

Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: *Daoism II*

Zhuangzi



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
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Summary

I. *Zhuangzi*

- Zhuangzi the Person
- The Text
- Concepts

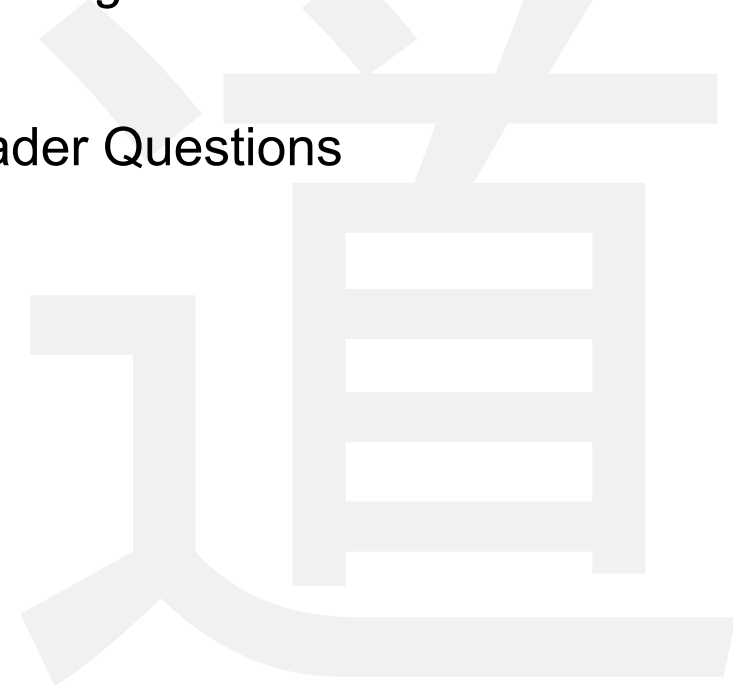
II. Discussion on Selected Extracts

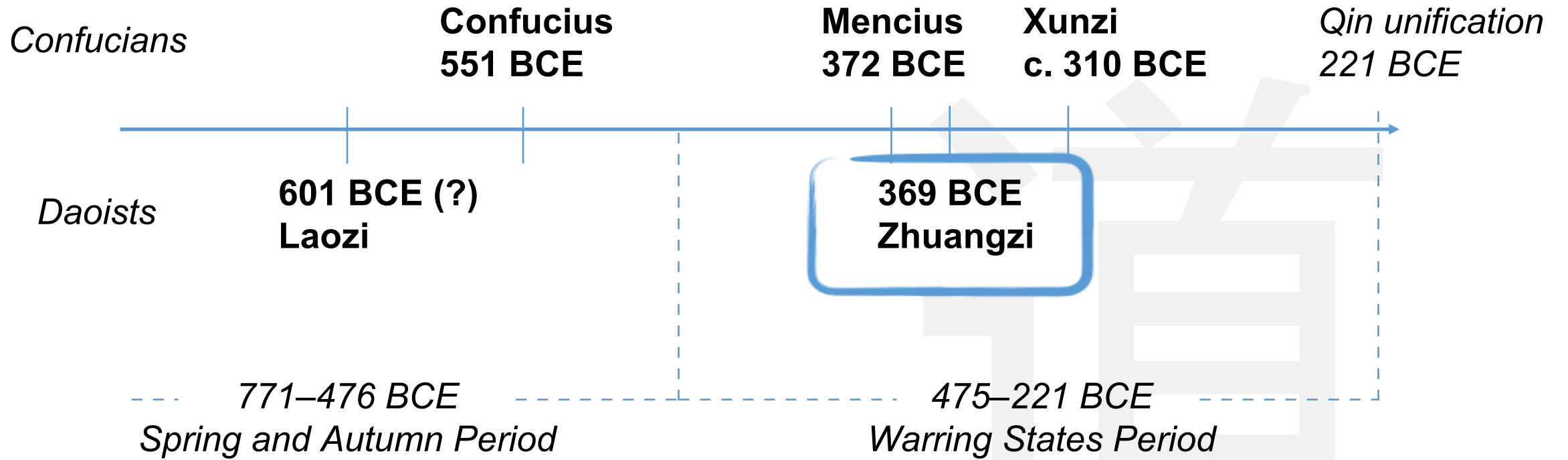
- *Zhuangzi*

III. Daoism vs Confucianism

- *Zhuangzi* contra the Confucians

IV. Broader Questions







What Is It to Be Human *and* Natural?

