author urges a great degree of ignorance. The people are to be kept illiterate (keeping their records with “knotted cords” rather than writing). They are not to visit other communities, even those within earshot of their homes. Perhaps they have labor-saving tools on hand, but they are not to use them, and one suspects that they are not to invent or seek out new ones. Notably, the chapter countenances some common human desires and not others. People rightly indulge their desires for fine clothes and savory food, but should not avail themselves of tools that could save them time and unnecessary toil. It might also be significant that the text does not account for the well-being of the people solely in terms of a single subjective state like happiness or pleasure. Happiness is just one good among others, alongside comfort and consuming savory food.

There are also some recommendations that would have stood out more prominently for the chapter's original audience. One is an inclination toward pacifism.⁷ States in the agrarian utopia lack the expansionist ambitions that invariably lead to wars of conquest. The second is that ordinary citizens give more weight to self-preservation than to achieving wealth or glory. This might suggest that they favor one conception of well-being over another, according to which being alive contributes a great deal more to one's welfare than fame or an abundance of material goods (so much that it would rarely be worth risking the former for the sake of the latter). It might also suggest that they put a higher premium on welfare than their non-utopian counterparts, regarding well-being as a greater or more central good than non-welfarist (ethical?) goods like glory, all things considered.

1.1. The *Daodejing* on desires

Perhaps the most theoretical and generalizable remarks about welfare in the *Daodejing* have to do with what might be called *acquired* desires. We can think of desires as falling on a spectrum between those that arise spontaneously from ourselves (desires that are “natural” or, to use the parlance of the *Daodejing*, “self-so” [*zìrán* 自然]) and desires that come about because of the novel effects of external things, whether those things be material objects or living creatures. Hunger is a good example of the former sort of desire; a craving for some flashy, faddish electronic device is a good example of the latter. The most influential commentator on the text, Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249 C.E.), suggests a distinction between desires that serve one's own needs and those that “make oneself a servant” (*yìjī* 役己) of external things (Wang 1965: ch. 12). Acquired desires are usually to the detriment of the desirer's well-being; satisfying them has little inherent value and pursuing them tends

to lead to greater frustration and conflict. Of course, many desires fall somewhere between these extremes. For instance, we have desires whose conditions for gratification more or less map onto those of our natural desires, but whose intentional objects have been narrowed by past experience. Consider a strong preference for arugula—we might prefer to eat arugula rather than another leafy green, such as lettuce, but our natural hunger would be sated whether we eat one or the other, so long as we have enough. The *Daodejing* tends to be suspicious even of the desires like this—that is, desires that are “acquired” in only a partial or weak sense. Consider chapter 12:

The five colors blind our eyes.
The five notes deafen our ears.
The five flavors deaden our palates.
The chase the hunt madden our hearts.
Precious goods impede our activities.
This is why sages are for the belly and not for the eye;
And so they cast off the one and take up the other.⁸

The “five colors,” “five notes” and “five flavors” represent the objects desired by people with refined sensibilities, informed by a connoisseur-like appreciation of sensory objects that conventional, civilized people come to understand and distinguish. These are acquired, although they retain some important features of desires that arise from ourselves spontaneously, not unlike the strong preference for arugula. Even so, the *Daodejing* suggests that we have little to gain by pursuing them, either instrumentally or intrinsically. The pursuit of such things tends to drive us mad, and we aren’t made much better off by satisfying them, for we become insensitive (“blind,” “deaden”) to whatever qualities make the desire worth satisfying in the first place. Thus the sage is for the belly and not for the eye.⁹

1.2. The *Daodejing* and current theories of well-being

In late 20th and early 21st century Anglophone philosophy of well-being, one cluster of theories—desire theories—propose, roughly, that a person is made better or worse off according to how much her desires are fulfilled or frustrated. There is not a lot of hope that an interesting, non-trivial desire theory could account for the *Daodejing’s* views about human welfare. Perhaps most obviously, the text’s criticisms of acquired desires suggest that being well off can’t consist solely in satisfying whatever desires we happen to have at the moment, which is to say that it’s incompatible with so-called *actualist, presentist* desire theories. Satisfying some desires—say, for refined music or the latest gadget—contributes little to one’s welfare, either inherently or instrumentally. And sometimes it contributes nothing at all.¹⁰

Most desire theories have ways of coping with this difficulty. What are called *informed* desire theories say that the desires whose satisfaction contributes to one’s welfare are not those that I happen to have at the present moment, but those that I *would* have under more ideal circumstances. Perhaps we could say that the desires that really

count are those that are informed by reflection, knowledge of the world and comparative experiences—for example, comparing the experience of having a flashy new gadget to the experience of eating savory food.

