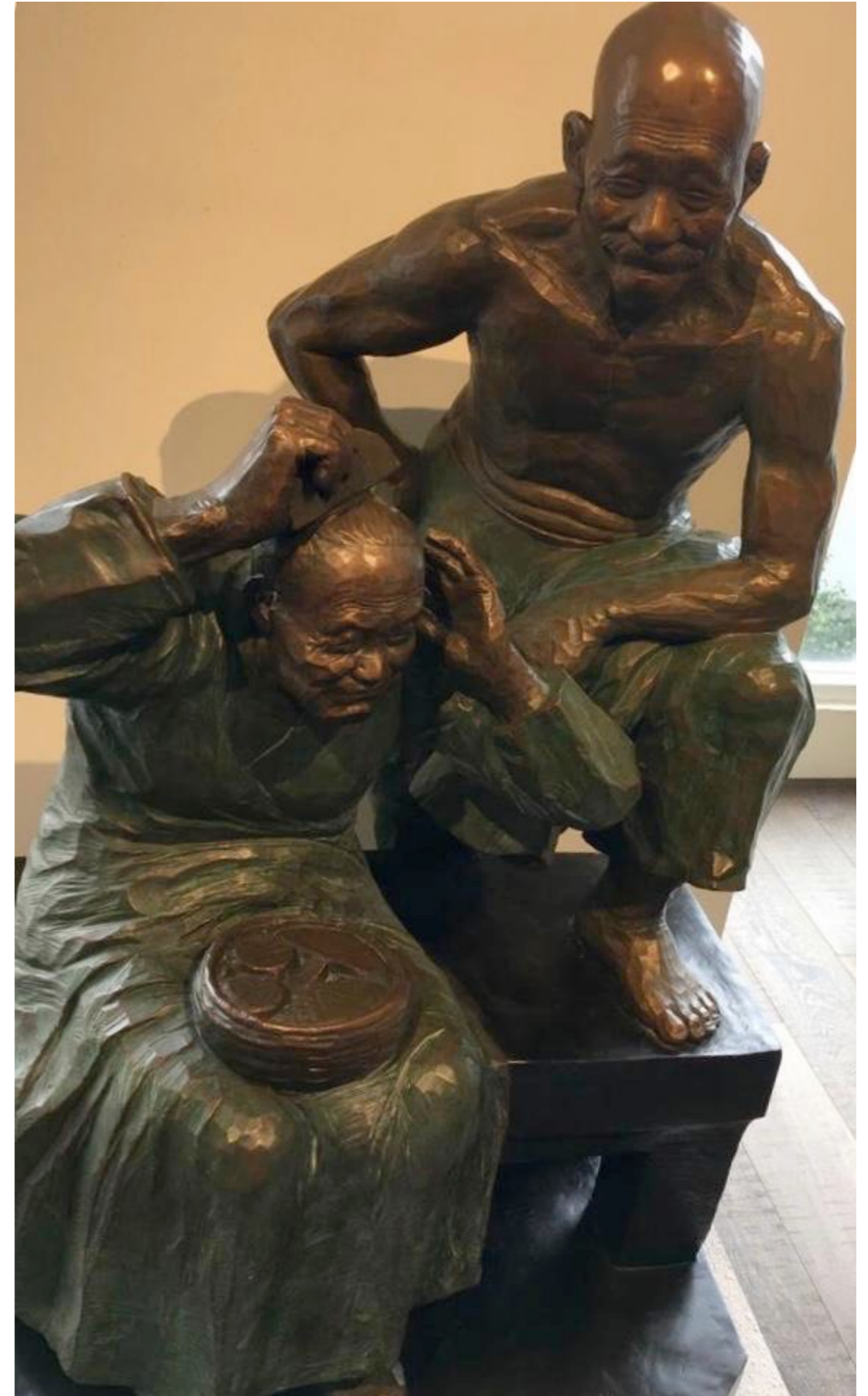


Philosophizing with Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi was an influential Chinese philosopher who lived around the 4th century BC. He is credited with writing - at least in part – an opus known by his name, the Zhuangzi, which is one of the foundational texts of Taoism. It is composed of many strange little stories, written in order to make the reader think. Its primary function is to make us reflect on the illusory and even ridiculous aspects of our life, by criticizing numerous preoccupations, social and moral obligations, which are the cause of our psychological and cognitive misery. Our work consists of a selection of stories, accompanied with a philosophical analysis, organized around the key concepts of each story, including some background on Chinese culture. A series of questions is provided, in order for the reader to meditate on the content of the text.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Oscar Brenifier

Doctor of philosophy, trainer and philosophical consultant, he has worked for many years in France and abroad on the concept of "philosophical practice", both in terms of practice and theory. He is one of the main promoters of the « philosophy in the city » movement: cafés-philo, philosophical workshops with children and adults, seminars in business and organizations. He has published many books in this field, including the collection "PhiloZenfants" (editions Nathan), which were published in more than thirty languages. He co-founded the « Institute of Philosophical Practices » of which he is the chairman. He is also one of the authors of the Unesco report "Philosophy, A school of freedom ".

www.brenifier.com

Viktorija Chernenko

Holds MA in Cultural and Historical Psychology, a doctorate student in Philosophy (Paris VIII). She has been developing philosophical practice in more than 25 countries since 2010, conducting individual consultations and facilitating workshops with children and adults. Since many years she is a consultant in business organizations working on a system of arguments evaluation; she is as well a specialist on evaluation of pedagogical competencies in educational sector. She is a co-founder of multiple group and individual programs on philosophical practice, a professor at MA programs on philosophical counseling, the author of a program on Critical Thinking for elementary school children. In 2015 she has founded Filosofize, an organisation that promotes philosophical practice all over the world.

<https://www.facebook.com/viktorija.chernenko.7>

Illustrations: Sandrine Thevenet and Christophe Bertin

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Introduction



Zhuangzi in China

Most likely, Zhuangzi really existed, but we do not know much about him. He seems to have lived during the fourth century B.C. and can be thought of as the most creative of all early

Chinese thinkers. His peculiar style and surprising content grant him a special place in classical literature.

He holds a very peculiar function and status within his home culture. For one, he is a “must”, an obligation, an essential and unavoidable author in the tradition of Chinese literature and philosophy. But most of his modern compatriots don’t read him, or have not read him since school, and really don’t know what he stands for, beside sometimes some vague, reductionist or distorted idea. The Zhuangzi is composed of many surprising little stories, written in order to make the reader think. Most Chinese cannot even recall one, although a few of them sound familiar to their ears when they are repeated to them, like the one of the butterfly, or the fishes in the pond. Second, the ideas of Zhuangzi, his modality of thinking, his critical and provocative side, do not correspond to the mental map, to the intellectual manners or routine of most Chinese people. Here, one has to understand that the most important battle of ideas in the history of Chinese philosophy takes place in the opposition between Confucian thinking and Taoist thinking, of which Zhuangzi and Laozi are the main representatives. We put aside Buddhist philosophy, which plays an important role as well, but is not of Chinese origin, even though the Chinese have stamped their mark on this Indian import. As well, we will not enter a scholarly debate about the unity or not of Taoist thinking, the main point being that within the unity of the Chinese philosophical matrix, there is a fundamental fracture, loaded with numerous ideological implications.

When we look at the common way that guides the actions and thoughts of contemporary Chinese citizens, we can observe that Confucianism is rather hegemonic, consciously or unconsciously so. We could make an analogy in the West, where in the original opposition represented by Socrates and Plato on one side, Aristotle on the other side, Aristotle has rather won the historical battle of ideas, since our common worldview is inclined toward a material reality more than toward a reality of ideas. The relation is quite similar in the Confucian/Taoist opposition, although we would characterize it as the opposition between humanistic and idealistic views. Let us take a couple of examples. First, the relation to the Dao, which is the most fundamental common concept within Chinese philosophy, the way “Being” or “God” would be two fundamental or founding common concepts within Western culture. For the Daoist thinkers, the Dao is not a “name” for a “thing” but the underlying natural order of the Universe, whose ultimate essence is difficult to circumscribe due to it being non-conceptual, yet evident in one's being, one's life. It is "eternally nameless" and must be distinguished from the countless 'named' things which are considered to be its manifestations. It is the reality of life, before any concrete example we could describe. But for the Confucians, the term Dao rather indicates the “Truth”, or the “Way”, as it defines a particular approach to life, to politics and to the tradition. It is a “humanistic” Dao, regarded as necessary in relation to our morality and our humanity. Confucius rarely speaks of the “T'ien Dao” (Way of Heaven). An influential early Confucian, Hsiin Tzu, explicitly noted this contrast. Though he

acknowledged the existence and celestial importance of the Way of Heaven, he insisted that the Dao principally concerns human affairs.

