

Zhuangzi

Brook Ziporyn

University of Chicago, USA

The 33-chapter text known sometimes as *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and sometimes as *Nan-huazhenjing* 南華真經 has traditionally been taken to contain the teachings of an obscure ancient personage named Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (c. 369–286 BCE), who comes to be a key figure both in what is later called Daoist philosophy (*daojia* 道家) (see DAODEJING AND LAOZI) and in post-Han Daoist religion (*daojiao* 道教). Few modern scholars accept the attribution of this entire text to this man, and some doubt his existence or authorship entirely. This entry will treat the text as an anthology of loosely organized writings expressing a variety of positions relevant to the philosophy of religion, of which we will concentrate on three: (i) Views of Heaven and Dao, (ii) Spiritual Exercises and Mystical Experience, and (iii) Mortality.

Some of these writings (largely but not exclusively found in the first seven chapters, known as the “Inner Chapters”) present logical and skeptical arguments closely interwoven with a distinctive anti-foundationalist mysticism that eschews all metaphysical commitments (i.e. dismissing all claims about both the source and the telos of both natural things and human actions, but finding a transformative religious experience to result from this dismissal), an approach unattested in any other pre-Han Chinese text, though arguably having some heirs in later intellectual history in very different forms.

Others of these writings work through various foundationalist metaphysical ideas (positing a source and/or telos of natural things and human behavior) that became more common themes of later Daoist and other Chinese thought.

Borrowing a term from Lee Yearley (2010), we will call the imagined single author of all the writings in the first category “the Radical Zhuangzi” (wherever in the text they may be found) and that of those in the second “the Conventional Zhuangzi.” Both will be addressed here, since relatively coherent positions can be reconstructed for each of these constructed figures, each of which is philosophically interesting in its own right but which are also importantly different from each other. In addition, we will address a third Zhuangzi, the figure (real or fictional) who plays a key role in imperial Chinese intellectual history under the name Zhuangzi, the putative author of the entire 33-chapter text *Zhuangzi*, embracing both the “Radical Zhuangzi” and the “Conventional Zhuangzi” in a single vision.

The Radical Zhuangzi on Heaven and Dao

The Chinese word “Heaven” (*tian* 天) means, first and foremost, the literal sky above, but the term comes to have many denotations with many divergent implications in

early China. What is shared by all of these denotations is the sense of *what is not done by human will, what is beyond human power*, like the sky. In the political propaganda of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256), the term came to be used, possibly as an indirect metonym, to name the deity in charge of political fortunes, the sponsor of the Zhou overthrow of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046) in the eleventh century BCE, ostensibly because of the moral outrages of the Shang’s last emperors. Over the next millennium this deity Tian, Heaven, comes largely to replace the previously preferred official term for the morally interested controller of imperial politics, Shang Di 上帝, “the Lord on High.” The anthropomorphic character of this deity came to be gradually diluted among some intellectuals by the time of the Spring and Autumn period (771–476). Already Confucius (551–479; see CONFUCIANISM) remarks that he wishes to emulate Heaven in that it “does not speak” and yet is nevertheless instrumental in some way to the generation and growth of all natural things. The associations between the sky and the turning of the seasons, and thus with the birth and growth of plants and animals, are already coming to the fore in this demythologizing trend. At the same time, for Confucius, Heaven retains some vestigial sense of interested sponsorship of legitimate projects of political, social, and ethical reform, such as his own. The Confucian thinker Mencius (see MENCIOUS), about two centuries later, retains this ambiguity of the naturalistic and ethical associations of Heaven, linking these two senses by asserting that the spontaneous processes of growth seen in nature and the spontaneous sproutings of moral feelings in human beings are both due to the same power of Heaven, both emerging from something beyond deliberate human control but requiring human tending and nourishment to reach their fullest flourishing. Heaven may or may not control the external outcomes of events according to a moral arc (Mencius is ambiguous on this point), but it definitely makes moral interventions in the world via its activity at a very special part of that world, namely, the natural and spontaneous human constitution, and the actions that can, under the right conditions, be made to follow from that. His special solution to the problem of bridging the gap between the natural and the human, and the non-normative and the normative, is to locate the activity of this nonhuman agent right in the heart (literally) of human activity, as the spontaneity of generation and growth of certain (but not all) human sentiments, ultimately deriving from Heaven.

