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a this and a that: atheism and interpretation

It is no secret that Zhuangzi 莊子, as the purported author of the text *Zhuangzi*, is a slippery and tricky writer.[1] The text itself is filled to the brim with stories and dialogues that seem to lie on the edge between profundity and nonsense. On the surface, while Zhuangzi may seem to be a champion of skepticism and relativism, focusing on Zhuangzi's skepticism may be a red herring. In this paper, I argue that an exploration of the Zhuangzian idea of the transformation of things (物化, *wuhua*) in conjunction with the concept of the this/that dyad (是/彼, *shi*/*bi*) found within the text points us not towards philosophical skepticism but to questions of interpretation and representation. In other words, the text of *Zhuangzi* is not concerned with epistemology as such, but perhaps with questions along the lines of the relationship between signs, the signified, and the signifiers. Skepticism assumes something real that is underneath appearances. Zhuangzi is not asking if we could ever really know something in of itself *past* phenomenon, since that already presupposes a distinct bounded object that one could know. Finding a fixed thing with a fixed name is in fact a notion that Zhuangzi is attempting to dislodge. Rather, what appears to be the more salient question in *Zhuangzi* would be how to track the movement of names (名, *ming*) as they correspond to reality (實, *shi*) and things (物, *wu*). Following this, I gesture towards how his formulation of the transformation of all things point Zhuangzi in the direction of articulating an atheism more radical than the Nietzschean position of the death of God.

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[1] For the sake of this paper, as my aim is to see what type of philosophical meaning we can extricate from the text, I will assume that the *Zhuangzi* was composed by one author, Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (~369 - 286 BC), and thus forms a philosophically cohesive text. While there are very good philological and historical reasons not in favor of this assumption, I am more interested in this paper in trying to explore what the text as we have received it can do for us analytically. In this way, I will assume here a conflation of text and author.

Taking an analytic cue from Brook Ziporyn's reading of *Zhuangzi*,[2] I first chart a course through *Zhuangzi* that starts with "Qiwulun 齊物論," Chapter two of the Inner Chapters (內篇, *neipian*). In this chapter, we find a sustained discussion of both the this/that dyad as well as the transformation of all things. This philosophical discussion that displays Zhuangzi's ability to manipulate and handle debates of the more logical flavor comes right after the first mention of *dao* 道 in "Qiwulun," and I read this as concerned with the ways of knowing through *dao* as well as the knowability of *dao* itself.

> There is no thing that is not a 'that', and there is no thing that is not a 'this.' One cannot see [this point] if viewed from 'that'; only from [the perspective of] 'this' can this point be known. Thus, it is said: 'that' comes from 'this', and 'this' also follows 'that'. This is the theory of the simultaneous production of 'that/this.' But likewise, simultaneous production is simultaneous destruction, and simultaneous destruction is simultaneous production. To affirm means to not affirm, and to not affirm means to affirm. To follow what is right is to follow what is wrong, and to follow what is wrong is to follow what is right… 'this' is also 'that', 'that is also 'this'. 'that' is also a singular right-wrong, and 'this' is also a singular right-wrong. Thus, is there a 'this' and a 'that' or is there no 'this' and no 'that'? 'This' and 'that' are not each other's pair. This is what is called the course pivot.

> 物無非彼，物無非是。自彼則不見，自是[知]則知之。故曰：彼出於是，是亦因彼。彼是，方生之說也。雖然，方生方死，方死方生；方可方不可，方不可方可；因是因非，因非因是 …是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。果且有彼是乎哉？果且無彼是乎哉？彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞.[3]

This discussion of what constitutes a 'this' and a 'that' relies on a few clever puns present in the Chinese text that may not be apparent in the English. There are several pairs of opposites at play in this passage of *Zhuangzi*. The first is the *shi/bi* (是/彼) pair. Here translated as this/that, these two indexical words are utilized in the text in order to convey the possibility of a

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multiplicity of perspectives. 'This' could refer to any thing and any perspective, depending on who is speaking and what they are referring to. The same goes for 'that'. Depending on who is speaking, the phrases, 'this chair' and 'that chair' could refer to the same chair. But not only can 'this' and 'that' refer to the same thing, but having a 'this' automatically posits a corresponding 'that' since claiming a 'this' does not make sense without also having a 'that.' Zhuangzi claims "Thus, it is said: 'that' comes from 'this', and 'this' also follows 'that'." In other words, 'this' and 'that' are mutually constitutive, since if something were truly to make any sense as a 'this,' then it must also have a corresponding 'that.'[4] Furthermore, one only comes to the realization that 'this' and 'that' form a dyad from our own perspective, that is, from the perspective of the 'this,' and here, Zhuangzi is also pointing to the impossibility of viewing things and the world from a perspective other than one's own.