The second example derives from the first: it bears on the criteria for determining and judging our actions. For Confucians, rituals are fundamental: customs and traditions have to be respected. They represent the crucial ordering of society, an important factor of harmony within society, regulating our lowly and individualistic instincts, a regulation which of course has moral connotations. Within this framework, hierarchy is crucial, since it determines the place of each individual in the structure of this harmony. For Taoists, those rituals are at best superficial, at worst an illusion or hypocrisy, since the only principle that has to be referred to and obeyed is the Dao, the cosmic principle. This of course leaves much space for individuality and represents a strong criticism of society, its rules and obligations. This is one of the reasons why Taoists are often perceived as rebels, anarchists or antisocial. Even moral rules are criticized, as a lower level of ethics, below the Dao, the De (power) and benevolence, in a declining order: then comes morality, and lastly the rituals. Confirming the Confucian tendency of Chinese society, one will often notice that when a contemporary Chinese knows a Zhuangzi story and gives his understanding of it, it is often twisted in a moralistic sense, an interpretation which is far from the original preoccupation. The case of the De, which we will deal with later on in our work, often translated as a virtue in a human moral sense, is a

good example of this, when it originally means “virtue” in an ontological sense, like in English we would say the “virtue” of a medicine, referring to the useful effects it can have, its efficiency or its power.

Of course, the two traditions sometimes share similar ideas about man, society, the ruler, heaven, and the universe, ideas that were not created by either school but that stem from a tradition prior to either Confucius or Laozi. The latter is generally thought of as founder of philosophical Taoism, which should be distinguished from religious Taoism, a latter invention. But Confucianism limited its field of interest to the creation of a moral and political system that fashioned society and the Chinese empire; whereas Daoism, inside the same worldview, represented more personal and metaphysical preoccupations. Although within this framework, Zhuangzi holds a particular singular, critical and even sarcastic perspective and style, which can be compared to the Greek cynics, like Diogenes, called “a Socrates that went mad”. Unlike Confucians, Daoism never had a unified political theory. While Huang-Lao, a latter Taoist, justified a strong emperor as the legitimate ruler, the “primitivists” (like Zhuangzi) argued strongly for a radical anarchism, political life and hierarchy being presented with disdain. One should not be surprised that throughout many dynasties, Confucianism was established as official doctrine by emperors, when Daoism was often barely tolerated or even banned as a doctrine.

But there is another aspect of Zhuangzi which is even more provocative for Chinese contemporaries: it is quite contrary to the values commonly promoted within society and the family. First of all, what can be called ambition and greed, with its relation to success and hard work, established as crucial moral values, including competition and the struggle for survival. Those values, the worldview they represent, is today quite widespread and strongly so. One has to make it! Be it by trying to pass the indispensable Gaokao (a demanding university entrance examination), by ranking at the top of the class, by climbing the social ladder, by becoming rich and recognized, by wanting to be respected and not lose face, the ordinary Chinese citizen is totally at odds with the Zhuangzi principles. Although one can claim as well than in the west most people are at odds with the idealistic perspective of most philosophers. Therefore, in spite of the admiration Zhuangzi suscitates as a great and famous thinker, he is easily viewed in a reductionist way as someone who promotes “doing nothing” and “life outside of society”, a behavior which of course is considered impossible, idealistic and unrealistic. A sort of common wisdom half-jokingly states that Confucianism is for young and working people, Taoism is for retired people, who have nothing to accomplish anymore. Lastly, we encounter the criticism of family values that often provides a feeling of goodness in the conscience of the Chinese citizen. Zhuangzi invites us to escape this illusory, selfish, reduced and limited perspective, and to place ourselves in a much wider perspective, what he calls sometimes the “great ocean”,

instead of the little pond where small people live in, pretending to be happy, good and safe.

Presentation of Zhuangzi by Robert Eno (Abridged by O.B.)

The literary style of the Zhuangzi is unique, and one needs to adapt to the style and format of the text in order to get into it. Most of the chapters are a series of brief but rambling essays, which mix together statements that may be true with others that are absurd, and tales about real or imaginary figures. It is never a good idea to assume that when Zhuangzi states something as fact that he believes it to be true, or that he cares whether we believe it or not. He makes up facts all the time. It is also best to assume that every tale told in the Zhuangzi is fictional, that Zhuangzi knew that he had invented it, and that he did not expect anyone to believe his stories. Every tale and story in the Zhuangzi has a philosophical point, and those points are the important elements of Zhuangzi's book. The world in which the events of the Zhuangzi occur is not the world in which we live. He tells us about a ten-thousand mile long bird, adding what a cicada and a dove have to say about it. We enter a world filled with fabulous beasts, imaginary plants, and flying immortals. The human population of Zhuangzi's world is unusual as well. His society is filled with

sorcerers, hunchbacks, and mysterious hermits, talking rivers, swimmers who can dive down steep waterfalls without fear, and a butcher who carves up ox carcasses with utmost dexterity. One interesting aspects of the Zhuangzi is that one of its chief characters is Confucius. Sometimes Confucius is pictured as a buffoon, a pompous fool despised by characters in tune with Daoist ideas. But frequently Confucius acts as well as a spokesman for Zhuangzi's point of view, and we are left to wonder whether this is just Zhuangzi's way of taunting his Confucian intellectual adversaries or whether he did not, in fact, feel that his ideas shared certain features with those of Confucius.

Zhuangzi's chief strategy is to undermine our ordinary notions of truth and value by claiming a very radical form of fact and value relativity. For Zhuangzi, as for Laozi, all values that humans hold dear -- good and bad; beauty and ugliness -- are non-natural and do not really exist outside of our very arbitrary prejudices. But Zhuangzi goes farther. He attacks our belief that there are any firm facts in the world. According to Zhuangzi, the cosmos is in itself an undivided whole, a single thing without division of which we are a part. The only true "fact" is the dynamic action of this cosmic system as a whole. Once, in the distant past, human beings saw the world as a whole and themselves as a part of this whole, without any division between themselves and the surrounding context of Nature. But since the invention of words and language, human beings have come to use language to say things about the world, and this has had the effect of cutting up the world

in our eyes. When humans invent a name, suddenly the thing named appears to stand apart from the rest of the world, distinguished by the contours of its name definition. In time, our perception of the world has degenerate from a holistic grasping of it as a single system, to a perception of a space filled with individual items, each having a name. Every time we use language and assert something about the world, we reinforce this erroneous picture of the world. We call this approach “relativism” because Zhuangzi’s basic claim is that what we take to be facts are only facts in relation to our distorted view of the world, and what we take to be good or bad things only appear to have positive and negative value because our mistaken beliefs lead us into arbitrary prejudices. The dynamic operation of the world-system as a whole is the Dao. The partition of the world into separate things is the outcome of non-natural, human language-based thinking. Zhuangzi believed that what we needed to do was learn how to bypass the illusory divided world that we have come to “see before our eyes,” but which does not exist, and recapture the unitary view of the universe of the Dao.

Like Laozi, Zhuangzi does not detail any single practical path that can lead us to achieve so dramatic a change in perspective. But his book is filled with stories of people who seem to have made this shift, and some of these models offer interesting possibilities, such as Cook Ting or the Wheelwright. These exemplars seem to have found a way to re-perceive experience through the mastery of certain types of skill, and this may be one route that Zhuangzi is suggesting to

guide us towards the new world perspective that escapes the prison that language has built for us. In another section, Zhuangzi has Confucius formulate the following regimen, called “the fasting of the mind,” for his disciple Yan Hui: Make your will one. Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, listen with your qi. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but qi is empty and waits on all things. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind. Confucius’s description seems to suggest some form of meditation practice, but the results look similar to the outcome of Cook Ding’s more athletic performance of ox-carving.

These portraits of ways towards wisdom suggest that while Zhuangzi believes that our ideas about facts in the world are fundamentally distorted forms of knowledge, he does not hold a completely relativistic view of knowledge. Cook Ding and Zhuangzi’s Confucius do seem to have reached some level of wisdom, but their knowledge seems to be of a very different kind from the knowledge people more ordinarily prize. There is no single Zhuangzi syllabus that can compare to the elaborate ritual syllabus that Confucius devised for his school. But Zhuangzi does seem different from Laozi in trying to give concrete hints about the path to his vision of perfected wisdom.