Informed desire theories are also problematic by the lights of the *Daodejing*. One worry is that the very conditions that make someone more informed are also the ones that make them develop the wrong desires. In chapter 80 (the lengthy description of the utopia quoted above) there is an evident preference for ignorance and naiveté: people are not even to read and write, nor travel to other communities, most likely because merely being aware of other possibilities tends to give rise to acquired desires that easily overpower the natural (“self-so”) ones. Anyone in a position to make informed choices about life in the agrarian utopia, even moderately informed ones, would no longer be a member of it. There are some obvious solutions to this problem, although most do not strike me as being clean enough for everyday use, requiring that we selectively erase and then restore the memory of the informed subject or engage in other acts of science fiction. Whether this is a problem depends on the use to which the theory is supposed to be put.

In any case, there is a more fundamental difficulty, which is to explain how the informed desire theory could be true to the *Daodejing* in anything more than a trivial way. Let us just stipulate that we could devise a scenario in which the things that people most want are the very things that the *Daodejing* believes to make the greatest contributions to human welfare, with or without science fiction. Even if we succeed, the “theory” won’t do much theoretical work. One could tailor the circumstances in such a way that the informed subject’s desiderata would map onto any of a variety of other theories of well-being. Perhaps it turns out that what people would want, under ideally informed circumstances, is just to maximize their own pleasure, making the theory consistent with hedonism, or to exercise virtues, making it consistent with perfectionism. If the desire theory is to have much explanatory power, it shouldn’t just tell us what’s good for us; it should also say why it’s good for us. It should say that eating savory food is good for us by virtue of the fact that we would desire it, and not (say) because it is pleasurable or exercises virtues (see Fletcher 2013: 206-09). If we look back at the critique of acquired desires in chapter 12 (our second quotation), it seems most likely that satisfying a desire would be good by virtue of the experiences it gives rise to. Refined flavors “deaden our palates” and refined music “deafens our ears,” suggesting that desires for such things are unhelpful because they don’t actually bring about the sensory experiences that make for a better life.¹¹

Other familiar welfare theories in the contemporary Anglophone literature are hedonism, which holds that someone is well off to the extent that she has a greater balance of pleasure than pain, and the objective list theory, which holds that someone is well off to the extent that she has certain objective goods. It is not clear that these two theories are necessarily in competition with the others; hedonism and the objective list theory are more concerned with enumerating or specifying the particular goods that make one well off, not with explaining or accounting for what makes them good (Fletcher 2013). Still, the *Daodejing*’s conception of well-being has significant implications for these theories. Hedonism seems to assume that all goods can be described in terms of two subjective states or aspects of subjective states, pleasure and pain. There is little indication in the

Daodejing that all contributions to welfare can be measured in terms of pleasure or pain. As noted about chapter 80, happiness seems to be one good among others, and there is no passage that assumes that people will want to maximize their happiness. In fact, happiness is rarely mentioned as a salutary human motive.¹² None of this rules out the possibility that hedonism could be consistent with the views expressed in the *Daodejing*, but it does suggest that the authors saw little to be gained by reducing all goods to two subjective states or aspects of thereof.

The *Daodejing*'s views would sit better with some variant of the objective list theory. The text tends to resist the temptation to homogenize different goods, suggesting that we would be better served by a list than by a single value or metric. Moreover, the authors of the *Daodejing* would be little troubled by one of the most popular contemporary objections to the objective list theory: namely, that it imposes a uniform the same set of goods on everyone, without allowing that the goods can vary fundamentally from one person to the next (Sumner 1996). On my reading, this is a problem that figures prominently in the *Zhuangzi*, but not one that has a major presence—if any presence—in the *Daodejing*.

2. The *Zhuangzi*

The *Zhuangzi* consists of some essays and a multitude of short, carefully crafted stories and dialogues. Embedded in these are arguments and conceptual devices that enact a kind of philosophical therapy—for example, helping readers embrace certain kinds of skepticism, reconcile themselves to the fact of their own finitude and mortality, find profound meaning in ordinary activities, and see oneself as part of a larger whole. The text exhibits internal tensions and logical inconsistencies, some of which are likely intentional and some of which are traceable to the fact that the text has multiple authors. Many modern scholars agree with traditional accounts that regard the first seven chapters of the received version, the so-called “Inner Chapters,” as written by the historical Zhuangzi. The remaining work contains some selections that seem largely consistent with Zhuangzi's vision, even if not necessarily authored by Zhuangzi himself, and some passages that seem to have been authored by philosophers and writers of different philosophical orientations. The editor of the received version of the text, Guo Xiang 郭象 (died 312 C.E.), conducted his work approximately six centuries after Zhuangzi's death, by which time there was a great body of writing that had been attributed to Zhuangzi, probably because of stylistic resemblance and a shared love of radically contrarian ideas. Here I will focus on those passages that offer a relatively unified vision of well-being, based primarily in the Inner Chapters but inclusive of likeminded selections from other parts of the text.