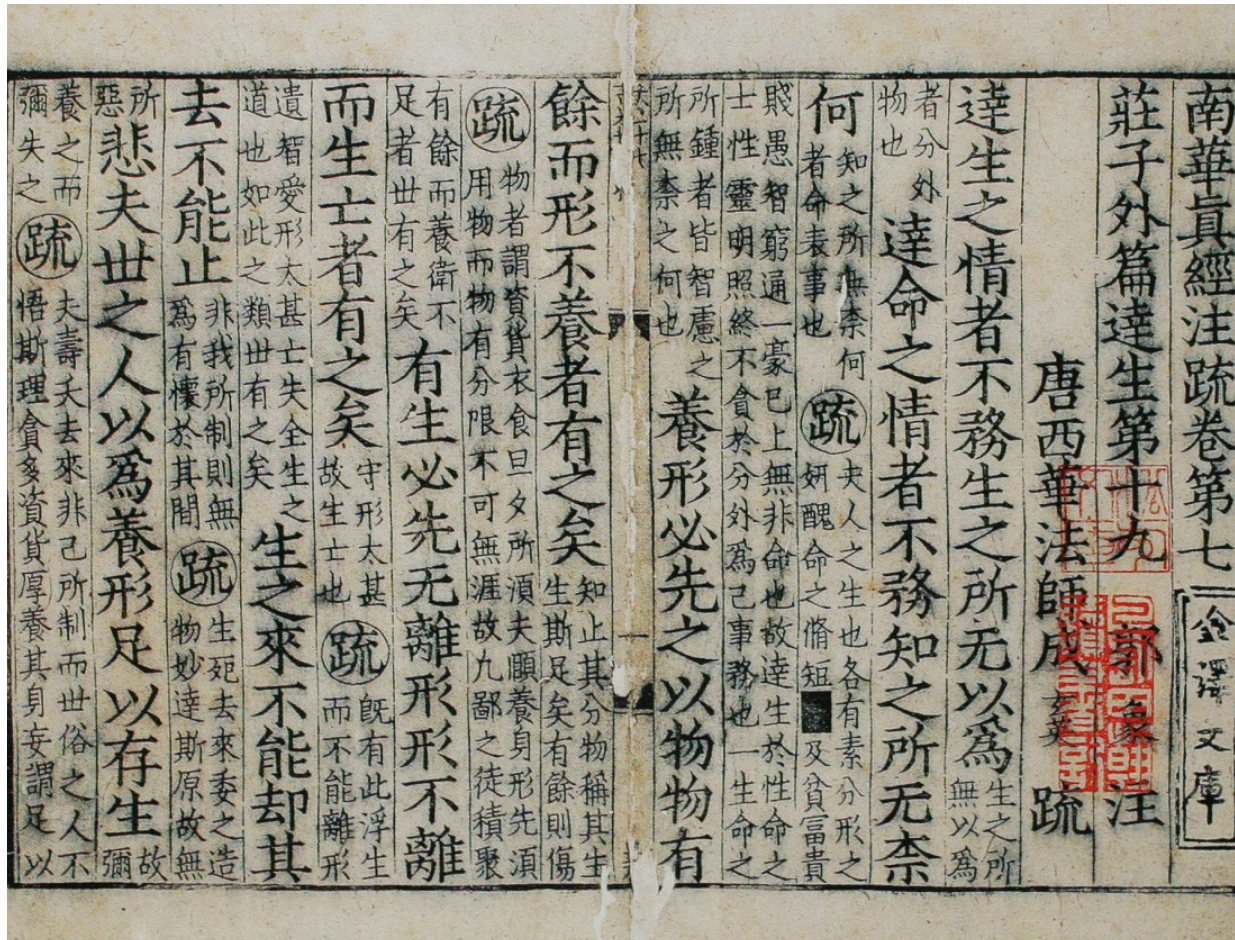




ink on silk [cropped], “Zhuangzi Dreaming of a Butterfly,” by Lu Zhi¹

Zhuangzi the Person

- Zhuang Zhou (莊周), c.369–c.286 BCE
 - contemporary of Mencius
- Song official who abandoned his post for a private life
- Possible tenure at Jixia Academy
- Text portrays him as an eccentric individual
 - Declined returning to office, when approached
 - Best friends with Hui Shi
 - “When Hui Shi died, Zhuangzi ceased to talk, perceiving that there was no one else with whom he could converse.” (*Huainanzi* 19.7)