Numb like a wooden rooster



紀涪子為王養鬥雞。十日而問：「雞已乎？」曰：「未也。方虛憍而恃氣。」十日又問。曰：「未也。猶應嚮景。」十日又問。曰：「未也。猶疾視而盛氣。」十日又問。曰：「幾矣。雞雖有鳴者，已無變矣，望之似木雞矣，其德全矣，異雞無敢應者，反走矣。」

Ji Xing-zi rears a fighting-cock for the king. After ten days, he is asked if the cock is ready. He answers "He is not yet in the right spirit. He is arrogant, vain and relies on his own vigor. » Ten days later, he is asked again. He answers: « He still relies on his own vigor, and he responds to sounds and shadows." Ten days later, he is asked again. He answers: "He still looks angry and remains full of vigor." Ten days later, he is asked again. He answers: "He is almost ready. When another cock crows, he does not respond anymore, as if he had become a wooden cock. His virtue is now complete. No other cock will dare challenge him. They will run away. »

CONTENT OF THE STORY

- 1 - Reactive and detached
- 2 - Performative and explicative
- 3 - Fighting with oneself
- 4 - Martial arts
- 5 - Questions

1 – Reactive and detached

The Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius, in his main work “Thoughts to myself”, promoted the stoic principle of establishing the soul as an “inner citadel”. This intimacy is called a fortress because it remains inaccessible to the troubles of the passions, to the turmoil of the world. But this citadel, where serenity reigns, is not an ivory tower in which one would take refuge in a transcendent selfishness; it is rather a high place, from where one reaches an immense field of vision, the base of operations which makes it possible to act with an adequate distance. As Emperor, he is a man of action, who has to act in a troubled world, but he needs and seeks serenity, as the indispensable condition of true efficiency. For him, human action has a profound and lasting value if it fits into the perspective of the whole universe and the community of all men. The idea is therefore not to escape from the outside world, remaining blind and death. Thus in his book, Marcus Aurelius strives to set into practice three crucial mental and existential principles. To see reality as it is, freeing oneself from all prejudices, emotional or cognitive. To accept with love and understanding all events as they result from the general course of nature. To act in the service of the human community. In this philosophical posture, one can identify some basic and natural wisdom, accessible to anyone through reason and common sense, an attitude that can be encountered with different shapes of inclinations in various cultures.

The “wooden rooster” story presents us with an important aspect of such wisdom, although with some cultural and philosophical differences. The main issue is the capacity of being centered on oneself in order to deal more adequately with the world and its vicissitudes. We are presented with a striking paradox, since this animal is supposed to be trained for fighting, and the way his trainer presents him seems to be exactly the opposite of a “combat rooster”. If we follow the course in time of his diagnostics, the bird is not supposed to be feisty, he is not supposed to rely on his own vigor, he is not supposed to react to external stimuli, when according to common sense these criteria would on the contrary correspond to the attributes of a fighter. The way he is described, the idea of being as “numb as a wooden rooster”, is rather shocking to the reader, who at first will not understand what the trained explains, what he is trying to accomplish with his colt.

In order to clarify the meaning of this fable or parable, we propose to introduce the opposition between “reactive” and “detached” patterns of behavior. Reactive behavior is the most common way to comport oneself. We expect and want certain things from the world, and depending on the situations, events and circumstances, we will react in a certain way: we will act, we will attack or defend ourselves, we will rejoice or suffer, etc. This can be called “heteronomy”, in opposition to “autonomy”, since our mental states and actions are primarily determined by what happens outside of us, responding to external stimuli. In such a way, we make

ourselves passive, since we undergo outside processes: we declare ourselves victims if those events provoke suffering in us, if they overpower us, we declare ourselves lucky or happy if those events rejoice us. In opposition to such a usual comportment, we can retreat on our internal self, defining our mental state and actions as they are based on our own will and decisions, what can be called a detached posture.

As the trainer of the rooster describes, such an attitude takes time: one has to build up and develop such internal strength, it is not natural. The most common and instinctive way to proceed in life is the reactive scheme. A child is not a potent character, he totally depends on outside forces and authorities, but as he grows up, he will learn to enhance his own power, thus becoming more autonomous. But there often remains in the adult some of this impotent dimension, unless or until he has learned to be autonomous. In a way, all of us have acquired some autonomous capacity, but it often remains incomplete and underdeveloped, and that is precisely the point Zhuangzi, a very demanding teacher, is inviting up to reflect upon. It implies to take some distance from the outside world and circumstances, in order to have a more objective understanding of it, and better determine the course of our actions. And rather than providing immediate response to daily events, we should remain centered in our self. We should therefore adapt to the events in a flexible way, and shape our will accordingly, emptying our mind and leaving space for our freedom, tranquility and strength. To adapt is a free action of the subject, who keeps for himself a number of

options and knows how to behave when something happens. For this action to be free, distance is necessary.

Of course, in order to do this, we should not be hypersensitive or hyperreactive, otherwise we will be permanently triggered by external solicitations without even noticing it. At that point, we are not centered in ourself anymore, but we become scattered, decentered, caught in a frenzy, by permanently responding to the flux of chaotic occurrences that characterize the world and its hectic nature. We then necessarily suffer of the “monkey mind” symptom, and neither our mind nor our being function properly anymore. This is the pain and drama most persons suffer from.

One can claim that in a way, “highly intelligent” individuals often seem to be rather ineffective thinkers. Such people are often good at reactive thinking and puzzle solving, but less able to think about topics that require a broader view and distance. One reason is that they have a competition mentality, and they always have to pick up challenges, whatever they are.

The human mind is in perpetual turmoil, most of the time animated by reactive thoughts. It acts in reaction to external phenomenon, and this reactive “me” is in fact our “little me”, our “usual me”, dependent, unsatisfied and anxious. Emptying the mind of those preoccupations means distance and freedom: we cannot be “triggered” anymore. An empty mind is a creative mind, precisely because it is not conditioned by the outside. It perceives the outside, but it has

sufficient distance to smoothly move in a creative and unpredictable way. This type of thought is capable of exploring, of inventing, of shifting paradigm. Indeed, those special thoughts can be considered rare, but they are noteworthy. They emanate from the loftiest part of ourselves, the divine spark that Socrates evokes, the tip of the soul, as Meister Eckhart calls it, its divine part one may say. Being not-conditioned, creative thought brings freedom and joy, even though external conditions seem unfavorable or bad. And this innovative and resourceful dynamic reveals our inner nature, our true talents, our essential goals. It allows us to be the person we want to be, to give the best of our self. On the opposite, to be in a reactive mode is to function based on fear and apprehension. We do not accomplish what we want to do, but comply with what the world commands or frames, submit to what pleases the world, especially in order not to provoke its wrath, and be accepted, recognized. Of course, this anxiety interferes with creative thinking, it deprives us of our thinking power. Reactive thoughts warn us against failure, it makes us sensitive to external judgment, and it makes us doubt of our own capacities. Often, we end up functioning on a survival mode: we only do what is considered necessary: work, social duties, family obligations, etc. We live in a sort of existential minimalism, short of something better, because of the context, as we claim it. And we admire the ones who seem to be “good” in this daily competition. And since this competition is urgent and compulsive, since it is about survival, there is no room for consciousness.

2 - Performative and explicative

The difficulty with the “pedagogy” of Zhuangzi, in this text like in others, is that he does not explain the principle of this “autonomy” that is clearly expressed in the filigree of the text. He only announces that the rooster is “almost ready” to fight, since “he does not respond anymore”. He adds that “His virtue is now complete. No other cock will dare challenge him.”, but he does not explain the dynamic of the process, even though it is counter intuitive and strange for the standard reader. Not generous, one may claim. Of course, there are different ways one can explain the Zhuangzi style of teaching, rather esoteric. But one argument or explanation for it would be that Zhuangzi practices a “performative” pedagogy, rather than an “explicative” pedagogy. For example, in this story, he wants us to practice the same autonomy that the rooster has learned, rather than having the reader depend on some authority telling him what to think about the story, and outlining directly and explicitly the moral or the meaning of the story.

The trainer is working for the king, the latter visibly keen on cock fighting, who expects from this training to get a fighting animal, ready for combat. This king seems quite eager to get results, so he periodically asks the trainer, every ten days, what the situation is. This man of power – which renders him suspicious to Zhuangzi - is visibly impatient, in this sense he sounds rather immature, and we can imagine that he is quite

surprised by the regular report of the trainer, although the story does not give us any details about his reaction. The king would indeed be rather disappointed in getting a fully trained rooster who wins without fighting. In a more profound way, learning to fight means to learn avoidance of fighting, since the true art of war is actually an art of peace. Many stories of the tradition tell us of a great fighter who won without fighting, who overcame enemies just by displaying his own self-mastery.

The absence of explanatory elements in the narration is of course coherent with the general economy of the text, with the Zhuangzi style. The reader is supposed to guess and make up as much as possible his own understanding of the situation. It is the general case that in the “tale” tradition of teaching, the explanation of the message is not given to the reader, and this tradition is rather common in China, like in many traditional cultures, or in spiritual traditions. Many religions, like Christianity with the parables of Jesus, use this technique. But what is striking with Zhuangzi, is the minimalism of his narrations, which often leave the listener or the reader speechless, just like if he could not avoid waiting for missing information. This is one of the reasons why those texts represent such a difficult reading, one of the reasons why even within the Chinese culture, if his name is rather known, his works or ideas are rather ignored. Beside the story of the “butterfly”, and a couple of other short texts, the Zhuangzi remains rather ignored, except by a few specialists.