The second pair at play in this passage is the duo of *shi/fei* (是/非). Depending on context, these two words can be nouns that mean 'right' and 'wrong' respectively, but they are also words that can signify either affirmation (是) or negation (非) when used in logical statements and arguments.[5] By placing these two pairs together, Zhuangzi is drawing our attention to the conflation of 'this' perspective with our sense of what is right, since both of these senses are found in the word *shi* 是. That is, in my reading, Zhuangzi is intentionally not using *ci* 此, as the word for 'this,' instead opting for *shi* 是 as the main opposite of *bi* 彼 , in order to claim that one cannot say that the perspective of 'that' is right without subsuming it into the perspective of

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[4] A philosophically minded reader may notice the similarities that this discussion has with Hegel's discussion regarding the self-destruction of "this" and "that" that is presented in the "Consciousness," the first section of *Phenomenology of Spirit.* It is worth noting that although the final philosophical conclusions appear to differ, the similarities in starting points would appear to ask whether or not the specific transitions and movement of consciousness/Spirit in Hegel are the only transitions. However, a sustained exploration of those themes remains beyond the purview of this paper.

[5] See A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978).

'this.'[6] The pairing of 'this' and 'right' also allows Zhuangzi to view *shi/fei* as a dyad in a

manner similar to *shi/bi*; in fact, one could even understand the right and wrong dynamic as an

instance of the this and that relationship. However, if this is the case, then, as Zhuangzi writes,

"To follow what is right is to follow what is wrong, and to follow what is wrong is to follow

what is right." Right and wrong are also mutually constitutive, but I think after adding in the

layer of *shi/fei* to *shi/bi*, Zhuangzi is making a stronger claim about the relationship between

opposites. It is not just that 'this' and 'that,' 'right' and 'wrong' are simultaneously produced, but

"'that' is also a singular right-wrong pair, and 'this' is also a singular right-wrong pair." In other

words, within each perspective or position i.e. 'this' or 'that', there are two more positions i.e.

right or wrong. There is always a more atomistic element, but since right and wrong constitute

this and that, and this and that are constitutive of right and wrong, then the relationship of

constitution is circular, not linear. We will never reach the first element, and instead, following

this chain of relations leads us to see the interconnectedness of things. However, practically

speaking, if each 'this' and 'that' have their own right and wrong, then who is to say what is

truly right and truly wrong?

At this juncture, it seems that from this type of skepticism, Zhuangzi is merely positing

some form of extreme relativism; everyone has his or her own right and wrong, and there is no

standard by which to judge who is actually right and wrong. He writes, "Something is affirmed

because someone affirms it. Something is negated because someone negates it. Courses are

formed by someone walking them. Things are so by being called so. 可乎可，不可乎不可。道

行之而成，物謂之而然."[7] But the relativist jump from affirmation to right is one that Zhuangzi

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[6] There is an interesting critique leveled against the idea of objectivity here that is worth noting as well.
[7] Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries,* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), 13. HY: 4/2/33.

is not making. In my reading, this is a premature conclusion to draw on the basis of at least two reasons. First, Zhuangzi states, "Thus, is there a 'this' and a 'that' or is there no 'this' and no 'that'? 果且有彼是乎哉？果且無彼是乎哉？" as questions, as evidenced by the particle *zai* 哉. Strictly speaking, by positing his claim as a question, Zhuangzi is not taking a stance on what something is, but rather is calling into question the conceptual structures that we already have in place. The answer to his question above would be both yes and no; there is a 'this' and a 'that', but due to the structure of this/that, there also are not completely distinct and exclusive 'this'es and 'that's. Secondly, while it appears that Zhuangzi is merely making the claim that everyone has his or her own right and wrong without asserting that these perspectives are 'right' in terms of a universal value, he writes, "How have words become so obscured that they could have a right and a wrong? 言惡乎隱而有是非?"[8] In other words, Zhuangzi is challenging the notion of transcendental values, that something is right or wrong in of itself. Rather, he is positing that values are immanent and take on meaning when deployed in various contexts. *Shi* is opposed to *fei* in their mutual exclusivity, but this only appears within the pairing of *shifei*. Value is not inherent within any one position since "to follow what is right is to follow what is wrong, and to follow what is wrong is to follow what is right." In other words, there are no fixed rights or wrongs. In this way, as Zhuangzi claims, "'This' and 'that' are not each other's pair." Rather, if we think of *shi/bi* along with *shi/fei*, then we see why they are not each other's pair, but rather, what Zhuangzi terms as the course pivot (道樞, *daoshu*). In other words, we see why the movement of this and that, as well as their interpenetration, lead Zhuangzi to conceptualize something called the course pivot.