The Zhuangzi

- Traditional canon established by neo-Daoist Guo Xiang (252–313 CE) post-Han Dynasty
- Modern scholarship only attributes Inner Chapters to the “author”
- Other chapters have been attributed to
 - Later Zhuangist followers, Huang-Lao School, Anarchists, Primitivists, Syncretists, Yangists, etc.
- Comprised of 33 chapters
 - Inner Chapters (Chs. 1–7); Outer Chapters (Chs. 8–22); Miscellaneous Chapters (Chs. 23–33)
- Readership not clearly rulers or ministers
- Parodies, anecdotes, pseudo-history, poetry

opening pages [cropped] of “Da Sheng,” Volume (19th volume) of Zhuangzi printed in Song dynasty²



Key Concepts from the *Zhuangzi*

(1) Transformation

(2) *Wuwei* [2.0]

(3) Emptiness

道



(1) Transformation

- There is a fish in the Northern Oblivion named Kun, and this Kun is quite huge, spanning who knows how many thousands of miles. He **transforms** into a bird named Peng, and this Peng has quite a back on him, stretching who knows how many thousands of miles. When he rouses himself and soars into the air, his wings are like clouds draped across the heavens. The oceans start to churn, and this bird begins his journey toward the Southern Oblivion. The Southern Oblivion—that is the Pool of Heaven. (*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 1 “Wandering Far and Unfettered”)
- Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities! **Such is what we call the transformation of one thing into another.** (Ch. 2 “Equalizing Assessment of Things”)



(1) Transformation

- Yan Hui went to question Confucius. “When his mother died, Mengsun Cai wailed but shed no tears, unsaddened in the depths of his heart, observing the mourning but without real sorrow. Lacking tears, inner sadness, and real grief, he nonetheless gained a reputation throughout Lu as an exemplary mourner. Is it really possible to have a reputation that is utterly at odds with reality? I have always found it very strange.”

Confucius said, “Mengsun Cai has gone to the very end of this matter, beyond merely understanding it. For when you try to simplify things for yourself but find it impossible to do so, things have already been simplified for you. **This Mr. Mengsun understands nothing about why he lives or why he dies. His ignorance applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next transformation into the unknown, nothing more. And when he’s in the process of transforming, 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?** You and I, conversely, are dreamers who have not yet begun to awaken. As for him, his physical form may meet with shocks but this does not harm his heartmind. His life is to him but a morning’s lodging, so he does no real dying. This Mr. Mengsun alone has awakened. Others cry, so he cries too. And that is the only reason he does so.



(1) Transformation

“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? 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 what I’m saying now is a dream or not. An upsurge of pleasure does not reach the smile it inspires; a burst of laughter does not reach the jest that evoked it. **But when you rest securely in your place in the sequence, however things are arranged, and yet separate each passing transformation from the rest, then you enter into the clear oneness of Heaven.**” (Ch. 6 “The Great Source as Teacher”)





(1) Transformation

- Perspectival relativism
 - Peng and Kun
 - Cicada and Fledgling Dove
 - Mingling and Pengzu
 - Song Rongzi and Liezi
 - Consummate Person, Spirit Man, Sage
- Flexibility of perspectives in relation to
 - a. Various inter-human perspectives
 - b. The human perspective as such
 - c. Perspectives as such





(2) *Wuwei 2.0*

- The cook was carving up an ox for King Hui of Liang. Wherever his hand smacked it, wherever his shoulder leaned into it, wherever his foot braced it, wherever his knee pressed it, the thwacking tones of flesh falling from bone would echo, the knife would whiz through with its resonant thwing, each stroke ringing out the perfect note, attuned to the “Dance of the Mulberry Grove” or the “Jingshou Chorus” of the ancient sage-kings.

The king said, “Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!”