Thus, what is the effect the author wants to produce on the reader, which is similar to what the rooster is supposed to undergo? One aspect of the teaching is to notice how we easily get destabilized. This very simple story troubles us, we have the impression of being lost when we first hear it. Hopefully, after a while, after some reflection or after some explanations from someone else, we will not be troubled by the story anymore, and we will find it amusing or interesting. Through this shift, we discover that we are not troubled by the story itself, which objectively is not troublesome, since we are in fact troubled by our representation of it, by the idea we make of it, by the understanding or lack of understanding we have of it. The feeling of absurdity, the internal speech we produce, consciously or not, the feelings we undergo, in other words our judgment, is what troubles us, not the story, since later on it does not trouble us anymore. And that is exactly what the rooster has to learn: not to react to external solicitations, to remain calm and collected, by unifying the self. After all, a story should never trouble us, no matter how strange or abstruse it is. Enjoying the strangeness, that is the challenge. This way, we learn to take some distance with ourselves, taking our own thoughts and emotions with a grain of salt: avoiding trusting too much our own reactions and mental processes, since they do not reflect objectively facts and reality.

Another principle the rooster had to learn, the king as well, the lesson the reader discovers while reading the story, is that learning is not just a formal acquisition of information, but

the challenge of oneself, a work on emotions and attitudes, a questioning of our own subjectivity, a critical positioning toward ourselves. We are our worst enemy, because we are stuck in certain paradigms and ways of being. If we trust Zhuangzi, there is some sense in his story. But if we doubt, we will reject easily the text, for its incongruity, or its lack of content. In order to become a fighter, the rooster has to become a “non-rooster”. In order to understand the text, we have to be “non-self”, since the self does not feel at home in the crazy world of this narration. A paradigm shift has to occur, where for one we realize the reality is not what we perceive, what we view as necessary or objective. The problem is to determine if we can extract ourselves from the particular worldview we entertain and adhere to. But such a shift cannot happen through mere argumentation: a shock has to be produced, and this is precisely what the narration tries to administer, in its content and its form.

3 - Fighting with oneself

This story picks up one of the classical themes of wisdom stories: fighting with oneself. Already, in any drama or tragedy, the hero is confronted to a dilemma, and in order to deal with this dilemma he has to go through the anguish of struggling with himself, confronting his own fears, his desires, his habits. In this process he has to clarify his own values, since in a dilemma, various tendencies of a being come into

contradiction. For example, the conflict between tranquility and duty, others and self, reason and passion, etc. In wisdom stories, the internal tension between opposite values is made more explicit, since the reader is supposed to receive a moral lesson, when in simple literary narrations this tension is more geared at creating an esthetic effect and undergo some catharsis, even though there might be a “lesson” as well. In Zhuangzi, we encounter a refined technique, the same one that later on will inspire for example the “koan” of Buddhist Chan or Zen tradition: a short phrase, exchange or narration, of an absurd, enigmatic or paradoxical nature, rather counterintuitive and paralogical, whose function is to produce “enlightenment”. In the present case, the story describes a rooster that is destined to fight with other roosters, but the training he is subjected to visibly rather encourages him to ignore any rooster he will encounter, a rather shocking and nonlogical situation. At this point, one of the question the reader might ask himself is: “If this rooster learns to ignore other roosters, who is he learning to fight with?”, since the trainer reiterates that some learning process is going on. Some hints are provided in order to answer this question. The fact he is “arrogant and vain” shows a character issue: he thinks too much of himself, he is showing little thought for other people, therefore he has to improve his attitude and behavior. In a way, with this attitude, he does not really see others: he is only affected by them since they reveal his own “curvature”, the nature of his own self. The same goes with other comments about him. “He relies on his own vigor” implies he is self-centered. The fact “he

responds to sounds and shadows” shows that he is superficial and credulous, since he naively trusts illusions, wasting his efforts and energy by answering them, remaining unfocused, disconnected from reality. He “still looks angry”, showing an immature behavior. And if “full of vigor” is taken – surprisingly – as a criticism, it again implies that he wastes his energy in meaningless efforts. Thus, he has to work on all this in order to “not respond anymore”, which signifies that he would then be considered ready for his duty. When we pay attention to the whole process, the answer to our question becomes obvious: he is learning to fight with himself, he is his own “sparring partner”, to use a boxing analogy, or he has to fight with his own shadow, a classical boxing training practice.

This idea can remind the reader of the famous Muslim spiritual principle: the great jihad – holy war - is not the struggle or war against the outer enemies, the others, the infidels, as often the concept is used, for example to justify terrorist actions, but it is rather the spiritual struggle within oneself, the war against the inner enemy, the fight against our misbehaviors, against our absence of self-control, against our sinful attitudes. An important distinction, between “external jihad” and “internal jihad”, the latter being the “great” one. But we encounter this same principle in many cultures, including in the Taoist philosophy, of which Zhuangzi is one of the great inspirator. More specifically, our rooster, has to struggle against his own negative, primitive, savage or crude tendencies, in order to become fit for combat. He has to learn to focus himself on the center of his own consciousness, on his

own will, and not on the flux of mind provoked by the surrounding stimuli. For this, he has to abandon greed and ambition, in order to practice humbleness and tranquility, which is the opposite of what one would a priori think constitutes a fighter. In the Zhuangzi intellectual scheme, he has to learn centering himself in the celestial way rather than in his own personal intention, in his subjectivity, like any human being that wants to become wiser.

The remaining question is about the efficiency of this strategy. By becoming a “wooden cock”, the rooster will win by default, since all the other roosters will fear him and run away. One might wonder how reasonable such a “training program” is. Of course, taken in a very literal and formal way, one might conclude it is illusory, since over idealistic. A criticism than can be applied anyhow to most philosophical, wisdom and religious scheme, to which the “practical person”, the “realist”, full of “good horse sense”, will object as being unrealistic. But let us propose some arguments in favor of such a scheme. When we observe some animal confrontation, for example dogs, we can notice that very often, no fight actually takes place: they merely examine each other, sense each other, check each other, and quickly, one dog will concede “victory” to the other, through some humbling gestures, or by running away. Like if they had compared instinctively each other’s “inner qualities” and had commonly decided who was the strongest. This instinctive or intuitive dimension of being is very appealing to Zhuangzi, it is a recurrent theme in his

writings, and it rather fits the Taoist perspective, since it implies to let nature, the Tao, operate within us.

Another example of this process, that we have all experienced, when faced with a trying situation: we sort of determine in advance if we will overcome the challenge or not, we sort of “know before” if we will succeed. A premonition than fits both defeat and success, although it seems that we accept more easily the premonition of losing than the one of winning. We often know when we are “ready” or not. What matters here a lot is the opposition between self-confidence on one side, and the “poison of doubt” on the other side, as Zen philosophy calls it. In thinking, like in many activities, the fear of failure, the fear of mistake, the mistrust in ourself, is often one of the obstacles to the activity, and a reason for our demise. When anxiety and misgivings make us envisage the worst about might happen, provoking some fear about surrounding circumstances, making us nervous about any external incident, event or indicator. We then hesitate, we spend lot of time and energy worrying about whether or not some particular move is the right thing to do, asking ourselves if the moment is right, if the decision is appropriate, wondering anxiously what the consequences could be for each action we might undertake.

The right action is first of all the calm action, where the gesture is constant and confident. And of course, such a gesture can be accomplished only through exercising oneself. Therefore, working on one’s attitude, developing one’s internal strength is a crucial aspect of the training, and once

we reach the appropriate state of mind, it is visible as well to the external observer. Which is one of the reasons why athletes or soldiers train their mental condition. “Repeat, repeat, repeat!” is the crucial mantra. There should be no space for thinking, the action is immediate. An acquired immediateness. The body knows what to do, the intervention of the mind would slow us down. An empty mind should be pursued without any pursuit, because when there is a pursue there is no emptiness.

4 - Martial arts

The practice of martial arts is a very important component of Chinese culture. It has different aspects and implications: psychological, intellectual, physical and social. It originated in China as far back as 4000 years ago and developed into hundreds of different styles of combat, all united under the name of Kung fu or Wushu. Originally meant as a means of self-defense for peasants, martial arts became much more over time: a means for health improvement, increase of physical strength, work on one’s mind and awareness, and even a spiritual activity, as an access to the realm of the transcendent. In modern times, martial arts are vastly used, for different purposes, their theoretical base and philosophical implications find its usage even in the field of business, where the laws of conducting a battle are transposed into daily activities of managers.

Martial arts have different classification schemes, for example by the region of its origin. But there exist two main divisions: northern and southern styles, external and internal styles. Northern styles focus much more on the legs and acrobatics, movements are quick and fluid. In Southern style the usage of the arms and the movements that involve the whole body is much more important. External styles puts primary emphasis on the physical force and the art of combat; what is important is the capacity to lead a fight. Internal styles will focus on the work on the mind, consciousness, breathing, and “qi”, energy or power (氣). While this latter type of martial arts still focuses as well on physical development, for example strengthening the muscles, there is a heavy emphasis on the effect these exercises produce on a mental or spiritual level. One possible goal to achieve would be to resonate with the natural rhythm, and in this way overcome oneself, one’s limits, and reach beyond the immediate. In this type of fight, actions are very slow, the purpose is to tune with your own vital energy, as well as the energy around you, instead of relying primarily on the tension of the muscles when hitting the opponent. A real combat can still happen, but in the context of a fight, the practitioner will be moving quickly and efficiently, but all his movements will be realized with relaxed muscles, in alignment with position and gestures of the the adversary.