In this connection, Mencius himself offers an arresting definition: “When something is done though no one does it, that is [the work of] Heaven” (莫之為而為者, 天也, *Mencius* 5A6). He probably does not mean this literally, denying even a divine agent, but instead means simply that no specific *human* agent has intentionally done these things; they are instead done by another (possibly intentional) agent, Heaven. The historical Zhuang Zhou was a near contemporary of Mencius, and the Radical Zhuangzi presents a starkly contrasted but closely related vision of the role of Heaven. In a way, his starting point is to take *seriously and literally* this definition of Heaven voiced by Mencius, but perhaps already pervasive at the time. While Mencius probably meant that Heaven is the name of the nonhuman agent of whatever happens without human intervention, Heaven is for the Radical Zhuangzi just a name for what happens although done by *no* identifiable agent at all: it is a stand-in

space-filling word for real agentless spontaneity. What happens is not done by man and not done by someone or something else called “Heaven” either – and this absence of agent, human or divine, is now all that is referred to when the word “Heaven” is used, a situation that leads to many of the self-referential paradoxes and rhetorical indirections that are distinctive to the *Zhuangzi*.

Moreover, since no one agent is identifiable as Heaven, no specific acts are identifiable as more Heavenly than others. Mencius’s privileging of certain spontaneous events over others – i.e. the moral impulses belonging specifically to the organ of the human heart over the spontaneous functions of the other organs – falls away; it is their spontaneity as such, the lack of a discoverable agent, that is now the productive power of a “Heaven” that is no specific being – i.e. which has become a word for the absence of any specific being – and this is equally everywhere and nowhere.

The Radical Zhuangzi arrives at this conclusion through a philosophically intricate critique of the notion of *identifiability* as such, and with it agency as such, deploying the vocabulary of a nascent logical discourse that had begun to raise questions about the reliability of conventionally accepted judgments, distinctions, and attributions of meanings. In the Radical Zhuangzi these questions are turned towards an inquiry into the necessarily perspectival nature of determinate attributions of identity, and the way in which this necessarily leads to the self-undermining of any attribution of identity. To posit an identity is to make a distinction between what is that thing and what is not. Such distinctions are *actions* done in accordance with a *perspective*; but that perspective is itself something with an identity, posited as something opposed to other perspectives. Zhuangzi thus argues that *to posit a perspective is by definition also to posit alternate perspectives*. But alternate perspectives by definition make different distinctions, including the fundamental distinction between “this” (itself) and “that” (another perspective), which contradict the originally posited perspective and the originally posited distinctions of identity. So, to posit any given perspective is simultaneously to posit a contradictory perspective; to make an attribution of identity to anything is in the same act to posit a contradictory attribution of identity for it. The structure invoked here can be illustrated by considering certain common indexical words: to say “now” is to posit a contrast to “then” – but if “then” exists, it too must be a “now,” which in turn makes the original “now” a “then.” Similarly, to say “I” is to posit a contrast to “you,” but the existence of this “you” makes it also an “I,” for whom “I” am instead “you.” To say “here” is to posit “there,” which is itself a “here,” relative to which the original “here” becomes “there.” For the Radical Zhuangzi, the same sort of problem applies to any entity, physical or metaphysical, logical or empirical, abstract or concrete, as long as it is determinate, a “this” as opposed to a “that.”

It is for this reason that what is not done by man is no longer seen as something done by someone or something else; rather, any attempt to identify an agent necessarily posits alternate perspectives which make it also not-that-agent. Hence our own actions, and the events of the natural world, cannot be attributed to any definite agent at all, nor even definitively to a lack of agency, which, as some particular state contrasted to what it is not, likewise falls prey to this critique of identifiability. For the Radical Zhuangzi, then, nonhuman (e.g. divine) agency falls away with