The cook put down his knife and said, “What I love is the Course, something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. **But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven’s unwrought perforations and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay.** So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices.



(2) *Wuwei* 2.0

An ordinary cook changes his blade one a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years.

“Nonetheless, **whenever I come to a clustered tangle, realizing that it is difficult to do anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt.** My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then all at once, I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground. I retract the blade and stand there gazing at my work arrayed all around me, dawdling over it with satisfaction. Then I wipe off the blade and put it away.”

The king said, “Wonderful! From hearing the cook’s words I have learned how to nourish life!” (Ch. 3 “The Primacy of Nourishing Life”)



(2) *Wuwei* 2.0

- When Confucius was traveling through the forests of Chu, he came upon a hunchback who was catching cicadas with a glue-tipped stick as if plucking them up with his hand. Confucius said, “How skillful you are! Or do you have a course?”

The old man said, “I have a course. For five or six months, I practiced piling one pellet on top of another. When I could make a stack of two without it toppling over, already I would lose only very few cicadas. When I could make a stack of three, I could catch nine out of ten. By the time I was able to balance a stack of five, I could catch the cicadas as if plucking them up with my hand. **I settle my body like a twisted old stump, holding my arm still like the branch of a withered tree. Although heaven and earth are vast and the ten thousand things numerous, I am aware of nothing but cicada wings. Motionless, neither turning nor leaning, I would not trade away a single cicada wing for all of creation. How could I fail to catch them, no matter what I do?**”

Confucius turned to his disciples and said, “**Using his will undividedly, the spiritual in him converges and solidifies**—such would perhaps be a description of this hunchbacked gentleman here!” (Ch. 19 “Fathoming Life”)



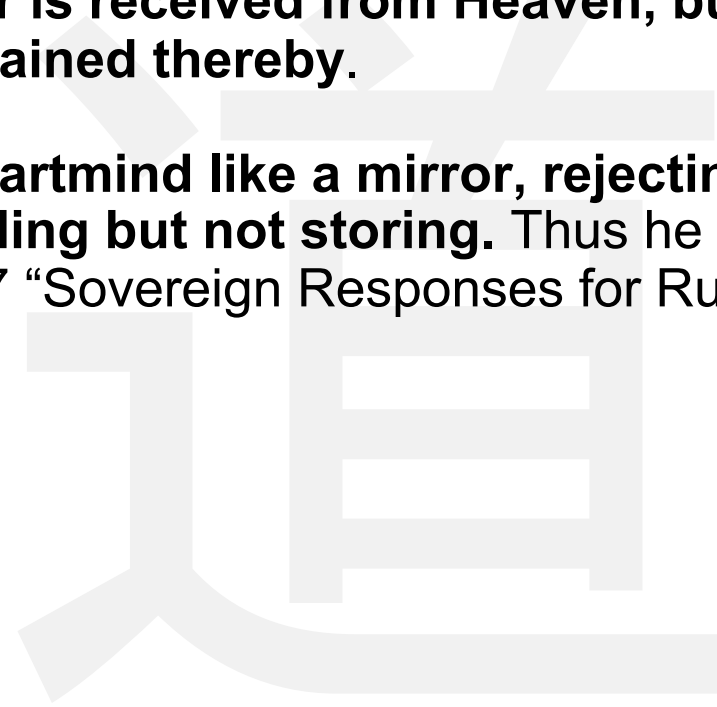
(2) *Wuwei* 2.0

- **Not doing, not being [wuwei]** a corpse presiding over your good name;
Not doing, not being [wuwei] a repository of plans and schemes;
Not doing, not being [wuwei] the one in charge of what has to happen;
Not doing, not being ruled by your own understanding;

In this way, **wholeheartedly embody the endlessness and roam where there is no sign, fully realize whatever is received from Heaven, but without thinking anything has been gained thereby.**

It is just being empty, nothing more.