Here, the concept of wu wei (“non action” or “non doing”) applies nicely. It is what Taoists often use, in order to describe this type of “internal style” fighting: you act through inaction,

which means that an act will accomplish itself once it is ready, without any special efforts, naturally, just because the person is in a state of total attention. An action will “fall” like a reaped fruit from a tree, or a pile of snow from a leaf, because “it” knows when it is ready, “it” does not have to calculate. This way, by practicing wu wei, you can absorb the attacks of an opponent and then use it against him by doing almost nothing. Just like in the story, after the rooster became “wooden”, the idea was that no one dared challenge him and all ran away. One can influence others in an effective way only when one is not influenced by external or internal stimuli, by being totally attentive, meaning that one dwells in a state of emptiness. Then the capacity of mirroring the opponent will be at its peak.

Such forms of practices insist heavily on the “qi”, demanding to work on this internal energy. “Qi” is conceived as the vital power that belongs to all living beings, but Zhuangzi broadens it and thinks that “qi” is a force that moves everything. For example, he views the wind as the “qi” of the Earth. In fact, the word for wind is in the etymology of the word “qi” itself. And in Chinese culture, the wind represents the spirit, the vital breath of the universe, the power of spirit in sustaining life and holding it together. We find here a connection with the ancient Greek word “psyche”, the life giving breath, the animating principle of all bodies. Thus, once the “qi” dissipates, it is the beginning of the end.

But the “qi” is not absolutely good: there can be too much of it, therefore it has to be controlled, in order to be in the right

proportion. For example, cosmic yin and yang, both considered the greatest of “qi”, temper each other. Thus, in the individual, the vital energy of qi must be balanced for better health. On the ambiguous side of the concept, it is interesting to see that “qi” can mean both force or energy, or vigor, but as well “anger”. As a part of an ideogram, it is even present in the word “hate”. This is the concept that is used in the story to indicate the state of the rooster. “He relies too much on his own vigor”, which means that he relies too much on his own “qi”. One can think that it is a great advantage for him, since he is capable of relying on his own vital force. But precisely, here lies the interesting message that this vital energy should be tempered, it has to take shape, be directed and channeled, it has to remain “in its place”. Otherwise it just turns into anger, hatred, or a flow of confused emotions that run in every direction. One’s energy needs to be educated and tamed. That is why the “spontaneous” rooster has to become “wooden”. A free-flowing power has to undergo constraints in order to be true power. Just like the wind, who in right proportions can be pleasant and useful, but destructive when it becomes tempestuous.

A specific practice that works explicitly on the “qi” is called “qigong”: it balances and cultivates “qi” through exercising the body, the breathing and the mind. Another famous example of such a practice is the T’ai Chi Ch’uan: It focuses the mind on the movements of the form, on slow body motions, and it is purported to bring about a state of mental calm and clarity. One of the goals of qigong is to reach equanimity, calmness

and stillness, with as much relaxation as possible, practicing an empty mind and minimum action. Advanced levels of “qigong” are practiced in a complete stillness or with very little motion, like a “standing pole”, as it is sometimes mentioned. The main work is accomplished “inside”: at an advanced stage, the body is ready to let “qi” do its own work, when there is no tension or knots stopping the “flow”. Some authors describe 6 stages of Taoist qigong and at the final steps the real wu wei takes place. This is when an access to a transcendental reality is permitted: it is a state of non-interfering. Just like the rooster in the story does not get involved anymore with other roosters: he fights with them by non-fighting. He is not “full of qi” anymore, he is not differentiated, his “qi” became wooden, therefore he now can perform a fight without moving and without reacting. The outside does not anymore determine the “qi” of the rooster, and the rooster commits an action, he produces an effect, but without any specific intention to do so. There the action is really a free one. The equilibrium is found within the self, and it maintains itself as a source of power. A reader animated by common sense will be puzzled and laugh at such a fighting cock who became so wooden that it cannot even fight anymore. But this rigidity simply represents an internal centering: the subject became autonomous, he can now win the fight without any intention, by simply being there.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Why will other cocks run away when seeing the wooden rooster?
2. Is the rooster actually trained to fight?
3. Is Ji Xing-zi a good trainer?
4. Why does Ji Xing-zi say that the cock is “almost” ready at the end of the story?
5. Why should a fighting cock not look angry?
6. Will there be a fight if all the cocks become wooden?
7. What did the cock learn during his training?
8. Why does the king check so many times if the cock is ready?
9. Do we know how the training took place?
10. What does the story want to teach us?

Reflection questions

1. Should a good fighter be detached?
2. Why is indifference bothersome?
3. Is detachment possible for a human being?

4. Should we educate our emotions?
5. Why do we tend to overreact to provocations?
6. Is patience the key to getting rid of our problems?
7. Should we fight with ourselves or accept ourselves?
8. Is learning endless?
9. Are we our worst enemy?
10. Can one reach tranquillity by fighting with oneself?

Frog and turtle



“子独不闻夫埳井之蛙乎？谓东海之鳖曰：‘吾乐与！出跳梁乎井干之上，入休乎缺甃之崖。赴水则接腋持颐，蹶泥则没足灭跗。还虯蟹与科斗，莫吾能若也。且夫擅一壑之水，而跨埳埳井之乐，此亦至矣。夫子奚不时来入观乎？’东海之鳖左足未入，而右膝已繁矣。于是逡巡而却，告之海曰：‘夫千里之远，不足以举其大；千仞之高，不足以极其深。禹之时，十年九潦，而水弗为加益；汤之时，八年七旱，而崖不为加损。夫不为顷久推移，不以多少进退者，此亦东海之大乐也。’于是埳井之蛙闻之，适适然惊，规规然自失也。”

"Haven't you ever heard about the frog in the caved-in well? The frog said to the great turtle of the Eastern Sea, 'What fun I have! I come out and hop around the railing of the well, or I go back in and take a rest in the wall where a tile has fallen out. When I dive into the water, I let it hold me up under the armpits and support my chin, and when I slip about in the mud, I bury my feet in it and let it come up over my ankles. I look around at the mosquito larvae and the crabs and polliwogs and I see that none of them can match me. To have complete command of the water of one whole water basin and to monopolize all the joys of a caved-in well, this is the best there is! Why don't you come some time and see for yourself?' "But before the great turtle of the Eastern Sea had even gotten his left foot in the well his right knee was already wedged fast. He backed out and withdrew a little, and then began to describe the sea. 'A distance of a thousand li cannot indicate

its greatness; a depth of a thousand fathoms cannot express how deep it is. In the time of Yu there were floods for nine years out of ten, and yet its waters never rose. In the time of Tang there were droughts for seven years out of eight, and yet its shores never receded. Never to alter or shift, whether for an instant or an eternity; never to advance or recede, whether the quantity of water flowing in is great or small - this is the great delight of the Eastern Sea!

"When the frog in the caved-in well heard this, he was dumfounded with surprise, crestfallen, and completely at a loss.

CONTENT OF THE STORY

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2 - Finite and infinite

3 - Stupor

4 - Junzi and Xiaoren - Gentleman and petty people

5 - Questions

1 – Banality and pettiness

What the frog describes, what it represents, captures a certain world vision, rather common. It basically presents the different characteristics of what can be called “immediate satisfaction”. First of all, pleasure. It wants to have fun, to enjoy herself, to get pleasure from what it does. Hoping around, resting in a hole, diving and swimming, slipping in the mud and wallowing in it. Playing like a child, engaging in all kinds of activities which do not necessitate any effort, do not represent any challenge, do not carry any educational dimension. What can be called pure entertainment. Second, comparing itself to others in order to feel great, choosing the smallest of animals, like larvae and tadpoles, in order to feel big, finding its own self formidable and incomparable, and concluding that no other being can match the greatness of its life and its degree of bliss. A strange mechanism that humans use instinctively in order to conclude how they, their family or their people are much better than others.

Third is freedom, the impression that one does only what he wants, when he wants, where he wants. That is what the frog says when it explains how it goes in and out of the well as it wishes. Although out of the well means at best to hop around the rim of this well, and no further. Then it can either go in the water or in the mud, an alternative which is presented as a great choice. This is often how individuals promote and describe their freedom: in a very limited and often ridicule way, where their freedom is quite minute, their alternatives

are rather reduced, but within this contracted universe, they have the impression of doing what they want. That is what Spinoza denounces, when he writes that the drunkard has an impression of being free when he decides to drink, but in fact he is determined by internal constraints and determinations of which he is basically not conscious. That is what Zhuangzi depicts with this description of freedom, and the whole portraying of the frog should be of course taken as a caricature and a spoof.