the same stroke as human agency. Chapter 2, ground zero of the Radical Zhuangzi, begins with the loss of the agent or “true ruler” that is sought behind natural events (i.e. Heaven) and also the one sought behind all the wildly varying human responses to events, in the form of human emotions, actions, and discourse (i.e. the human self). This “true controller” is in both cases sought and never found, for as soon as anything is identified to fit the bill, its identity, as the product of a perspective that necessarily posits alternate perspectives that undermine it, is shown to undermine itself. Both the search for an identity behind shifting appearances and its failure are necessary rather than contingent: there is manifestly something “other” lurking in all experiences, some noncoincidence with themselves, some slipperiness and instability, which is then mistaken for a pointer to a transcendent other entity that is fully coincident with itself, unslippery, and stable: Heaven or the Self. To dispel this illusion of Heaven and Self, first it is noted that the identity of the producer of all identifiable could by hypothesis have no specific identity of its own; if it did it would not be the producer of all identities. (Obviously nothing like the theological category of *causa sui* is seriously considered as a solution to this worry.) As such, even if it must exist, it cannot have a specific identity, and it is not clear how something without an identity is any different from no one and nothing. But by the same token, no one and nothing is indistinguishable from a something which is unidentifiable: the meaning of “nothing” is no different from “something we can’t in any way identify.” A definite absence of Heaven and Self is also disallowed. The existence of either the divine or the human agent, Heaven or Self, would be no different from its nonexistence: everything would proceed just the same with or without it. It cannot be a something or a nothing, neither a definite presence nor a definite absence. It should be noted that this applies not only to the *source* of events, but also to their *outcomes*, and thus also to their *meanings*. There is neither any identifiable source and meaning of things, nor a definite lack of source and meaning.

This built-in confusion pertaining to something identified as having no identity, a Mobius-strip of something that is nothing and nothing that is something, is then seen, via logical inquiry as described above, to pertain to the nature of identity as such, whether of a source (Heaven or Self) or of a product (natural events or personal experiences and actions): to have an identity is never to definitely have that identity, for an identity relies on an attribution of a perspective, and a perspective is always also the positing of alternate perspectives. Every producing source produces another perspective that now serves as its own defining source, and, because these products (specific experiences) are seen to have a different meaning and a different identity depending on their source and outcome, this undermines the definite identity even of the products of this source. We cannot distinguish what we call “Heaven” being a product of man from “man” being a product of Heaven, for positing either alternative immediately equally establishes the other. This model is expressed most elegantly in the famous butterfly dream story that ends chapter 2 of the text: Zhuangzi dreams he is a butterfly, but then wakes up and wonders whether what he is experiencing now, his identity as Zhuangzi the erstwhile dreamer of the butterfly, is not just a dream the butterfly he just dreamed is dreaming. There is no way to tell. As soon as he dreams

he is a butterfly, it becomes equally likely that Zhuangzi, the source of the dreamt butterfly, is the dream of the butterfly, making the butterfly the source of the dreamt Zhuangzi. Here we have again the same structure we saw in the indexicals: “now” is necessarily distinguished from “then,” but this positing of “then” makes the original “now” equally a “then.” By being source distinguished from product, dreamer as opposed to dream, Zhuangzi becomes indistinguishable from product, from dream; by being product, the dreamt, the butterfly becomes indistinguishable from source, the dreamer. The identity of both is undermined in that each is itself only in contradistinction to the other, but in positing the other, the other’s perspective is also posited, from which oneself is the dreamt illusion. This makes which is the real self behind which necessarily unknowable. There must be a distinction between them, and equally there must be a confusion about which is the source of which, which is also a confusion about which reduces to which, about which is the true identity expressed deceptively as the other. This is what Zhuangzi sees in the relation of all things to what they are distinguished from, and in all their transformations into one another.