The Consummate Person **uses his heartmind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing: responding but not storing.** Thus he can overcome all things without harm. (Ch. 7 “Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers”)





(2) *Wuwei* 2.0

- Non-action [*wuwei* 無爲]
 - Two possible disambiguations:
 - a. Those who seek learning gain every day / those who seek the Way lose every day / they lose and they lose / until they find nothing to do [*wuwei*] / nothing to do [*wuwei*] means nothing not done (Ch. 48)
 - Literal not-doing-anything
 - b. Higher Virtue is not virtuous / thus it possesses virtue / Lower Virtue is not without virtue thus it possesses no virtue / Higher Virtue lacks effort / and the thought of effort / [Lower Virtue is not without effort / and the thought of effort] (Ch. 38)
 - Special kind of doing
 - Without deliberation or intention, or being consciously guided by some normative standard
- Natural action
 - Precursors in the *Analects* (17.9) and the *Mencius* (5A6)



(2) *Wuwei* 2.0

- A third possible disambiguation of *wuwei* vis-à-vis the *Daodejing*:
 - c. “The Grand Marshal had in his employ an old man of eighty who was still forging harness buckles without the slightest error. The Grand Marshal asked him, ‘Are you just skillful, or do you have the Course?’ He said, ‘I have that which I hold to. Since the age of twenty I took a delight only in making harness buckles. From then on I neglected all other things, noticing nothing besides harness buckles.’
Thus, what one can make real use of depends on what one has no use for; usefulness grows from having no use for certain things. How much more is this the case for that which makes use of all things! What being fails to find support in it?” (Ch. 22 “Knowinghood Journeyed North”)
 - A doing with a special phenomenology
 - Psychological ‘flow’



(3) Emptiness

- **Now I will try some words here about “this.” But I don’t know if it belongs in the same category as “this” or not. For belonging in a category and not belonging in that category themselves form a single category! Being similar is so similar to being dissimilar! So there is finally no way to keep it different from “that.”**

Nevertheless, let me try to say it. There is a beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-a-beginning. There is existence. There is nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-nonexistence. Suddenly there is nonexistence. But I do not yet know whether “the existence of nonexistence” is ultimately existence or nonexistence.

Now I have said something. But I do not-yet know: has what I have said really said anything? Or has it not really said anything?

Nothing in the world is larger than the tip of a hair in autumn, and Mt. Tai is small. No one lives longer than a dead child, and old Pengzu died an early death. Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one.



(3) Emptiness

But if we are all one, can there be any words? But since I have already declared that we are “one,” can there be no words? The one and the word are already two, the two and the original unnamed one are three. Going on like this, even a skilled chronicler could not keep up with it, not to mention a lesser man. So even moving from nonexistence to existence we already arrive at three—how much more when we move from existence to existence! **Rather than moving from anywhere to anywhere, then, let us just go by the rightness of whatever is before us as the present “this.”** (Ch. 2 “Equalizing Assessment of Things”)





(3) Emptiness

- Yan Hui said, “I am making progress.”
Confucius said, “What do you mean?”
Yan Hui said, “I have forgotten Humanity and Responsibility.”
Confucius said, “That’s good, but you’re still not there.”
Another day he came again and said, “I am making progress.”
“What do you mean?”
“I have forgotten ritual and music.”
Confucius said, “That’s good, but you’re still not there.”
He returned another day and said yet again, “I am making progress.”
“What do you mean?”
Yan Hui said, “I just sit and forget.”
Confucius, jolted as if kicked, said, “What do you mean, you sit and forget?”
Yan Hui said, **“It’s a dropping away of my limbs and torso, a chasing off of my sensory acuity, which disperses my physical form and ousts my understanding until I am the same as the Transforming Openness.** This is what I call just sitting and forgetting.”
Confucius said, “The same as it? But then you are free of all preference! Transforming? But then you are free of all constancy! You truly are a worthy man! I beg to be accepted as your disciple.” (Ch. 6 “The Great Source as Teacher”)



(3) Emptiness

- Confucius said, "... even if your Virtuosity were ample, reliable, and firm, and you engaged in no contention for the sake of a good name, unless you somehow attained perfect comprehension of his heartmind and disposition, your high-handed display of regulating words about Humanity and Responsibility in the face of such a tyrant would just be a way of showing off your beauty at the expense of his ugliness. ...

"On the other hand, if you just agree with everything anyone says, the princes of the state will surely take advantage of you in their jostlings with one another. ..."

Yan Hui said, "I have nothing more. What then should I do?"

Confucius said, "You must fast! Let me tell you. To have something in mind and then go out and do that thing—do you think this is a simple matter? Majestic Heaven does not accommodate those who look on this as easy."