Fourth is power or control, no matter how small the “kingdom” in question is, which constitutes another important criterion for happiness. The “micropowers”, that Foucault describes, so popular and vindictive. The reason is twofold. When an individual holds some power, it implies he does only what he decides, without any other being representing an obstacle to its whims. One can be as capricious and whimsical as he desired, no personal hurdle will be presented by anyone, no one can impede him. This concept of power is an extension of the previous one: freedom, but if freedom was in relation to general circumstances, power is in relation to others. Others won't tell us what to do, but we will tell them what to do. Although we don't really see how the frog will command anyone in this story. But, as well, the one who has power seems to be better than others, to have more value because he is more important, since he “rules”. Of course, the story tends to ridicule this concept of power, which has a very reduced extension. To have complete command of the water of one whole basin and

to monopolize all the joys of a caved-in well, is an interesting way to combine strong words “complete” and “monopolize, and words describing rather reduced existence, like “water basin” and “caved in well”, which furthermore describes a rather decrepit environment. This contradiction of terms creates a rather oxymoronic phrasing, producing a certain sense of absurdity fitting well the whole story.

Fifth, is egocentrism. The frog goes at length to describe what happens to it wonderful self, to its precious little body, like if it was the center of the world. “When I dive into the water, I let it hold me up under the armpits and support my chin”. It seems that the water is there just for the frog, and the frog generously allows the water to hold its armpits and chin. And so it is with the mud. That is a rather infantile perspective where the world is there for the subject and its desires, just like if one was God’s gift to the world, the center of the universe. and everything was there at its disposal. And of course, our precious self and what surrounds it “is the best there is”. The basic principle of infantile narcissism is based on the strange logic that “what concerns me is the most important, therefore what concern me is the best”. That is for example a common reason why so many persons think their family is so great and special, even when they suffer from the relation. No wonder all the other animals cannot compare with the magnificence and the wellbeing of the frog! Let us conclude on the idea that the frog is a rather primitive being, crude and unsophisticated, caught up in its own little self, in its own small universe, but since it knows nothing else, it

seems quite happy with itself. From this standpoint, we should not be astonished that it blindly asks the turtle to come and visit her, even though the turtle does not seem in any way to be physically fit for penetrating and even less living in this shrunk microcosm.

2 – Finite and infinite

In opposition to the petty world of the frog, the turtle describes a wide horizon, a universe endowed with immensity and breadth. In a way, we can say that she describes infinity. In a typical Chinese manner, where abstraction is often not presented as such but through a metaphor, an image, or in an allusive way through a concrete entity, greatness or infinity is here represented through the measure of a “thousand li”. It is still hard to imagine or represent a “thousand li”, as a thousand indicates a quantity that is quite large, but it is still accessible, imaginable, otherwise, if it was too big, like “millions”, the number would not indicate anything anymore, it would almost seem imaginary or fantastic. In opposition to the water well, where everything visible can be captured in one single glance, a “thousand li” is quite far away, quite distant. We can easily see at once the totality of the rim of the well, but we cannot see or represent ourselves something that has the size of a “thousand li”. It is even beyond the horizon, and therefore can easily represent the infinite, a concrete infinite, to be distinguished from the indefinite. In a way,

since it is measured, even though it would take time, we could go to the end of it. That is why it remains something concrete, although huge. Although even this distance cannot exhaust the width of the ocean (A distance of a thousand li cannot indicate its greatness), at least we have an idea of what it is not, since it is “bigger than that”, a measure which brings us closer to apprehending its actual dimension. Even though the “negative way” is used, which always imply a certain mystery, it still gives us clue about the reality of the sea. Thus, the turtle describes the sea, very wide, but as well very deep, another time with the measure of a “more than a thousand li”. The depth is more problematic, because if we can travel continuously to cross the sea, we cannot continuously go deeper to the bottom of the ocean. There is a physical impossibility, at least in those times. And for this reason, depth has always a more mysterious connotation, since unfathomable. It seems more inscrutable, more incomprehensible, more enigmatic. We go even further from the well, where the water and the mud are described as covering the feet and the ankles. The medium is here described in a very superficial way, as being very shallow. Actually, the well might be deeper than what the frog describes, but this animal is only concerned with the superficial, not with the depth. Although we suspect that mud, the impure mixture of earth and water, fills up most of the well, unlike the sea, constituted primarily of pure water. After the size of the sea, we tackle its volume, and in particular the stability or eternity that comes as a consequence of its size. When all the rivers on the earth overflow, when all the

waters on the earth disappear, the sea is in no way affected: its volume is so huge that all these earthly waters, with their ups and downs, do not affect it in any way. Neither the height of the water, nor the shape or emplacement of the shores are affected. This signifies, even more than the precedent descriptions, that the sea is beyond our grasp and imagination. In this case, no measure, no magnitude is applicable to it, because absolutely nothing is comparable to it. Even the totality of all the waters on earth, which for us humans represent a huge quantity that we cannot measure, is not comparable to the volume of water in the sea. The earthly waters already represent for us an infinity, a huge quantity, as is shown in the flood, a powerful natural phenomenon, but the sea is still another order of infinity beyond this. An infinity for the infinity, an infinity beyond the infinite. In this ordering of infinities, we start touching the absolute, in the sense that nothing conditions the sea, it is an unconditional reality, since nothing affects it in any way. It is an absolute in the sense that it is total and complete, nothing seems to be missing to it, since it is not subjected to any becoming, not subjected to change, not subjected to the “plus and minus”. We don’t see anything limiting or restricting it. Nothing is comparable to it, and in that sense, it does not have relation to anything else than itself. But this absolute is rather different from the “western” absolute. For it is not the absolute as a God, a transcendent absolute, or as a pure concept, which escapes any material form, and is external to the world, God being the most common form of the absolute in western thinking, and some other cultures. It is not either

the absolute as the universe, the entity that contains all other entities. But it is not either the absolute as “nature”, the principle by which everything occurs, what we encounter somewhat in the principle of the Dao. In a sense, it is immanent because it is present in the world, but in another sense, it is not immanent, since it is not present everywhere, the way the “universe” or “nature” are omnipresent. It is a rather concrete and determined “absolute”, since one can remain outside of it, as the frog does in general in her “water well life”, and the turtle for now. The interesting aspect of this absolute which is not an absolute, is the freedom that it allows, since one has the choice to take part in it or not. Another way by which the text evokes the idea of infinity or absolute is in the description of the Sea, when it says that it is never altered “whether for an instant or an eternity”. By speaking in this fashion, we understand that the Sea incarnates something transcendent, since it never changes, it is never modified, never influenced. It ignores even the limits of times: the lesser, absolute minimum, which is the instant, and the greater, absolute maximum, which is eternity. In this sense, it is not perpetuity which defines it, it is not a time that last forever, but an actual absence of time, a true eternity, a transcendence. The Sea knows no change, therefore it remains outside of “this world”, even though it is still a concrete “object”. But we can tell that through this symbol Zhuangzi invites us to think in another realm of reality, which nevertheless is the true measure of reality, the criteria for judging all things. And it makes the little “happy turtle world” definitely look ridiculous.

3 - Stupor

At the end of the story, after hearing the turtle describing the Sea, the frog is in a state of total shock. “When the frog in the caved-in well heard this, she was dumfounded with surprise, crestfallen, and completely at a loss.” This state of astonishment and stupor mentioned by Zhuangzi reminds us the description Plato makes of Socrates, in the effect he has on his partner in different dialogues. This tireless questioner, in one of the most memorable exchanges of Plato’s dialogue, is compared by Meno to a torpedo fish, an electric ray. This fish shocks and numbs its prey into silence, as his interlocutor claims Socrates does, through his masterful application of the questioning process, through the art of refutation. “You seem to me now to have done that very sort of thing to me, making me numb. For truly, both in soul and in mouth, I am numb and have nothing with which I can answer you.” A surprising aspect of this “numbness” is that usually, both the frog and Meno have a lot of things to say, they are quite talkative. We saw it with the frog, in her long description and apology of her happiness in the well, where she is so convinced of holding some profound wisdom that she invites the turtle to share it with her. We see it as well with Meno: “And yet thousands of times I have made a great many speeches about virtue, and before many people, and done very well, in my own opinion anyway”. In general, this noble young man is rather self-confident, he can make long speeches about virtue, just like the frog can about happiness. Meno finds Socrates so

astounding in his capacity of dialogue that he warns him: “as a foreigner in a different city, if when doing this sort of thing, you would probably be arrested as a sorcerer”. There are two aspects of this “sorcery”: the power of his words, irresistible, and the mystery of his words, unexplainable. And in both cases, the poor victim can only undergo the effect of the speech, as a mere feeling or emotion, observing the impact it has on them, but they are in no shape or state to analyze what is going on.