What emerges from these considerations is a mystical agnosticism, a convergence of something similar to a reverent negative theology with what in isolation would be a nihilistic skepticism. In the indistinguishability of these seemingly opposite positions we find the starting point of the Radical Zhuangzi’s distinctive philosophy of religion. This typically takes the form of a three-step procedure. First, we show the necessity of distinctions for any attribution of identity. Then we raise questions about the validity of accepted distinctions, in light of their necessary self-undermining, and like some of the logicians, seeing all distinctions to be insupportable, we posit instead an undifferentiated oneness of all things. But then, in the final step, this oneness too falls prey to the same critique: the distinction between “oneness” and “non-oneness” does not survive this perspectival logic any better. In this way neither the original distinctions nor the second lack of distinctions can stand; but this inescapable paradox is not considered an objection or refutation suggesting a dead-end, but a positive result: the insupportability of the One, or indeed of *any* one, any particular identity, brings on the beatific state described in terms of *forgetting* 忘 and *transformation* 化, or, put another way, “*doubt*” 疑 and “*drift*” 滑. Forgetting or doubt is the undermining of the distinctions that would establish certainty about any identity or lack of any identity. Transformation or drift is the affirmation of inevitable otherness pressing through any putative identity, as each posits an unlimited array of possible alternate identities from and to which it transforms. Forgetting or doubt is the apprehension of the possibility that the present identity is already any one of those alternate identities right here and now, because it could be an expression or aspect of any of them. As in the butterfly dream, each moment is a waking up to the question of whether this present is or is not the dreamer of all the pasts and future identities as its own present dreams, and whether past dreamt identities are not the real identity behind this presently dreamt identity. Thus we arrive at the *unobstructed transformation among all perspectives*, and thus the warranting of all possible distinctions, an infinite array of all possible distinctions as made from all possible mutually

positing perspectives, constantly transforming into one another. The transformation is “unobstructed” because it is not simply a change from one certain state to another different but equally certain state; rather the different states might have been what the changed-from state actually was all along, the dreamer of its dream. This is the Zhuangzian three-step: from the setting up of conventional distinctions to the questioning of these distinctions and the positing of oneness, from oneness to forgetting and the resurrection of all distinctions in their open transformation into each other.

This fecund instability is now experienced as the very productive power formerly attributed to “Heaven,” and still sometimes indicated in that way, although now always with a subsequent erasure or ironic backing-away. The Radical Zhuangzi sometimes replaces “Heaven” with “Fate” 命, traditionally the ungainsayable power that makes things go as they do, but now this is explicitly presented as a word used when no agent at all can be found, including Heaven (chapter 6, end). These events are not attributed to any single source, not given any single meaning, not done by any single agent, not reducible to any single principle. For this reason too, as we’ll see below, a whole host of terms are offered as alternates for Heaven and for Fate, from the most anthropomorphic to the least – the Creator of Things 造物者, Creation-Transformation 造化, the Great Clump 大塊, Yin and Yang 陰陽 – but most famously the term *Dao* 道. This term, as used by the Radical Zhuangzi as in the Daodejing (see DAOISM), is an ironic reversal of the prior meanings of this term that fits perfectly this discovery of the interchangeability of absolute skepticism and mystical insight, of absolute presence and absolute absence. *Dao* originally means “road,” and had long been used in the slightly extended sense of a method or means, a course of cultivation or procedure for attaining a particular end – for example, the “way” of benevolence and righteousness, the “way” of sagely kingship, the “way” of archery, even the way of Heaven (e.g. its rotation and alternation of the seasons, producing agricultural growth). A *dao* is literally what makes things happen, what gets one to a prespecified result, to whatever things one is looking for, to whatever things one is defining as important, as real things and real goods in the relevant sense. The Radical Zhuangzi however speaks of “a *dao* that is not a *dao*” 不道之道 (chapter 2) – i.e. a way of making things happen which is no particular way, done by no particular agent, embracing no particular vision of what goals count as legitimate outcomes, done without either oneself or anyone else, human or divine, knowing how or why. We may call this, paradoxically, a perfect atheism reaching a convergence with a thorough mystical vision of beatifically meaningless fecundity, not only exuberantly productive of objects but also of values, of viewpoints, of perspectives, of meanings, of frameworks for alternately defining how objects are to be divided and classed and identified and valued. The Radical Zhuangzi disallows even the possibility of a definite identity for the source and outcome of things and actions and perspectives, either as Heaven as in religious thinking or a definite denial of the same, which would amount to a definite nothingness as source and outcome, as in run-of-the-mill atheism, or of a straightforward pluralism where linear causality attributes in each case single causes for single

effects, since neither an individual concrete cause nor a universal cause can have a definite identity that doesn't ipso facto make it also the bearer of equally likely contrary identities. This means that no single meaning or identity can be attributed to any event or set of events, that inexhaustible transformation of identities and values is immanent to existence. And yet this does not lead to nihilistic despair but rather to a new opening up to the world that exceeds that originally sought by connection with Heaven or definite "way" in its earlier sense; now it is "way" as such, interconnection and openness in all directions, between every position and every other position. That is what the Radical Zhuangzi means by Dao.