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[8] HY: 4/2/25.

In "Xiaoyaoyou 逍遙遊," Chapter 1 of the Inner Chapters, Zhuangzi says, "But suppose you were to chariot upon what is true to both Heaven and to earth, riding atop the back-and-forth of the six atmospheric breaths, so that your wandering could nowhere be brought to a halt. You would then be depending on – what? 若夫乘天地之正，而御六氣之辯，以遊無窮者，彼且惡乎待哉?"[9] Zhuangzi is responding to the story of Liezi 列子, who, rides upon the wind, seemingly free and unhindered. However, Liezi must still depend on something, once that power is exhausted, and is forced to return after fifteen days.[10] Liezi is still dependent on one thing - the wind - but here, Zhuangzi is suggesting an alternative to that paradigm. Sima Biao 司馬彪 sees the six atmospheric breaths (*liu qi*, 六氣) as light and darkness, wind and rain, and yin 陰 and yang 陽.[11] If one were to move upon dialectically opposed things – light and darkness, wind and rain, yin and yang - then "your wandering could nowhere be brought to a halt." In light of this, what does Zhuangzi mean when he says that ""this' and 'that' are not each other's pair. This is what is called the course pivot," and how does this create movement?[12] What is translated here as 'pair' is *ou* 偶. In the *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字, *ou* has the early meaning of 'plowshare partner.' That is, *ou* is the person with whom you push a plow. But plows move in straight lines, whereas a pivot moves in a circle. Thought in this way, the this/that dyad leads to self-perpetuating circular movement. Usually, *shi/fei* as a pair, work in the form of something akin to mathematical logic. Movement comes through refutation or affirmation of premises and principles. However, by locating *shi/fei* within *shi/bi* and vice versa, Zhuangzi is not only refuting the idea that 'this' and 'that', 'right' and 'wrong' as functioning as distinct pairs, but he

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[9] Ibid.,5. HY: 2/1/21.
[10] HY: 2/1/19 - 2/1/20.
[11] Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi,* 5. Footnote 11.
[12] One could conceivably appeal to the role and necessity of negativity for movement in a Hegelian dialectic to philosophically help us out here and to make some interesting comparisons, but here, I try to build up some Zhuangzian notion of this movement without recourse to Hegel.

is also positing that knowledge forms in the movement of a circle. In the same way, light and darkness and yin and yang are not exclusive pairings and categories, and thus, unlike Liezi, who still has to return after fifteen days of riding upon the wind, if one were to move upon what is true to both Heaven and Earth, on what would you depend? How would your power be exhausted?

Furthermore, the this/that dyad operates at every level of reality, not just as indexical terms or just as value statements. Since this/that and right/wrong are such basic and fundamental concepts, the words can be used to dictate and signify not only concrete objects that we use every day, but also the more abstract concepts that the *Zhuangzi* discusses such as life and death, being and non-being, and the list goes on. From this perspective, we can understand Zhuangzi's simultaneous mourning and celebration of his wife's death as a concrete example of this circular movement. In this story, Zhuangzi is squatting on the ground, drumming on a basin and singing, and Huizi 惠子, his rhetorical sparring partner, admonishes him for this unseemly behavior. Does Zhuangzi's wife not deserve better from him? Even us who are not thinking along the lines of Chinese ritual propriety would find this type of 'mourning' behavior strange. And yet, Zhuangzi says:

> When she first died, how could I alone not be grieving? But when I examined her beginnings, I found that originally there was no life. Not only was there no life, there also was no form, and not only was there no form, there wasn't any breath. In the mixing of vagueness and ambiguity, a change occurred and there was breath. Breath changed and there was form; form changed and there was life. Now, there occurred another change, and she is dead. In this way, she takes part in the movement of spring, autumn, winter, and summer.[13]

Instead of operating as a pair of opposites that constitutes a spectrum, life and death are two points in a cycle of changes. Regardless of if we read this as an actual claim regarding death or

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[13] HY: 46/18/16 – 48/18/18.

as an illustration of Zhuangzi's philosophical position, the point remains the same: just as death is not the end of life, but rather just another position in the circle, so too are any positive and negative concepts and claims. None of these things are fixed objects or concepts, which leads us to what is also at stake in these death stories: namely a discussion of the relationship between name (名, *ming*) and reality (實, *shi*).

In Chapter Six of the Inner Chapters, "Dazongshi 大宗師," there is a story of Yan Hui 顏回, one of Confucius' favorite students, asking Confucius 孔子 why Mengsun Cai 孟孫才, despite crying no tears and feeling no distress during the mourning rites, is known throughout the country of Lu 魯 as master mourner. In other words, Yan Hui asks, "How does one who does not have the reality, nevertheless possess the name? 無其實而得其名者乎?"[14] By asking this loaded question, aimed at a broader discussion regarding the relationship between names and reality, Yan Hui is taking up a classic Confucian position that claims that one's reality (實) should match one's social role (名) as dictated by the proper ritual. Arguably the most famous articulation of this principle is found in the *Analects* (論語, *lunyu*) 12.11: "A ruler rules; a minister ministers; a father fathers; a son sons[15] 君君，臣臣，父父，子子."[16] Here, there is the obvious play on the interchangeable nature of nouns and verbs in Classical Chinese, but this statement in the *Analects* speaks to a greater philosophical concern that names must correlate to reality in order to achieve both metaphysical and social coherence. In Yan Hui's view, Mengsun Cai, by not fulfilling the proper role of mourner, is not entitled to the name of mourner. At this point in the story, Confucius, conceivably taking up the role of expounding the Zhuangzian perspective of

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[14] HY: 18/6/76.
[15] For sake of parallel translation, 'sons' here means to act as a son.
[16] ICS Lunyu: 12.11/32/4.

the transformation of things (物化, *wuhua*), replies in a fashion similar to when Zhuangzi

explains his 'mourning' of his wife:

> Having transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next transformation into the unknown, nothing more. When he's in the process of transformation, what could he know about not transforming? When he's no longer transforming, what could he know about whatever transformations he's already been through?"[17]

Here then, we find Zhuangzi's challenge to the pairing of name and reality. If one is in

the process of transformation, then how can one's name and reality directly correlate? Returning

to the metaphor of the seasons in the previous death story can help us think through the process

of transformation. "When he's in the process of transformation, what could he know about not

transforming?" This means that when one is transforming, one is constantly transforming. When

is summer either not being birthed from spring or dying into autumn? Although we have

demarcated the seasons with boundaries and have named each period, in actuality, the reality of

the seasonal transformation does not correlate to their names. In other words, each season is not a

static entity that corresponds directly to the name of the season. Likewise, although it may be

tempting to track Zhuangzi's wife's transformation from nothing to breath to form and finally

life, if thought of in terms of the seasons, then the stages of becoming are not distinct bounded

periods. This is not to say that there are not differences between breath and form or winter and

spring, but we can note the differences between two things without being able to clearly

demarcate when one starts and the other ends. We know the difference between winter and

spring, but when is the definitive time that winter ends and spring starts? Where would we draw

the boundary? From the perspective of winter, the coming of spring is a mystery, but from the

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[17] Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 47. HY: 18/6/78 – 18/6/79.

perspective of spring, we might not know exactly when, but we do come to realize that winter has passed and the transformation into spring has come.