Nevertheless, let us try to analyze the process by which such a powerful operation can occur, what is the mechanism or the reason for it. Let us propose as a technical name for this phenomenon the concept of “cognitive dissonance”. The idea of dissonance comes from music, it refers to a combination of musical notes that do not sound pleasant together, that do not seem to fit, according to harmonic principles. One hears the sounds, the notes, but they don't seem to belong together at that moment, creating an emotional, sensitive and cognitive distortion, like when we receive contradictory information. On a more intellectual level, cognitive dissonance happens in daily life, like when we perceive something that should not be perceived, for example in an elephant shows up in our living room. Indeed, we would be surprised to see this elephant, but it's more than a surprise: it is a strong astonishment, coupled with some bewilderment, since what we perceive totally goes against common sense and experience. It can as well be when we receive or experience information that totally goes against our experience, our

beliefs, our feelings, our reasoning. More than puzzlement, there is a strong emotion, which suddenly makes us doubt of everything: reality, reason, ourselves, someone else. Our relationship to the world and to ourselves is profoundly shaken. More than feeling doubt, we undergo a strong impression of confusion, since our usual schemes do not function anymore. A manageable doubt would be about a particular issue, and we still can reflect upon it. This doubt is not manageable, it shakes too much the very foundation of our identity and world vision, thus the sense of confusion and stupefaction: we are overwhelmed by the information we are receiving.

This experience can happen accidentally, for example if we learn that we have been blatantly betrayed by a person very dear to us, who probably had no intention of provoking this effect on us; in fact, this “friend” would probably try to hide the information. But the “art of the sorcerer” that Socrates, Zhuangzi and other wise men exercise, is the mastering of mental processes, a profound understanding of human psychological and thinking processes. We can tell from this story that Zhuangzi is an accustomed practitioner of this trade. He understands what can provoke such an effect: the production of a paradigm shift, with its quasi hypnotic effects. Socrates does it through questioning, a technique which sometimes Zhuangzi uses as well, but this time he does it by describing some unthinkable reality: the unfathomable Eastern Sea. The frog, used to her little world, prisoner of it, never in her life envisaged such an immense perspective: her whole world construction is in shambles, shaken in its very

foundations. There is no difference of size between the two worlds, the frog's and the turtle's, it is not that one is bigger than the other, or much bigger than the other: it is the shock and total discrepancy between the measurable and the incommensurable, between the immediate and the transcendent, two radically opposed perspective. The mere evocation of such a reality is stunning for the poor turtle, until now so satisfied with her puny universe, satiated with her own bliss.

As we indicated, it is not an accident that Zhuangzi describes a phenomenon of intellectual shock, with its mesmerizing effect. Since that performative dimension of speech is at the heart of his writings. His way is not so much to explain or demonstrate, although this pedagogical dimension is not absent from his works, but more to provoke, to astound, in order to suscite a conversion in the reader, breaking out of common sense, out of common opinion, a common opinion that is biased, petty and devoid of integrity. The idea is to overcome a banal state of mind, both emotionally and cognitively, as we see in the frog, which both has a shrunken worldview and infantile or primitive emotions. And such a conversion cannot be produced without a strong disturbance, even a clash. And inevitably, such a conversion will produce stupor, since usual mental mechanisms do not function anymore, a stupor which like for Plato or Zen philosophy, is a condition for improving mental processes. How else could the poor frog react, when she discovers the incredible reality the turtle describes to her, infinitely surpassing her little world?

Although Zhuangzi shows his sarcastic self, since this stupor, rather than helping the poor frog, leaves her in her state of imbecile beatitude: "Hopping around, resting in a hole, diving and swimming, slipping in the mud and wallowing in it."

4 – Junzi and Xiaoren - Gentleman and petty people

In the present story, two characters are opposed, visibly of different intellectual, existential and moral statute. This opposition between a "great" person and a "lowly" person is a traditional recurrent theme. In classical Chinese philosophy, the human ideal is expressed through the term of "Junzi", which literally means "Son of the Lord", therefore someone noble or elitist. We already find this term in the Yi King, and Confucius uses it regularly. But one should know that one of the major cultural impact of the Confucianist paradigm shift is to value the person not so much on its lineage or formal statute, but rather on his intellectual and moral value. Not only from a theoretical standpoint, but as well in actual sociological transformation of the power structure. Through the importance granted to education, self-improvement and examinations, gifted individuals from lower strata will get access to the power structure and become the actual counsellors of the princes and other aristocratic rulers. A transformation that will become a dominant principle in the evolution of Chinese society. Therefore the "superior person" designated by the term Junzi referred more and more to a

“elevated spirit”, rather to someone that inherited a title from his ancestors. In this context, we might as well mention the fact that some legitimacy was granted to men who in power struggle overthrew the dynasty in power, by claiming they had lost the “mandate of heaven”. The Zhou dynasty actually came up with this concept, with the idea that there could be only one legitimate ruler of China at a time, and that this ruler needed the blessing of the gods. They used this concept in order to justify their overthrow of the Shang dynasty, and their subsequent rule (1046–256 BCE). The idea of Mandate of Heaven was reinforced by Confucianist teaching, since it fitted precisely its idea that value was determined by one’s actions and behavior, and not by bloodline.

In Confucianism, the ideal personality is the sheng, translated in English as sage, or wise man. However, since sagehood is hard to attain, Confucius created the junzi, the gentleman, a stage which more individuals could achieve, the junzi coming as second to the sage in the hierarchy of values. There are a number of typical characteristics of the junzi. He should not fear poverty, therefore should not pursue wealth as a goal. He is a man of action, of good deeds, rather than a man of speech, therefore he should rather speak little, since actions are more real than words, and there is a suspicion about the emptiness and mirage of speech. The junzi should be loyal and obedient, since he has to integrate himself in the power structure and be respectful of authority. A point, among others, which will be problematic for the Taoists, in particular Zhuangzi. Of course, he has to be knowledgeable, so he has to educate himself,

intellectually and morally. He must learn to be master of himself, not allowing his desires, fears and diverse emotions direct his thoughts, actions and life. A core value is the ren, which means benevolence or altruism, a key characteristic of a virtuous human being, the outward expression of Confucian ideals. The idea is that everyone is born with the sense of ren, but some develop it more than others. Confucius once described ren in the following terms: "One should see nothing improper, hear nothing improper, say nothing improper, do nothing improper". To summarize, in order to be a political leader, the junzi must express superior ethical and moral positions while gaining inner peace through virtue. By acting virtuously, the junzi engages everyone to follow his example, he is appreciated and even admired for his moral character.

In opposition to this, the xiaoren, "petty person", who ignores or does not even understand the value of virtues, lives in a mere survival modality, and only pursues immediate gain, be it wealth, fame, power or mere sensual pleasure. The petty person is egotistic, it ignores the collective dimension of its existence. He does not challenge himself, existentially cognitively. He is non-reflective, therefore he does not evaluate and analyze his own life and actions, he does not take into consideration the social consequences of his deeds, he envisages reality only on the short-term modality. Should the ruler be surrounded by xiaoren as opposed to junzi, his governance and his people will suffer due to the influence of small-mindedness. For Confucius, government should function like a family. Both from the standpoint of the sense

of a tightly bound community, with a common goal, and from the principle of filial respect or piety, with a well-established hierarchy, based primarily on age.

Numerous aspects of Confucian values are kept on by Zhuangzi, for example the loftiness of thought, the moral obligation, the intellectual integrity. But there is a major point of discordance, around the status and the framework of human individual identity. This transformation occurs by rejecting the necessity of social structures, institutions, knowledge, technologies, and cultural practices in favor an allegiance to cosmic or natural law and power that is accessible to the individual: there exists some internal, innate, and universal human power, derived from the xing (life potency), which is connected to the natural cycles of the cosmic Dao. This notion of a flourishing life is not to be confused with a 'successful' life: Zhuangzi is not impressed by worldly success. A flourishing life may indeed look quite unappealing from a traditional or Confucianist point of view. A "good person" may very well give up social ambition and retire in relative poverty to tend to his own self and cultivate his own xing.

Zhuangzi hopes that every individual might achieve a transcendent self, along with a freedom associated with the transcendent individual. He promotes an ideal of spiritual freedom through individual self-cultivation. He thus opposes knowledge and culture against an individual's personal vitality and innate powers. He criticizes formal scholarship, which for him is useless and petty, in favor of knowhow, as a

sort of an acquired new nature, which transforms the self, connecting him to the reality of the world, to the Dao. Realized individuals, the goal, are therefore not individuals who stand apart, but are manifestations of the workings of a shared Dao. Such a philosophy carries a basic individualistic point of view. It assumes that ultimate value lies in what humans possess innately and in what is naturally accessible to every individual. The capacity to distance oneself from society, its obligations and rituals, becomes therefore a crucial criterion for becoming a junzi. One can live within society, but not allow rituals and obligations to determine his daily life. The reader will easily recognize the xiaoren in the frog that is only preoccupied with its little comfort and petty preoccupations, living in a small, bounded world, of which it is very proud, while the junzi turtle is connected to the infinite ocean, having access to the fundamental reality of things. No wonder poor turtle feels very claustrophobic in the frog's well. And we should as a conclusion pay attention to the fact that when the big animal tries to enter in "frog heaven", it gets stuck, its legs got wedged fast. This allegory explains to us how a "great person" can get bogged down in the "small world". Just like in Plato, when the man that escaped the world of shadows and saw the light comes back in the cave, he cannot function properly, so the others will laugh at him and finally kill him. Therefore the turtle looks awkward and clumsy in the water well. Probably this is one of the main reasons why most people are not tempted to become Junzi and prefer to remain Xiaoren: the second one looks more

normal, more pleasurable, more successful. The first one seems quite strange and inadequate.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Is the frog happy?
2. Is the frog's life interesting?
3. Why is the frog at a "complete loss" at the end of the story?
4. Does the turtle understand the frog's happiness?
5. What is the difference between the frog and the turtle?
6. Was the turtle cruel toward the frog?
7. Could the frog live in the ocean?
8. Why does the turtle describe the ocean?
9. Is the turtle freer than the frog?
10. Why does the frog prefer finiteness of the well to the infinity of the ocean?