Spiritual exercises and mystical experience in the Radical Zhuangzi

In a few places in the text, we find descriptions of what might be classed as apophatic spiritual practices (see APOPHATIC AND KATAPHATIC THEOLOGY). These do not involve any detailed descriptions of yogic postures or visualizations, but rather a progressive clearing away of the mind's preconceptions, its rigid adherence to a particular fixed perspective and its judgments about what is so and what is right. Here again we see the convergence of skepticism and mysticism. These states and practices are described with such terms as "me losing myself" 吾喪我, "the fasting of the heart and mind" 心齋, "dropping away the torso and limbs, chasing out acuity of hearing and vision, departing from the body and getting rid of the understanding, becoming the same as the great (transforming) openness, [which is] called sitting and forgetting" 墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大(化)通，此謂坐忘, "forgetting morality, ritual, music" 忘仁義禮樂, "ousting past and present, the world, all things" 外古今，外世，外物. The resulting state is described as "an emptiness that awaits the presence of things" 虛而待物, "using the mind like a mirror, responding but not storing" 用心若鏡，應而不藏, "harmonizing with all rights and wrongs, with every 'this' and every 'that,' while resting in the center of the Potter's Wheel of Heaven" 和之以是非而休乎天鈞, "this and that no longer matching as opposites, [which is called] the axis of Dao, which when it finds the center of any circle responds without limit, with a limitless supply of rights and a limitless supply of wrongs" 彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞。樞始得其環中，以應無窮。是亦一無窮，非亦一無窮也, "the numinous reservoir that can be poured into without ever filling and can be dipped out from without ever being exhausted never knowing where from" 此之謂天府。注焉而不滿，酌焉而不竭，而不知其所由來 "identity with Great (or 'Transforming') Openness" 同乎大(化)通, "the breakthrough of dawn" 朝徹, "seeing whatever appears as the one and only" 見獨, "fully embodying the infinite and wandering without identifiability" 體盡無窮，而遊無朕, "the tumultuous tranquility" 撻寧, and so on. These all seem to point to the application of the above skeptical insights about identifiability of things and selves, maintaining a state which accepts no conclusions and attributes no particular single source and no particular single telos or meaning to any experience, reconnecting with the drift and

doubt, the transforming and forgetting, the interconnecting upsurge of ever new events and ever new responses coming from no definite source and directed to no single long-term goal. For both explanations through efficient causes and through final causes, both sources and meanings, require some term with a definite identity (i.e. the efficient or final cause itself), the possibility of which this Zhuangzi has rejected.

As the mirror metaphor would suggest, the emptying of preconceptions is itself here seen as a way of enhancing the sensitivity and responsiveness of the mind, allowing it to adapt to the ever-shifting micro-demands of each emergent perspective in such a way that both protects one from damage and also allows the various perspectives to transform freely into one another without obstruction. This is symbolized dramatically in the famous story that opens chapter 3, which tells of a butcher whose knife passes through the open channels that form the grains of an ox's body. The edge of the knife (the Zhuangzian person) has "no thickness" – lacks any definite identifiability, has "lost itself" – and its placement into the ox allows for an altered experience of the ox: no longer a clump of solid identifiable obstructions to be slashed through, but rather at every point showing empty passageways – non-identities – through which the knife can pass. This both preserves the knife from wear and tear, and also forms channels that clear a way, a *dao*, a "path" through the ox of the world, transforming it and opening it out to the further transformation and interconnection with the world (e.g. becoming food for delectation, consumption, digestion, energy, other animals' action). The unexpectedly zigzagging and branching course through the ox is a *dao*, but a *dao* which is not a *dao*, i.e. which cannot be surveyed in advance as a fixed set of roadways to guide the knife. For the "*Dao* that is not a *dao*" in Zhuangzi's new sense is an unobstructed openness that also implies unforeseeable transformation and connection, not only between things but also between perspectives on things. At the touch of the knife (the present perspective), each path transforms into other paths, each identity into other identities, unfolding unexpected twists and turns into new *daos*, for at each position of the knife (i.e. in each perspective) their identity and network of connections transforms. The knife has to get to each juncture to detect which way to go, and it is its presence there that opens up that new and unforeseen way to go, which from the perspective of a moment ago, when the knife had not yet reached this new position and its perspective, may have looked entirely impassable and obstructed, with no *dao* (opening, channel, path) available, and which may be again closed up from the perspective of a moment from now, when the knife has departed. The ox (the world) is transformed by the knife, the conclusionless all-responsive Zhuangzian person using his mind as a mirror, making unexpected channels through its stagnant, blocked preconceived form, and this idea is extended to suggest that such an empty identityless person, although bringing no identifiably positive content to the table, offering no moral instructions or theoretical conclusions, somehow transforms others and even, perhaps, the sociopolitical environment. Again, all this follows from the intrinsic instability of identities, including the identities of identity-positing perspectives, the seeming paralyzing nihilistic skepticism of which