The *Zhuangzi* differs from other major philosophical texts in that it aims not just to present a vision of human well-being, but also to help readers realize that vision for themselves. In this respect it might be compared with Hellenistic philosophers like the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics, who saw proper philosophical instruction and writing as doing much of the work of effecting lasting changes of mind and character (Nussbaum 1994). One important difference is that the *Zhuangzi* targets both conscious, deliberate processes and non-conscious, automatic ones. Its goal is not just to change one's explicit

beliefs but also to change the wider net of implicit thinking that operates directly (and more consistently) on human activity. For example, one aim of the opening section is to persuade readers to adopt a certain degree of skepticism, raising doubts about the ability of creatures like us, of short lives and limited experience, to draw sound conclusions about the nature of the universe, the fundamental purposes of things, and so on. But it does not simply make the argument that we are poorly positioned to draw such conclusions, it depicts our position with philosophically irresistible allegories and metaphors that tend to linger well after one leaves the study. For example it invites us to compare the position of those who draw conclusions about their ultimate purpose (etc.) to the position of a morning mushroom trying to draw conclusions about the full sweep of a day (presumably it would know nothing about dawn or dusk). It also describes a mythical tortoise and tree that live tens or hundreds of thousands of years, to whom our epistemic confidence would seem laughable.¹³ One of its most effective ways of changing the wider network of our implicit and automatic thinking is to present our own pretensions as comically self-centered or self-important.¹⁴

2.1 A schema for reading the *Zhuangzi's* remarks on well-being

Zhuangzi is not a doctrinal philosopher. That is, his final goal is not to persuade us to adopt certain beliefs by virtue of the fact that they are true, but rather to perform a kind of philosophical therapy, changing enduring features of character and personality.¹⁵ One of the foremost outcomes of these changes is to make us, the text's readers, better off. For this reason among others, the more direct route to Zhuangzi's views on well-being is by looking at the effect that his arguments (and the material that frames or illustrates them) are supposed to have on us. I would like to propose a three-part schema for understanding that effect.

Suppose that there are two mutually opposed perspectives or points of view, characterized not just by what one believes about certain things but also by how they appear to her, and suppose that different philosophical attitudes seem to be warranted by each.¹⁶ The first and most familiar perspective is *human*, and it is characterized by distinctions of value, epistemic confidence and value absolutism. From this perspective, some ways of life, practices and states of affairs appear to be clearly and decidedly better than others. We "know" with confidence that it is better, *ceteris paribus*, to be successful than a failure, that being alive is preferable to being dead, that cheating on tests is wrong, etc. Moreover, there are some things that are good for everyone, and good because they are grounded in facts that are true from all perspectives. And our sense of what's good focus largely on human society and social units, having to do with things like achievement in one's profession, civic duties, caring for family members.

Following Zhuangzi's metaphor, the second point of view is *heaven's*. To get an intuitive feel for this perspective it helps to think about how things would seem from a broad, perhaps panoramic view of the universe over the fullness of time, and how human value distinctions, pretenses to knowledge and absolutism must seem from that perspective. The further we stand back from it all, the more it looks absurd that people care so much about different ways of being and different outcomes of events, and it looks ridiculous when people draw grand conclusions on the basis of extremely limited personal experience and powers of perception.¹⁷ Additionally,

from this grander view one will become less attached to one's own values, and therefore more open to the possibility that values are relative to species and cultures.¹⁸

A couple of caveats about the heavenly point of view. First, my description of the heavenly point of view as “panoramic” is only a heuristic. There are ways of inducing the relevant philosophical attitudes that don't require stepping back from our time and place. For example, we can pick up skepticism by observing that we have no way of confirming whether we are dreaming or awake, or that we can't know something because we can't *know whether know* it (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2: 45 and 47-48). Second, if some of these attitudes were understood as philosophical doctrines or positions, they might well be logically inconsistent. For example, it might be that the sort of skepticism Zhuangzi has in mind should properly cast doubt on things like relativism and value equality as well. This need not be as troubling as one might think. As we will see shortly, the perspective of heaven is not meant as Zhuangzi's final position, and as mentioned at the outset of this section, Zhuangzi's philosophy is more therapeutic than doctrinal.

To summarize, from the human perspective epistemic confidence, value distinctions and absolutism seem warranted. From the perspective of heaven, skepticism, value equality and a certain kind of value relativism seem warranted.¹⁹ The great error that many readers of the *Zhuangzi* make is to recognize the philosophical appeal of the heavenly perspective and assume that it's the end of the matter, that Zhuangzi is just a skeptic, relativist or value equalitarian.²⁰ In point of fact, Zhuangzi thinks the two are to be combined in subtle ways, such that our thoughts, feelings and behaviors are moderated by the heavenly point of view even as we appreciate human obligations, purposes and concerns well enough to pursue them. Zhuangzi illustrates this combination in several different stories, often featuring people who outwardly conform to their inherited social customs but inwardly maintain a cool, dispassionate attitude toward them—the sorts of people who participate in mourning rituals but don't have feelings recognizable as grief or sorrow, or who strive to master some profession but do not truly care whether they succeed or fail (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 3: 52-53; ch. 6: 88-89; ch. 19: 205-06). On my reading of the text, this combination is also, in the final analysis, a way of seeing things, one that alters how things seem to us, and not just what to believe by virtue of being true. To mark this fact it would be useful to refer to it as “philosophical double-vision.” The *Zhuangzi* points to several different ways of justifying philosophical double-vision, but the justification that stands out most is simply that it is advantageous for those who adopt it, that it makes them better off. In the next section I will attempt to explain why this is so, in hopes of filling in the text's views about human welfare.²¹