Yan Hui said, "My family is poor, and I have had no wine or meat for many months. Can this be considered fasting?"

Confucius said, "That's the fasting you do for a religious sacrifice. It is not the fasting of the heartmind."

Yan Hui said, "What is the fasting of the heartmind?"



(3) Emptiness

Confucius said, “If you merge all your intentions into a singularity, you will come to hear with the mind rather than with the ears. Further, you will come to hear with the vital energy rather than with the heartmind. For the ears are halted at what they hear. The heartmind is halted at whatever verifies its preconceptions.

But the vital energy is an emptiness, a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the heartmind.”

Yan Hui said, “Before I find what moves me into activity, it is myself that is full and real. **But as soon as I find what moves me, it turns out that ‘myself’ has never begun to exist. Is that what you mean by being ‘empty’?**”

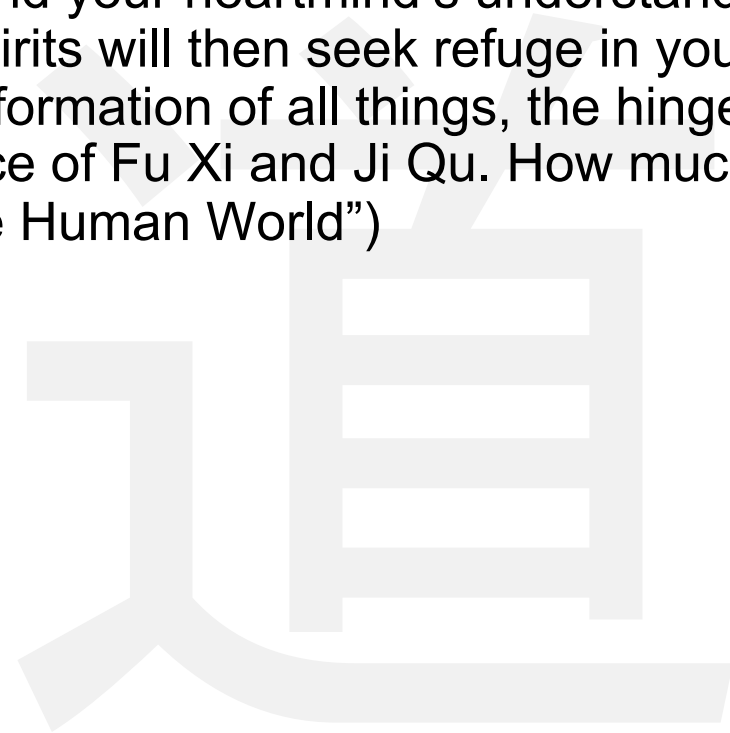
Confucius said, “Exactly. Let me tell you about it. With this you can play in his cage without impinging on his concern for a good name. When he’s receptive, do your crowing, but when he’s not, let it rest. Do not let him get to you, but do not harm him either. Seeing all possible dwelling places as one, let yourself be lodged in whichever cannot be avoided. This will get you close to success. It is easy to wipe away your footprints, but difficult to walk without touching the ground. It is easy to use deception when you are sent into your activities at the behest of other humans, but difficult to use deception when sent into activity by Heaven. You have learned how to fly with wings, but not yet how to fly without wings. You have learned the wisdom of being wise, but not yet the wisdom of being free of wisdom.



(3) Emptiness

Concentrate on the hollows of what is before you, and the empty chamber within you will generate its own brightness.

“Good fortune comes to roost in stillness. To lack this stillness is called scurrying around even when sitting down. Allow your ears and eyes to open inward and thereby place yourself beyond your heartmind’s understanding consciousness. Even the ghosts and spirits will then seek refuge in you, human beings all the more so! This is the transformation of all things, the hinge on which Shun and Yu moved, the lifelong practice of Fu Xi and Ji Qu. How much more should it be so for others!” (Ch. 4 “In the Human World”)