We see this dynamic of the transformation of things in the repeated metaphor of dreams and dreaming. In the above story, Confucius goes on to state, "You and I, conversely, are like dreamers who have not yet begun to awaken,"[18] an obvious resonance with the famous butterfly dream story at the end of Chapter 2 of *Zhuangzi*. In this story Zhuang Zhou 莊周, otherwise known as Zhuangzi, dreams that he is a butterfly, but knows nothing of the fact that he is Zhuangzi (Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamt that he was a butterfly, flitting around as a butterfly would. He did as he liked, knowing nothing of Zhou. Suddenly, he awoke, a startled Zhuangzi. 昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也).[19] However, when he awakes, he realizes that he is Zhuangzi, but "he did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly or if a butterfly was now dreaming that it was Zhou."[20] It is only after he had awakened that Zhuang Zhou recognizes that he was dreaming of being a butterfly. That is, it is only after the transformation or rather, in the midst of the process of transformation, that one recognizes the difference. Those who are 'dreamers who have not yet begun to awaken," i.e. those who cling to a fixed self, do not perceive the transformation of things. This does not mean that the awakened Zhuang Zhou is the holder of the true self, but merely that he recognizes his place within the process of transformation and is able to recognize the difference. The story is silent on whether or not the butterfly is cognizant of its previous transformations, but the blissful ignorance of the butterfly to think of itself as Zhuang Zhou dreaming seems to suggest the unknowability of the next transformation, as we saw in the story

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[18] Ibid., 47. HY: 18/6/79.
[19] HY: 7/2/95.
[20] Ibid., 21. HY: 7/2/94 – 7/2/96.

of Mengsun Cai: "Having transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next transformation into the unknown, nothing more."[21]

And yet, if "the becoming of things is like a galloping horse, transforming with each movement, altering at each moment,"[22] then do these 'spontaneous transformations' render it impossible for us to ever talk about anything? Indeed, this is what the River God (河伯, *hebo*) inquires – "In that case what value is there in the Course (道, *dao*)?" to which Ruo of the Northern Sea (北海若, *beihai ruo*) replies, "When you understand the Course, you will be able to see through to the way things fit together, and then you will certainly understand what is appropriate to each changing thing."[23] But as we saw in the brief discussion of the correlation between names and things earlier, 'fitting' together is not a matter of matching the proper name with the proper thing, as might be in the style of the School of Names (名家, *mingjia*) or of the Confucian tradition. Rather, Zhuangzi presents us with what he calls spillover-goblet words (卮言, *zhiyan*), which "giv[e] forth new meanings constantly, harmonizing them all through their Heavenly Transitions."[24] If names and things are constantly changing, if right follows from wrong and wrong follows from right, then, as Zhuangzi states, "…what words other than spillover-goblet words, harmonizing through their Heavenly Transitions, could remain in force for very long? All beings are seeds of one another, yielding back and forth their different forms, beginning and ending like a circle, so that no fixed groupings apply."[25] In language that resonates with the circular movement of the this/that dyad, Zhuangzi is positing an infinite re-interpretability of words in the form of spillover-goblet words. For him, it isn't about searching

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[21] Ibid., 47. HY: 18/6/78.
[22] Ibid., 72. HY: 44/17/46 – 44/17/47.
[23] Ibid., 72. HY: 44/17/47 - 44/17/48.
[24] Ibid., 114. HY: 75/27/1.
[25] Ibid.,115., HY: 75/27/9.

and matching up the 'proper' meaning and referent of the word. "But human speech is not just the blowing of air. Speakers speak, but what they say is peculiarly undetermined. So do they speak or has there never once been speaking? 夫言非吹也。言者有言，其所言者特未定也。果有言邪？其未嘗有言邪？"[26] For Zhuangzi, speaking and language are not about fixed meanings. If speaking is about a direct correlation between the sign and the signified, then never once has someone spoken, but people do in fact speak and create meaning. Thus, he tells us to track the movement of the meanings and significations as opposed excavating the meanings themselves or even the signifier. "It blows forth the ten thousand differences but also allows them to cease on their own. They take up both [their beginnings and their ending] on their own accord – who, then, is the rouser? 夫吹萬不同，而使其自[己][27]也，咸其自取，怒者其誰邪？"[28] Ceasing the search for the rouser here is key, since like the sounds of the wind, spillover-goblet words are self-filling and self-emptying. In other words, the production of meaning for spillover-goblets words is self-contained.