2.2 The prudential benefits of philosophical double-vision

To get a more well-rounded sense of the advantages of combining the human and heavenly points of view, it might help to imagine someone with human goals but an ability to deploy heaven's point of view strategically, someone who aims to succeed in her career and live a long and healthy life, but sees no reason to think that success, health and self-preservation really are better than their alternatives. This imparts some obvious advantages and some less obvious ones. The most conspicuous is peace of mind, because it enables people to face

failure and death without the usual feelings of angst and regret. As skepticism is a crucial aid in achieving these goals, scholars have sometimes compared Zhuangzi's use of skepticism with that of the Pyrrhonian Skeptics, who offered systematic and methodological doubt as a means to freedom from anxiety or emotional disturbance (*ataraxia*).²² But as Paul Kjellberg has pointed out, of the many uses of skepticism depicted in the *Zhuangzi*, anxiety and emotional disturbance are sometimes the least of the author's concerns, and peace of mind is frequently a means to other ends. Often skepticism is used to treat smugness, lack of creativity, and the sorts of self-conscious, rational thinking that interfere with the effortless and skillful performance of demanding tasks.²³ In what follows I will briefly review these additional applications of double-vision.

One of the more consequential benefits in adopting both the heavenly and human points of view has to do with seeing things as belonging to a unified whole, at the very least in the sense of seeing them as belonging organically to a complete system, and probably also in a more mystical or metaphysical sense. In both of our Daoist texts, perceiving things as "one" or "whole" has a great array of benefits for the perceiver, from providing comfort to undermining the instinct to dig in our heels whenever we come across strong resistance from others (we are more effective when we work with the grain of others' deep-seated dispositions, rather than fight against them). But for a variety of reasons, striving too hard to see the wholeness of things is self-undermining; the more we strive, the more difficult it is to accept that things share a mutual identity, perhaps because it introduces a kind of adversarial, me-versus-world attitude (and perhaps for reasons more profound). Consequently, the only way to succeed at seeing things as whole is not to care about whether one succeeds at doing so, and for those purposes it helps the adopt the value-equalizing stance of heaven, while maintaining aims or goals, as humans do. The *Zhuangzi* illustrates this idea in one of its more memorable allegories.

[The phrase] "three in the morning" refers to the toiling of the spirit in an effort to illuminate things as one, without understanding that they are the same. What do I mean by "three in the morning"? When the monkey trainer was passing out chestnuts he said, "You get three in the morning and four at night." The monkeys were all angry. "Very well," he said, "you get four in the morning and three at night." The monkeys were all pleased. With no loss in name or substance, he made use of their joy and anger because he went along with them. So the sage uses rights and wrongs to harmonize people and rests them on Heaven's wheel. This is called walking two roads.²⁴

As one of the more suggestive and layered passages in the text, it would be difficult to unpack in short order. For our purposes what's most important is that the text urges us to make *strategic* use of the value-equalizing stance. By seeing all outcomes as the same in value—as though two different but ultimately equal distribution schemes—we become less concerned with our own success or failure, and ironically we become more likely to succeed.

Another major advantage of philosophical double-vision is that it meets a necessary condition for optimal performance of skillful activities. One of the most famous and influential ideas in the *Zhuangzi* is that there is a highly desirable way of performing one's

tasks called “nonaction” (*wúwéi*). Nonaction is in some respects like the highly skilled performance that people associate with being “in the zone” or what psychologists sometimes call flow-like activities, characterized by deep concentration and absorption in some challenging activity.²⁵ It also resonates with a great deal of current research in cognitive science on automatic, “frugal,” and usually implicit or non-conscious thinking that does most of the work of guiding us in activities for which we are well-trained (Slingerland 2014). But it adds a number of features that aren’t as consistently associated with these more familiar phenomena. The most striking is the sense that one is not fully or properly the agent of one’s skillful performance, that one is just allowing nature, heaven or the Way to run its course (Yearley 1996: 154-55, 173). Another characteristic of nonaction is the total absence of certain kinds of self-consciousness, which is expressed as ignoring or “forgetting” about the self-directed reasons or considerations for engaging in the activity in question.²⁶ Many of the *Zhuangzi*’s most vivid and memorable passages are extended descriptions of nonaction, depicting woodcarvers and a famous ceremonial butcher who can describe in moving language how they learned to master their craft.²⁷ A recurring lesson is that the greatest success in these crafts requires that we *not care* about whether or not we are successful, that we are more likely to perform optimally if we have little emotional investment in doing so.

Nonaction draws on both the heavenly and the human perspectives because it takes up essentially conventional human aims, yet allows us to see those aims as having no stakes worth worrying about. From the purely human point of view, one would typically see some point or purpose in having a job and performing it well, and one would *also* care about or have some emotional investment in doing so. But when the human point of view become just one lens in philosophical double-vision, the aim or point of doing well seems to be warranted but caring about it does not. Hence, the *Zhuangzi*’s exemplars of nonaction accept and, arguably, take some sort of pride in their work, even as they learn not to worry about it.