(3) Emptiness

- Emptiness [xu 虚]
 - Language (Chs. 27, 33)
 - a. Elsewhere [yu 寓] words,
 - b. Weighty/authoritative [zhong 重] words,
 - c. Tipping-vessel [zhi 卮] words
 - Action
 - *Wuwei* [2.0]
 - Existence
 - Flux of identity:
 - a. Flexibility across perspectives
 - b. Role
 - c. Kind of entities
- Sitting and Forgetting [zuowang 坐忘]/ Fasting of the Heartmind [xinzhai 心齋]
 - i. Forgetting benevolence and rightness
 - ii. Forgetting rites and music
 - iii. Forgetting everything:
 - (a) Limbs and body / Not listening with ears
 - (b) Perception and intellect / Not listening with the mind
 - Forgetting (a) form and (b) understanding
 - Any privileged organisation of actions or distinctions
 - Non-anthropocentric self-conception / Listening with one's spirit
 - Identification with "Great Thoroughfare" [dàtōng 大通 dàtōng]



Discussion Questions

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 18, 54; *Zhuangzi* Chs. 1–7ff, 17f

1. How does the *Zhuangzi*'s understanding of our place as human beings in the world differ from the *Daodejing*'s? What implications does this have for how we are to act (or not) in it?

Referring to *Zhuangzi* Chs. 1f, 2f, 4f, 17f, 18f,

2. How is the *Zhuangzi* be able to make any claims about non-human animals?

Referring to *Zhuangzi* Chs. 2f, 13f, 26f, 27f, 33f.

3. How is it possible for the *Zhuangzi* to make claims about anything apart from itself as a text? Isn't the *Zhuangzian* perspective just another perspective?



Zhuangzi contra Confucianism

Referring to *Analects* 13.3 and *Zhuangzi* Chs. 2f, 4f, 6f, 18f,

A. What exactly, according to the *Zhuangzi*, is so problematic about Confucian rituals? Is he attacking a strawman?

Referring to *Mencius* 6A1–10 and *Zhuangzi* Ch. 1f, 2f, 6f, 7f,

B. Can the *Mencius*' claim about the moral nature of human beings survive the *Zhuangzi*'s criticisms?

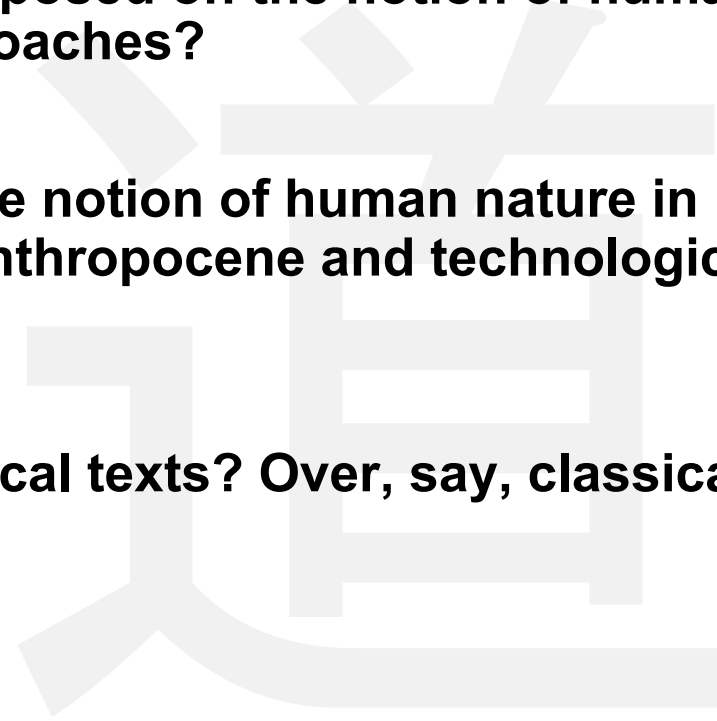
Referring to *Zhuangzi* Chs. 2f, 26f, 33f, and *Xunzi* Chs. 17f, 19f, 21f, 22f,

C. How might the *Xunzi*'s conception of models be seen to meet with the challenge of the *Zhuangzi*? Is it convincing?



Broader Questions

1. Are both Confucianism and Daoism *necessarily* opposed on the notion of human nature? What would it take to synthesise both approaches?
2. Why, apart from mere curiosity, would exploring the notion of human nature in classical Chinese texts matter for us living in the Anthropocene and technological overgrowth?
3. Why *should* we study classical Chinese philosophical texts? Over, say, classical Greek, Indian, or Nahua ones?





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Image Sources

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