is turned instead into a vivid and beatific attunement to the transformation of oneself and of all things constituted by both the embrace and the bracketing of all distinctions.

Mortality

For the Radical Zhuangzi, death too is approached in terms of this thorough agnosticism and its attendant transforming openness, in the treatment of which we see again the Zhuangzian three-step. In chapter 6, we are told of four friends who have undermined the certainty of the fixed distinction between “life” and “death,” who have noted that the inseparability of these paired terms destabilizes the simple identity of each. The first approach to this is “oneness”: they see life and death as “a single string, a single body,” which as a totality is itself neither life nor death, with prebirth nothingness as the head, life as the spine, death as the backside. One of these friends suddenly takes ill and is on the verge of death. He explores this oneness in terms of a oneness of *agent*, in vaguely deistic terms: he says, in effect, “the Creator of Things made me a human for a while, the spine of the organism, and now will bring another transformation; I can’t know what that will be into any more than I can know what I was before I was transformed into this human.” Significantly, this does not mean he was or will remain a single entity before or after life. The head, nonexistence of a particularly stipulated being – this human being, the spine – was the existence of *many* others, as will be its death, the backside: “Maybe he’ll make my arm into this, my leg into that, my soul into another thing, my buttocks into another ...” In any case, there is nothing to complain about: he accepts the unevadable action of Heaven in both life and death.

Here the unknowability of identity is diluted through temporal distribution: he knows that he’s alive as a human now, no problem, but that is the spine of one body endowed with unknown multitudes of other identities as its many heads and backsides. This begs the question about whether he can correctly know his real identity even now, since he is part of this unknowable body, but at this stage the question goes unasked and something resembling a straightforward submission to providence in death is arrived at. But then another friend gets sick and speaks again of this oneness and its unfathomable course, no longer so deistically but equally piously: not “the Creator of Things,” but “Creation-transformation” and then casually switches to less unified and anthropomorphic names for this agent of all transformation, such as “the yin and the yang” and “the Great Clump,” which now do the same duty as the remover of the conventional distinction between life and death: like a great smelter, the process of Creation-transformation makes us now into one thing, now into another, or many others, and we neither know nor need to know where from or where to – “where could it send me that would not be OK?” A trusting attitude is here suggested towards the instability of the universe, which still oddly resembles the attitude of a pious theist, as if rooted in the deistic conviction that the universe is governed by a benevolent providence which arranges all for the good, but actually resting on an affirmation of the value of all that is necessarily

connected to that which we ourselves, from our perspective, happen to regard as good (i.e. our own life, with its own biased perspective that identifies itself as life, and as good): “What makes me see my life as good is what makes me see my death as good.”

But that is only the beginning of the three-step. In the next story we have three friends who no longer speak of oneness at all. Now we are told instead that the friends *forget* the oneness: they participate with each other “without participating with each other” (i.e. without awareness of it, not positing any “one body” of which their divergent identities are all parts), taking action for each other “without taking action for each other” (i.e. without positing any single shared purpose). We are no longer referred either to one agent or to one body or to one meaning of all things and all stages. There is no longer any universal overview, even of the whole, or even the whole as seen from the present perspective. All that is left is endlessness of transformation and mutual forgetting, not only of each other but also of our oneness with each other in some larger identity or project.