Another noteworthy advantage is that philosophical double-vision can elicit more creative thinking about use and usefulness. Many passages refer to cases where someone will encounter something that appears to be useless, such as an oversized gourd or trees too gnarled to use for timber. A sagacious character will then propose a different way of construing usefulness such that the supposedly useless things work to someone’s advantage. Oversized gourds, for example, could be turned into boats, and gnarled trees are useful, at minimum, to themselves, for their very uselessness to human beings makes them more likely to survive (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 1: 34-35; ch. 4: 63-67; ch. 20: 209-10). And this important means to (or perhaps constituent of) the human good typically draws on both heavenly and human philosophical attitudes—heavenly because one approaches conventional understanding of usefulness with deep skepticism, and human because something can’t be useful unless there is some purpose to which it is put.²⁸

In the *Zhuangzi*, our ability to cope with death is often presented as the ultimate test-case for philosophical double-vision, presenting us with the challenge of seeing some purpose or point in living while remaining indifferent to—or even embracing—the potential loss of one’s own life. The text abounds in interesting, strategic uses of heavenly

philosophical attitudes to help us overcome fear and anxiety about death. It proposes that the toil and stress that we invariably encounter makes living come at a net loss to our own welfare.²⁹ It suggests that we have no way of proving that we are currently awake and not dreaming, such that we could know that the things we value in life are real (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2: 47). It proposes that our usual notions of death may be based on too narrow a conception of personal identity, seen as an individual body and spirit rather than a larger whole or a continuous series (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 6: 88-89; ch. 18: 195-96). Two passages build on the quite plausible premise that we have no intrinsic or inherent claim to our own lives, or at least no claim that we could hold against the natural order of things.³⁰ One challenging dialogue casts doubt on the very reality of the passage of time (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 22: 245-46). And in the background is the ever-present idea that we have too limited a range of experience and too feeble an understanding to draw sound conclusions about the value of life and death (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2: 47-48). This recalls Zhuangzi's comparison of our circumstances to that of a morning mushroom making inferences about the character of a complete day, a skeptical treatment that I find even more potent when set alongside the barrage of challenges outlined here.³¹

2.3 A conception of well-being for skeptics

What might be most liberating about philosophical double-vision is that it frees us from measuring our own lives against fixed standards of the human good, thereby helping us to think more creatively about usefulness and sparing us a gratuitous source of discontent (great hand-wringing about whether one's life is going well adds nothing to a life that is, and too little to the life that isn't). Accordingly, the *Zhuangzi* recommends that we apply skepticism not just to outcomes and ways of being, but to conceptions of well-being themselves. By extension, it also urges skepticism about many theories of well-being, insofar as they lead us to a fixed conception. But this raises a puzzle: the text assumes that its readers are interested in being well-off; how can they go about pursuing this without knowing what would count as being well-off?

One answer is that Zhuangzi has a certain faith or confidence in our spontaneous, non-rational inclinations to lead us in the right direction. Among the many semantic uses of the Chinese character translated as "heaven" (*tiān* 天), one is to refer to a thing's spontaneous nature. A thing's spontaneous nature is often a more reliable mechanism than deliberate, self-conscious reasoning. One selection makes an example of the millipede, which is far more effective at walking when it relies on nonconscious, instinctual processes than it would be if it pondered every step of every foot (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 17: 183).

But this doesn't exhaust what Zhuangzi might say in defense of his skepticism. In some selections the author's doubts about the knowability of human welfare seem genuine. One of the most compelling selections is a short discourse at the beginning of chapter eighteen, "Perfect Happiness." Here the author distinguishes between three possible objects of knowledge: (1) the ultimate or ideal form of well-being, (2) whether the conventional or ordinary conception of well-being is true, and (3) whether the *means* by which people pursue their conceptions of well-being are actually conducive to it. The text

suggests that a radical skepticism is warranted for (1). It raises a number of basic questions about ideal conceptions that seem unanswerable—for example, questions about the limits of possibility (how happy could one be? How long might one live?) and about the things that an ideal welfare subject might find enjoyable or hateful (how could we know?). The author also maintains that skepticism of some kind is warranted for (2). In order to know whether ordinary conceptions are true, we would have to be able to know (1). Furthermore, most people take human welfare to be happiness obtained from things like comfort and fine clothes, and the author finds himself too indifferent to such things to determine whether the subjective state of happiness really does attach to them, as ordinary people claim (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 18: 190-91).