Here, we find that Zhuangzi's understanding of the conditions for words and their interpretability rests upon a metaphysical assumption with implications regarding theism. An apophatic reading of the *dao* is plausible from the text of the *Zhuangzi*, since the "man who truly knew the meaning of words,"[29] knows that one does not know how to answer questions concerning the *dao*. However, asking the question - "what identity can there be for the rouser? 怒者其誰邪？"[30] - is different from apophaticism, a position that might posit all words concerning the Absolute as fiction or lies, as never reaching or doing justice to the reality of a transcendent

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[26] HY: 4/3/23 – 4/3/24.
[27] This could be read either as 已 (*yi,* to cease or stop) or 己 (*ji,* self or oneself). Here, I read it as *ji* 己.
[28] Ibid.,10. HY: 3/2/9.
[29] Ibid., 85-86. This is found in the dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and Knowinghood found in Chapter 22, "Zhibeiyou 知北遊. " HY: 57/22/1 – 58/22/16.
[30] Ibid., 10. HY: 3/2/9.

absolute. If stated in a question form, the proposition still leaves the possibility open that there is no rouser, while an apophatic stance will still presuppose the position and slot of the transcendent absolute. From this, I argue that the immanent cycle of transformation outlined in *Zhuangzi* potentially points us towards a position of genuine philosophical atheism. In terms of atheism, what is essential to stress here is the fact that it is a-theist, as opposed to un-theist. To draw an analogy, strictly speaking, a-rationality is not the same as irrationality. Irrationality and rationality would fall into the same trap of the this/that dyad that Zhuangzi outlines for us in the text, and in the same way, the death of God still reifies the existence of God.

A contrast with Nietzsche may be helpful here to demonstrate the significance of Zhuangzi's claim. Despite his best efforts, Nietzsche still ends up positing and reifying the existence of some type of God. Through a brief comparison of Nietzsche's and Zhuangzi's theories of signs and interpretation, I posit that the fact that for Nietzsche, a sign requires an outside power to imprint a new value and new meaning upon it still implies and presupposes the existence of a transcendent Other. In this way, Nietzsche himself fails to move outside a theist system since a mover remains necessary, and the significance of Zhuangzi's position becomes clear. In other words, Nietzsche cannot sincerely ask the question: "Who, then, is the rouser?"

Nietzsche writes:

But every purpose and use is just a *sign* that the will to power has achieved mastery over something less powerful, and has impressed upon it its own idea of a use function; and the whole history of a 'thing', and organ, a tradition can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations, the causes of which need not be connected even amongst themselves, but rather sometimes just follow and replace one another at random. The 'development' of a thing, a tradition, an organ is therefore certainly not its *progressus* towards a goal, still less is it a logical *progressus,* taking the shortest route with least expenditure of energy and cost, - instead it is a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subjugation exacted on the thing, added to this the resistances encountered every time, the attempted transformations for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results,

too, of successful countermeasures. The form is fluid, the 'meaning' even more
so…[31]

Since Nietzsche claims that the will to power consists of "spontaneous, aggressive, expansive,

re-interpreting, re-directing and formative forces,"[32] one channels the will to power outwards in

the violent assertion of power over the external world. The then interpreted sign not only bears a

new meaning, but will also reveal the mark of the interpreter's will to power, becoming a part of

the strong person's being through this process. In other words, in order for transformation and

interpretation to take place, within Nietzsche's framework, one still needs an outside mover.

Even though Nietzsche famously allows for the conditions for the possibility of freedom in the

Western tradition, he remains trapped in implying a first cause or originary form.[33]

However, for Zhuangzi, "things die, are born, go round, go square, and no one know the

root of it."[34] Instead of Nietzsche's system of chaotic, accidental, and contingent metaphysical

view, Zhuangzi is postulating a metaphysical system in which "the bright is born from the dark,

and the determinable is born from the formless…all things generate and give form to one

another." What is at stake for Zhuangzi is the articulation of a self-sustaining system of

immanent transformations. Things are always in the process of spontaneous transformation.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi writes, "That which makes beings beings is not separated from beings by

any borders."[35] What this means is that we cannot conceive of a creator that is separate from its

creation, as Zhuangzi writes further, "'Something causes it' and 'nothing does it'--these are

attempted descriptions of the root, but actually they end and begin where beings do. The Course

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[31] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *'On the Genealogy of Morality' and Other Writings*, 3rd ed. trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)., 53.
[32] Ibid., 54.
[33] NB: Comment from Brook that I haven't figured out yet ["But I do think you need to give some attention to the difference between ONE external transcendent power and N's view of irreducibly MULTIPLE and uncoordinated external overpowerings. That is also a dimension of deep atheism: there is no single direction, plan, coherence."]
[34] Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 86. HY: 58/22/19.
[35] Ibid., 89. HY: 59/22/50 – 59/22/51.