Finally, in a third story, we are told of a man who treats death simply as transformation and forgetting, without any knowledge about what makes him live or die (so no more talk of a Creator or a process or smelter or even an undifferentiated Great Clump), without any oneness, without any assertion of some uncognized or non-deliberate mutual participation, without any speculation of what comes before or after, but now also without any certain knowledge of who or what he is even at present: just in the course of any transformation, he simply drops away all that came before and after, but with it vanishes also his certainty of his present identity. He now makes no judgments even about what he is presently, whether he is alive or dead, spine or head or backside. Of his state we are told, “We 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? You dream you are a bird and find yourself soaring in the heavens, you dream you are a fish and find yourself submerged in the depths. I cannot even know if the person speaking right now is dreaming or awake.” He cannot jump out of his skin to a before or after, or to a foundation or cause, or to an outcome or meaning, and that means that he can’t really even know what he is right now, whether later events will show him to have been something else entirely, someone else’s dream. The oneness with contrary states now undermines even the definitive identity of the putative parts, and with it the possibility of subsuming the identity of any part into any definite “oneness” or even of a definitive “infinity of transformation and mutual participation in non-participation.” This pure agnosticism is then what the oneness and fecundity of Heaven have amounted to. Hence we are told, in the same chapter, that for such people “the oneness is one, but the non-oneness is also one.”

The dream imagery used in this passage hearkens again back to Zhuangzi’s famous “butterfly dream,” already mentioned, which makes the same point. Zhuangzi cannot know whether he is now being dreamed by the butterfly he just dreamed he was, or vice versa. If Zhuangzi is the butterfly’s dream, then even this moment of being Zhuangzi is really one more aspect of butterfly, one more part of the experience of

being a butterfly; Zhuangzi is an aspect of the identity of the butterfly. If the butterfly is Zhuangzi's dream, then even when it is fluttering around it is really a part of Zhuangzi's experience, a part of what it is to be Zhuangzi. The mere positing of the alternate contrasting perspectives makes it impossible also to be simply one identity or the other in any definitively knowable way, even for a moment. And yet they do not collapse into a oneness: there must be a distinction between them, even to have this unknowing of what they are, of which they are, for without the distinction there can be no question of "which"? All identities are both preserved and abolished in the unobstructed mutual transformation of their unidentifiability, what the text calls "the radiance of drift and doubt" 滑疑之耀.

The Conventional Zhuangzi

Such is the Radical Zhuangzi. But viewing the 33-chapter anthology as a whole, we find the Conventional Zhuangzi, the foundationalist, occupying a lion's share of the text. Here the second step of the Zhuangzian three-step tends to dominate: the undermining of conventional distinctions and the prioritization of oneness, though this also involves the constant transformation of forms within or through the force of this oneness. It is still sometimes called Dao, but now sometimes also *qi* 氣, or vital energy, which forms a continuity of transforming forms, veering between conventionally distinguished opposites of solid beings and empty spaces, formlessness and form, beautiful and ugly, life and death. The Conventional Zhuangzi also posits an inborn nature (*xing* 性) present in individual things, something unmentioned in the Radical Zhuangzi, which is originally bestowed by Heaven or Dao or original quintessential *qi*. This inborn nature is the presence in the individual of the undivided Dao, not yet split by conventional distinctions of moral virtues and moral turpitude, or hedonic pleasures as against undesired experiences; it is the unhewn original issue of the undifferentiated Dao. This dimension of the innate is sometimes also described as a basic inborn "virtuosity" (or virtue, *de* 德 – a term used in the Radical Zhuangzi only to mean the efficacious interconnective power of the radiance of drift and doubt but without any definite relation to an original endowment which would link it to a specific source like Dao or Heaven). A reconnection to this state of original undifferentiated transforming power in its individualized form is now the goal of some of the apophatic practices already described, which free us of the adventitious conventional distinctions that had hitherto obstructed its free virtuosic function. (This is easily confused with, but should be sharply distinguished from, the prominent use of the term *xing* in Mencius, who regards this inborn nature as the spontaneous impulses of human moral feeling.) Forgetting, the third step for the Radical Zhuangzi, is here often narrowed in its application to a forgetting of the distinctions imposed on the original undivided *xing* or *de*, rather than, as in the Radical Zhuangzi, also including the forgetting of the undifferentiated generative prenatal oneness itself, forgetting Dao, forgetting Heaven, or forgetting the distinction between Heaven and Human, natural and artificial, spontaneous and deliberate. This allows for a