But the author adopts a more sanguine attitude about the possibility of knowing (3) whether people adopt the right means to achieve the goods that (they think) should make them happy. He describes the way people run themselves ragged to acquire more things than they can possibly enjoy, how they spend most of their lives in fear of losing those things. On my reading, the author is less skeptical about (3) because it has to pass a different sort of justificatory test: in the other cases, the question was whether we could ever know the true nature or entire substance of human well-being; but in (3), the question is whether ordinary people meet their own standards, whether the means they adopt pass or fail by their own lights: even if we stipulate that their conception of human well-being is correct, it is clear that they are not achieving it. Many of the ground-level goods that people expect to find happiness in are for the sake of one's own body and bodily desires, things like being comfortable, wearing fine clothes, eating rich foods and simply having the body in a living state. But what people do *in fact* fails to secure these goods, and fails for two reasons. First, and inexplicably, they go to great lengths to acquire goods that they "honor" rather than goods that enjoy, things like wealth, prestige, great longevity and moral recognition. Second, they care so much about acquiring these things that they never get to enjoy the bodily sources of happiness, running themselves to exhaustion and being constantly in fear of losing them. What they need is not just to have comfort and rich foods, but to enjoy them as well, and yet their labors and constant apprehension interferes with their enjoyment (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 18: 190). The author then contrasts conventional ways of promoting one's welfare with nonaction, and suggests that at least in the case of nonaction he can be confident that the happiness is genuine (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 18: 191). In short, the way that ordinary people promote their well-being fails by their own standards, while the Daoist way of promoting well-being succeeds by the same standard. This is, of course, only the beginning of an ambitious and stimulating project, but it is enough to see new paths to a different kind of theorizing about human welfare.

2.4 The *Zhuangzi* on theories of well-being

The multi-layered schema that I've described here doesn't lend itself to easy conclusions about the *Zhuangzi's* place in contemporary welfare theory. Consider: if we were to look simply at the sorts of lives that the text presents as good for those who live them, it would be tempting to say that they are most consistent with some variant of perfectionism. The exemplars of nonaction combine certain sophisticated attitudes (great humility and

equanimity) with consummate performances of a craft or skill (butchery, woodworking), all of which requires that they perfect certain faculties and aptitudes that seem fundamental to being human. I suspect that the substance of the *Zhuangzi's* picture of human well-being would overlap neatly (but not perfectly) with that of a pluralistic perfectionism, whereby each form of being well would require that the subject refine different core features of the human animal.³² But when the text begins to justify these ways of life, its justifications aren't always consistent with perfectionism. In many cases they are not even consistent with each other. So in one selection the *Zhuangzi* will recommend nonaction because it's the better way to experience genuine happiness, but elsewhere suggest that it is good by virtue of being a dispassionate expression of the grand Way, which seems not to express itself in terms of happiness. Quite often it proposes that Daoist ways of living are the best guarantee to a long life (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 11: 114), and yet, as we have seen, it also aims to disabuse us of the notion that staying alive is intrinsically or *ceteris paribus* better for someone than dying. Even if we saw a perfectionist argument for living in the Daoist way, we would be well advised not to take it too seriously.

Nevertheless, what appears to be a vice for some theoretical purposes is a great virtue for others. There are very few texts as rich in suggestive, potentially revolutionary arguments and ways of thinking about human well-being, and none so wide-ranging. The text is also distinctive in plunging into the treacherous epistemological waters of devising a conception—and perhaps theory—of well-being that could be justified in spite of the fact that we can't know which particular conceptions are true. And most importantly, at least for those philosophers who love wisdom, it offers arguments about well-being that aim to fundamentally transform the way we see and pursue it.³³

Bibliography

- Carr, K.L. and P.J. Ivanhoe (2010), *The Sense of Antirationalism: The Religious Thought of Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard*, revised edition, Createspace Independent Publishing.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York: Harper and Row.
- Fletcher, G. (2013) "A Fresh Start for the Object-List Theory of Well-Being," *Utilitas*, 25.2, 206-220.
- Graham, A.C. (1981) *Chuang Tzū: The Inner Chapters*, London: George Allen & Unwin.
- _____ (1989) *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, Chicago: Open Court.
- Hansen, C. (1983) "A Tao of Tao in Chuang-tzu," in V. Mair (ed.), *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, Honolulu: Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii, pp. 24-55.
- _____ (1992) *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____ (2003) "Guru or Skeptic? Relativistic Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*," in S. Cook (ed.), *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 128-62.
- Heathwood, C. (2006) "Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism," *Philosophical Studies* 28:539–563.
- Ivanhoe, P.J. (1996) "Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?" in P. Kjellberg and P.J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 196-214.
- _____ (2002) *The Daodejing of Laozi*, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- _____ (2011) "The Theme of Unselfconsciousness in the *Liezi*" in R. Littlejohn and J. Dippmann (eds.), *Riding the Wind with Liezi: New Essays on the Daoist Classic*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 127-50.
- Kjellberg, P. (1996) "Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi on 'Why Be Skeptical?'" in P. Kjellberg and P.J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 1-25.
- _____ (2001) "Zhuangzi," in P.J. Ivanhoe and B.W. Van Norden (eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Indianapolis: Hackett, pp. 207-53.
- Kohn, Livia. (1992) *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lau, D.C. (1989) *Tao Te Ching*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