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cannot be considered existent, nor can it be considered non-existent."[36] Guo Xiang (郭象, ca.

252 - 312 CE), annotates the end of "Qiwulun" by writing, "Only after you understand that the

forms form themselves can you understand what is meant by creation….Thus, creation is without

any lord or master and each being creates itself."[37] For Guo Xiang then, whose primary concern

is that of spontaneity or being self-so (自然, *ziran*). But as Zhuangzi writes, "You temporarily

get involved in something or other and proceed to call it 'myself' – but how can we know if what

we call 'self' has any 'self' to it?[38], it is important to note that by self-so, Guo Xiang is not

advocating for the idea of a fixed and continuous self. Self-so does not lead to an authentic or

true self. Rather, through the transformation of all things, Zhuangzi is putting forth is a system in

which within finitude itself, we find the potential for the infinite. Each being creates themselves,

but in the process of this transformation, there is no self to be found. Likewise, in this type of

Zhuangzian a-theism, it doesn't matter whether or not God exists; rather, things exist in of

themselves. If one were to posit that God exists or does not exist, then by the logic of the

this/that dyad, one could not hold an a-theistic position. If one were to claim that God does not

exist, then it would also be that God does exist and vice versa. One could even claim that this a-

theism is an unthinkable or unknowable position, which actually holds with the claim of the

Guanyinzi 關尹子: "It is not that the *dao* is unspeakable, unspeakability is the *dao;* it is not that

the *dao* is unthinkable, unthinkability is the *dao* 非有道不可言，不可言即道；非有道不可思,

不可思即道."[39]

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[36] Ibid., 111. HY: 75/23/79 – 75/23/80.
[37] Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 162.
[38] Ziporyn *Zhuangzi*, 48. HY: 18/6/80.
[39] *Guanyinzi* 關尹子, "Yiyu 一宇" from https://ctext.org/wenshi-zhenjing/yi-yu/zh .

Here, a potential key difference between a thinker like Zhuangzi and a thinker such as Nietzsche rests potentially on language.[40] In the history of Western philosophy, people have railed against the attempt to think beyond a subject-object paradigm. However, what we find in *Zhuangzi* is a dualism that is not really a strict dualism. That is, if his philosophical system is based upon the logic of the this/that paradigm, then he is potentially able to forego the *necessity* for positing an Other. Of course, the existence of words such as this/that signal to us that Zhuangzi is not pretending to not think in terms of what we might call a subject-object paradigm. Indeed, from a pragmatic standpoint, it would almost be ridiculous to not think in terms of making objects and distinctions in the world.[41] Rather, he is claiming that first, the border between this and that is what connects them, as opposed to being what separates them, and secondly, even if we go about our everyday life adhering to 'this' and 'that,' they are not necessary distinctions to maintain because 'this' and 'that' in fact do not directly correspond to and represent reality as such. The 'this'es and 'that's are never refuted and proven wrong. Rather, they are always in the process of transforming. The fact that they are empty concepts or spillover-goblet words that will fill up and empty themselves makes them productive for transformation. In this way, we see that Zhuangzi is not concerned with figuring out what something is truly, as much as understanding the process by which one thing is transformed or

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[40] Here, I don't mean to say that language dictates what can and cannot be said or thought, but I wanted to acknowledge the centrality of language to philosophical thinking. For example, we see that one of the difficulties that the later Heidegger finds with metaphysics is being trapped by the verb 'is' and the subject-object paradigm that he wrestles with in German, Greek, and other European languages.

[41] This idea potentially resonates with the Chan saying first formulated by Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信, later translated by D.T. Suzuki: "Before I had studied Zen (Chan) for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers. 前未參禪時、見山是山、見水是水、及至後夾親見知識、有箇入處、見山不是山、見水不是水、而今得箇體歇處、依然見山祇是 山、見水祇是水." Found in D. T. Suzuki (1926), *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 24.

interpreted, and perhaps what we should attend to then is how these words fit within a larger

pattern of coherence and transformation and their traces.