linkage to more conventional uses of Dao in a foundationalist sense, as it comes to be understood in later Chinese thought, i.e. as a cosmic source, course, even stuff of all things (easily confused with more strictly metaphysical or material notions of an absolute entity which is the source or creator of all things in other traditions), or the unilateral valorization of naturalness, spontaneity, nondifferentiation in preference to artificiality and distinctions, and deliberate cultural and social distinctions. Apophatic practices and experiences of the sort already described, eliminating preconceptions and conclusions, are in this context interpreted as a return to, and preservation of, this original state of pristine quintessential *qi*, or undistorted *de*, or the inborn *xing*. This is sometimes associated with highly enhanced artistic and technical skills of various kinds, fostering a seemingly miraculous virtuosity, and at other times with a primitive, precultural lifestyle that eschews both socially esteemed moral endeavors and socially despised hedonistic luxury (e.g. in chapters 8–10).

But in still other parts, the Conventional Zhuangzi adds another twist, recombining the two sides so distinguished into an alternative synthesis. Here a stable relation between the spontaneous and the deliberate, between the undifferentiated and the differentiated, is seen as a way of ensuring the better organization and function of the deliberate and differentiated human realm itself, including its social and political aspects (especially in chapters 11–16 and 33).

The *Zhuangzi* text of course contains far more than this simplified summary can present. In its pages we also find advice on politics, social critique, satires of Confucius and other thinkers of the time, critiques of language and speculative metaphysical constructions, adventurous cosmological speculations of its own, abstruse jokes and surrealistic flights of fancy, and much more.

The Cultural Zhuangzi

Reading the *Zhuangzi* as a single integrated 33-chapter text, as something written by a single author, Zhuang Zhou, was the dominant style of interpretation through two millennia of China's imperial history. In terms of cultural importance, this "Zhuangzi" has had greater impact than the two virtual figures we distinguish above on text-historical and philosophical grounds, making inferences about separate authorial sources. The Cultural Zhuangzi apparently sees no contradiction between the Radical and the Conventional Zhuangzis. Either the Radical Zhuangzi sets the stage to allow for the various applications to practical and political life, and even the foundationalist speculations, of the Conventional Zhuangzi (all perspectives are after all now allowable, so why not these?), or vice versa (the radical skepticism is a temporary therapy to remove conventional distinctions and return to original oneness and spontaneity; the rejections of the original oneness are just rhetorical flourishes). In either case, the Cultural Zhuangzi sees that either manner of expression can lead directly into the other manner of expression, from either side, showing the unobstructed interconnection and transformation of these

two viewpoints – a point which would be easily embraced by either the Radical Zhuangzi or the Conventional Zhuangzi, though for different reasons.

See also: APOPHATIC AND KATAPHATIC THEOLOGY; CONFUCIANISM; DAODEJING AND LAOZI; DAOISM; MENCIOUS

REFERENCE

Yearley, Lee. 2010. “The Perfected Person in the Radical Zhuangzi.” In *Experimental Essays on Zhuangzi*, edited by Victor Mair, 126–136. Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press.

FURTHER READING

- Chai, David. 2018. *Zhuangzi and the Becoming of Nothingness*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cook, Scott, ed. 2003. *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Coutinho, Steve. 2013. *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*. New York: Columbia.
- Hansen, Chad. 2000. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J., and Paul Kjellberg, eds. 1996. *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ma, Lin, and Jaap van Brakel. 2019. *Beyond the Troubled Water of Shifei: From Disputation to Walking Two Roads in the Zhuangzi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mair, Victor, ed. 1983. *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2011. *Ironies of Oneness and Difference*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2013. *Beyond Oneness and Difference*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ziporyn, Brook, trans. 2020. *The Complete Zhuangzi*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publications.