- Nussbaum, M. (1994) *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Raphals, L. (1996) “Skeptical Strategies in the *Zhuangzi* and *Theaetetus*,” in P. Kjellberg and P.J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 26-49.
- Sima, T. (1999) “On the Six Lineages of Thought,” trans. H. Roth and S. Queen, in W.T. de Bary and I. Bloom (eds.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, volume 1, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 278-82.
- Slingerland, E. (2014) *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity*, New York: Random House.
- Sumner, L.W. (1996) *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wang, Bi 王弼 (1965) *Commentary on the True Classic of the Way and Virtue (Daode zhenjing zhu 道德真經注)*, Taipei: Yi wen yi yin shu guan.
- Watson, B. (1968) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yearley, L.H. “Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State,” in P. Kjellberg and P.J. Ivanhoe (eds.), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 152-82.
- Ziporyn, Brook (2001) *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, Indianapolis: Hackett.

¹ For my purposes, China’s classical period begins in 6th century BCE and ends in 221 BCE. The founders of most of China’s great philosophical traditions lived in this age, and it was also a time of great philosophical pluralism, sometimes called the “Hundred Schools Period” to mark this very fact.

² Lau 1989: 121-41. The earliest surviving work to characterize them as members of the “Daoist school” is an essay by Sima Tan (165-110 BCE) in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, which was published at least two centuries after the earliest fragments of the *Daodejing* (Sima 1999: 279).

³ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 4: 59-61. Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers refer to Burton Watson’s complete translation of the text (Watson 1968).

⁴ Any account of the Way is unavoidably controversial, but one prevalent account goes as follows: the Way is a cosmic force that can be seen in different ways depending on the stance that one adopts. When one sees it without desire, it is mysterious, ineffable, yet indivisible and always complete, such that there is nothing in the cosmos that is imperfect or stands in need of improvement. But when seen with desire it can be divided, and words will sometimes be necessary to understand it correctly (1, 37). Furthermore, as seen from the first stance it is like an underlying source or ground that makes the cosmos a unified whole; as seen from the second it is just the sum total of how things behave when they follow their own natural tendencies (25). This reading of the text’s comments on the *Dao* resembles A.C. Graham’s (1989: 219-23).

⁵ That is, ensure that the people do not learn to read and write.

⁶ Translation slightly modified from Ivanhoe (2002).

⁷ Other chapters that endorse pacifism include 30-31, 46 and 75.

⁸ Translation by Ivanhoe (2002).

⁹ Some chapters in the *Daodejing* recommend being without desires entirely (3, 34, 37, 57). Others suggest that we should limit the desires to a certain set of legitimate or natural ones (12, 19, 80). I suspect that there is some poetic license being used in the former set of chapters, but in any case the recommendation that we be entirely without desires is inconsistent with much of the rest of the book, including its vision of life in the primitive agrarian utopia.

¹⁰ There is at least one response available to defenders of the actualist, presentist interpretation: they could say that I have described the objects of the above desires wrongly. What I called a desire for refined music was actually a desire for more primitive music; it's just that it was wrongly interpreted. Meihua thought that she wanted refined music, but in fact she just wanted music that has a direct, raw appeal to her most cherished feelings. So when she hears the refined music her actual desire remains unsatisfied. Much of what I will say about the desire theory in subsequent paragraphs also tells against the revised version of the desire theory implied by this line of defense, but it is also worth noting one worry about it: it threatens to account for the desideratum in a circular manner, saying that listening to primitive music satisfies Meihua by virtue of the fact that she desires it, and that she desires it by virtue of the fact that it satisfies her.

¹¹ A more general but probably surmountable difficulty in attributing a desire theory to the *Daodejing* is the lack of common terms. It would be a mistake to move too quickly from conclusions drawn about desires in the *Daodejing* to theoretical treatments of desires in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Many contemporary debates about desires (but not all) presuppose a different, generally broader sense of "desire" than the equivalent terms in the *Daodejing* ("desire" is often a translation of *yù* 欲). In current and recent discussions of desire theories, there is a worry about desires whose objects of concern are far removed from personal experience, like the desire that a stranger be cured or that the sum of all atoms in the universe is a prime number (for a summary see Heathwood 2006: 542-43). If these are indeed desires, they aren't the sort that the authors of the *Daodejing* are concerned with. The two envision different sorts of conditions for the satisfaction of a desire. In the former desire would be satisfied so long as "So-and-so is cured of her illness" is true. For the desires under discussion in the *Daodejing*, the conditions for satisfaction have robust experiential dimensions. Perhaps the desire wouldn't be satisfied until the desirer is able to see enough evidence that the stranger's health is restored, or envision the many consequences of her recovery with some confidence that it's not just idle speculation.

¹² Other than ch. 80, the only chapters that mention happiness (*lè* 樂, also translated "joy" and "delight") are 23, 31 and 66. In chapter 23 it may be understood more metaphorically as describing the attitude of the Way and other abstract entities. In chapter 31 it describes the motives of those who enjoy killing.

¹³ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 1 (Watson 1968: 30). A better translation of this particular passage is in Kjellberg (2001: 209). See also ch. 17: 175-76.

¹⁴ For an excellent summary and analysis of Zhuangzi's uses of humor to alter non-rational cognition, see Carr and Ivanhoe (2000: 132-44).

¹⁵ Lisa Raphal's "Skeptical Strategies in the *Zhuangzi* and *Theaetetus*" exemplifies this view, arguing that Zhuangzi's skepticism (like Socrates' in the *Theaetetus*) is not a doctrine so much as a method and a recommendation (Raphal 1996).

¹⁶ It is one thing to believe a narrow, wooden suspension bridge is secure. It's another thing for it to *seem* secure. If I believe a bridge is secure without it appearing secure, it's a good bet that I'll feel my heart in my throat as I cross it. For the present purposes, a "point of view" is about how things seem and not (or not only) what we believe.

¹⁷ Sometimes the text describes the Way, not heaven, as having the point of view from which distinctions in value are collapsed (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 19: 179).

¹⁸ There are several senses of the contemporary term "relativism," some more significant than others. A passage in chapter two implies that values would be relative to species and cultures in roughly the same that the pronouns "this" and "that" are apt only relative to a speaker (what's "this arm" for me is "that arm" for you). See *Zhuangzi*, ch. 2: 39-40.

¹⁹ Chad Hansen has argued that what I'm calling "value equality" would be better described as the absence of any values or evaluation whatsoever (1992: 289-90). I find a good deal of evidence for both ways of framing the heavenly perspective, suggesting that *Zhuangzi* either did not make Hansen's distinction or saw them as different expressions or proximate characterizations of the same philosophical attitude.

²⁰ Hansen is one of the better-known defenders of the relativist reading of the *Zhuangzi*, which I take to be mistaken (1983, 2003). A useful way of framing his error is to say that he takes heaven's perspective to express *Zhuangzi*'s final position, neglecting the fact that *Zhuangzi* ultimately recommends a combination of both heavenly and human attitudes (see Ivanhoe 1996: 200-01).

²¹ It may be that there are still greater or more advantageous ways of seeing the world (for example, see *Zhuangzi*, ch. 6: 77). Once we move into this area of speculation, however, interpretations will quickly become vexed. Most any plausible interpretation will agree that some sort of double-vision is decidedly better for the person who has it than the purely heavenly or purely human points of view. Many will also agree that some form of double-vision survives in the better ways of seeing things. So it is both informative and ecumenical to focus on double-vision itself.

²² For a list see Kjellberg 1996: 23, n.10.

²³ Kjellberg 1996: 9-15.

²⁴ Watson 1968 (ch. 2: 41). Translation modified from Kjellberg (2001: 218). See also the translation and notes in Ziporyn (2009: 14).

²⁵ Csikszentmihalyi 1990.

²⁶ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 19: 126-27. For a richer and more complete account of the nature of Daoist unselfconsciousness, see Ivanhoe (2011).

²⁷ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 3: 50-51; ch. 13: 152-53; ch. 19: 205-06. See also *Zhuangzi*, ch. 19: 200.

²⁸ Edward Slingerland, using the language of contemporary cognitive scientists, calls this strategy "categorical flexibility" (2014: 139).

²⁹ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 18: 193-94. A slightly more charitable reading of the human point of view would hold that we mere humans see life as good *ceteris paribus*, or perhaps as having some value that can be outweighed by harms. In this case the "net loss" argument would be consistent with the human point of view, but perhaps it only describes what we *believe* about life and death, not how life and death *seem* to us. No matter what I may think about it, it often seems terrifying.

³⁰ *Zhuangzi*, ch. 6: 84-85; ch. 18: 192-93. This premise is plausible because the natural order, much like a boulder or a table, is not the sort of thing we can rightly make moral demands of. Honoring moral claims and principles of justice is the business of people, not of heaven, earth or the passage of time.

³¹ Of the arguments mentioned here, there is an interesting difference between the upshot of those that appear in the Inner Chapters (chapters 1-7) and those that appear in chapter 18, “Perfect Happiness.” Generally speaking, the former set of arguments lead to the conclusion that we have no reason to prefer either life *or* death, often because we can’t know which is better. For most of the arguments that appear in chapter 18, the natural conclusion is that being dead is actually better than (not just equal in value to) being alive. This difference might be evidence for the view that the Inner Chapters more accurately reflect the historical Zhuangzi’s core vision. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the arguments for preferring death in chapter 18 are meant to be strategic, or useful for some purposes and not others. I tend to read them as floating proposals or possibilities that merely cast doubt on (not refute) the assumption that life is better than death. The point isn’t to prove that life comes at a net loss, for example, but merely to raise the possibility or show that it’s a plausible interpretation of the evidence. This is more consistent with the skepticism of Zhuangzi’s core vision.

³² See Ivanhoe (1996) for a pluralistic reading of Zhuangzi’s ethics.

³³ My thanks to Richard Kim and Philip J. Ivanhoe for their expert feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.