Reflection questions

1. Is ignorance a bliss?
2. Why do people like cosiness?
3. Should one compare himself to others?

4. Is banality a common feature of human existence?
5. Why does infinity scare us?
6. Do we limit our own horizon?
7. Are some people better off in “a well”?
8. Is happiness the ultimate goal of life?
9. Are we prisoners of our environment?
10. Is infinity better than finiteness?

The monkeys



劳神明为一而不知其同也，谓之“朝三”。何谓“朝三”？狙公赋芋，曰：“朝三而暮四。”众狙皆怒。曰：“然则朝四而暮三。”众狙皆悦。名实未亏而喜怒为用，亦因是也。是以圣人和之以是非而休乎天钧，是之谓两行。

To exhaust one's mental power trying to make all things different and separate, without realizing that they are all the same - this is called "Three in the morning." What do I mean by "Three in the morning"? A monkey keeper was handing out acorns to monkeys, and he told them, "From now on, you will get three in the morning and four at night." The monkeys were all furious. "Well, then," he said, "you will get four in the morning and three at night." The monkeys were all delighted. There was no change in the reality behind the different words, and yet the monkeys responded with joy or anger, making a great use of their emotions. Therefore, the Sage brings all into harmony through assertion and denial, while he rests it upon the balance of heaven: this is called "walking a double path."

CONTENT OF THE STORY

- 1 - Indifferentism and determinism
- 2 - Caring and not-caring
- 3 - Manipulation and power
- 4 - Static and dynamic
- 5 - Questions

1 – Indifferentism and determinism

Two perspectives are compared or opposed in this story. Two attitudes that we could call “indifferentism” and “determinism”. It is a familiar expression in common language and daily life to claim about some change or alternative that “it does not change anything” or “it’s all the same”. At that specific moment, when this expression is being used, we can imagine that someone just made a claim, either to substitute an idea with another, to replace an action by another, to change a formulation for another. And at this point, his interlocutor, critical, makes the claim that such an initiative is meaningless, useless or senseless. If there is a change, it is purely one of form, not of content, it constitutes a superficial modification, thus this change of form does not in reality modify anything. At the same time, the person that proposes or promotes the transformation thinks that this change indeed does makes a difference. The difference between both proposals at this point might not so much rest upon the fact that there is or not some formal difference, it is rather undeniable, if only by the difference of words, but on the significance or the substantiality of it. For the partisan of the “no difference”, this change – if change there is - is equivalent to an “epsilon value”, this mathematical quantity considered insignificant in an equation, which therefore can be dismissed as non-existent and further ignored. One such typical difference of perspective is encountered in the idea of “semantic debate”, when a person wants to replace one word

or expression by another one, and his interlocutor wants to tell him that it is a useless proposal or irrelevant debate.

According to Leibniz, indifferentism is a form of mental liberty: freedom of indifference, according to which “nothing forces us on one side or the other”. Kant defends this position as well, because “it implies to work on ourselves, since we then have to evaluate the conditions of possibility of reason, examining its functioning and its objects”. Proudhon claims that : “It is the extreme liberty of our reason, not the inertia of our intelligence, which brings us back to indifferentism, toning down passions, a positioning alone capable to maintain our will outside of established routines”. Indifferentism indeed allows us to escape the mechanics of fixed polarities.

Often, the opposition of perspectives, on the importance or non-importance of a change, the substantiality or insubstantiality of a replacement, can bear upon rather small intellectual stakes, but it can as well have more important implications. For example, in the political domain, one can skeptically claim that “Voting makes no difference, since politicians are all the same, no matter which side they are on, since they are just a “power hungry bunch”. Or else, the fatalist will declare that “It is not worth going to the doctor, because we will all die anyhow”. Both points on which one might disagree, for different reasons, defending the “difference”, what can be called “determinism”: the determination of a preferred position.

In this story, Zhuangzi criticizes human beings, who as the monkeys of this story, give importance to what has no importance, see meaning where there is no meaning. In the absolute, “Three acorns in the morning and four at night” is a different proposition from “Four acorns in the morning and three at night”, and there are many reasons why one could pretend to make an issue out of it. After all, one might claim to hungrier in the morning than in the evening. And so it is for many objects of dispute: in the absolute, one can always encounter a difference between the perspectives that are presented as opposed, one can always find reality in a disagreement. But the issue that Zhuangzi raises, by presenting us as ridicule the monkey behavior, is that we attribute value to matters that have no content, at least not an effective content. We miss the point, and as a consequence we probably don't value what should be valued, since we lack a sense of perspective. We should distinguish the “essential and the accidental”, according to Aristotle, but we are in fact easily fooled, we easily fool ourselves, and we take for a solid reality, sturdy and reliable, what is merely fleeting, incidental and peripheral.

Thus Zhuangzi, through his criticism, tells us that our faculty of judgment is flawed, the way we value things is inherently problematic. Although we might state that this is a common criticism among philosophers of all breed. Both in the fact that “we commonly attribute value to what has no value”, and its corollary criticism: “we commonly don't attribute value to what has value”. Thus we can claim that Zhuangzi would

rather be an indifferentist, in the sense that there is a strong tendency in his work to discredit many distinctions which are considered important by the vast majority of our brethren, and many philosophers as well. Furthermore, his contempt or criticism of politics, of language, of customs and rituals, of knowledge, would tend to point in this direction.

2 – Caring and not-caring

Zhuangzi would rather globally invite us to a “not-caring” existential and psychological position, more than to a “caring” position, which would preoccupy our mind and mobilize our emotions in a useless way. The Taoist perspective he represents coincides in this sense with the stoic “ataraxia” promoted by many Greek philosophers: the peace of the soul should be a primary consideration for our existence, for our thoughts and actions, we should try as much as possible to reach a state of serene calmness. One of the conditions for this is to accept the reality of the world and not worry about details, or not try to change things that cannot be changed, should not change, or make no real difference. In this case, we can judge both that the difference is insignificant and that they have no power to change the situation, since they are in captivity.

As the story goes, the monkeys attribute more value to one of the given formulations. This is from a cognitive standpoint.

From a psychological standpoint, they are more attached to a formulation than to another, what can be called attachment, caring, or clinging. This mental attitude, this emotional caring, affects them very much, for it provokes in them alternatively joy or anger. In this case, joy is not better than anger, contrary to what popular opinion might think, since this joy is deprived of real content, as Spinoza would criticize it. Beside the fact that this joy is founded on an absence of consciousness. Indeed, the monkey keeper was smart, since at little cost he made the monkeys happy and made them agree to his new policy. We could as well defend the thesis that this man demonstrated empathy, showing his caring self, since he took into account the subjectivity of the animals. Even if this joy can be considered from an objective and external standpoint as unhealthy, since it is superficial and fleeting. But this can be considered from a “caring perspective” an element of empathy: make the other one joyful, even though his joy is unfounded and brainless: he is still joyful, and who are you to judge!

One important aspect of the Zhuangzi position is connected to what can be called emotional intelligence. A famous quote of him states that “The relationship between gentlemen are as tasteless as water, those of the petty men are as honeyed as sweet wine. Yet the “tastelessness” of the gentleman enables him to have a close and more profound relationship to others, whereas the sweetness of the petty man leads to disaffection. This reminds us of the Plato idea that there are three types of friendship: friendship of pleasure, friendship of utility, and

true friendship, the latter being of rather undefined nature, but involving truth and authenticity. So it is with Zhuangzi, who gives priority to righteousness in maintaining friendship or any other kind of relation, an attitude which is “clear and pure as water”. The most simple explanation of such a thesis is that pleasure or utility implies some type of expectation, a dependency on external factors, an a sense of immediate gratification, and therefore it can only lead to a type or other of dissatisfaction or disappointment. This is the case for different reasons. First, we don’t depend on ourselves, since we rely on an external object in order to be happy. Second, we center ourselves on obtaining something, on a form of possession, rather than on our own self: the classical opposition between “having” and “being”. Third, we rely on objects that do not have any stability, either because in essence they cannot last, or because they depend on an external power that we don’t control. In both cases, if we depend on the presence of these objects in order to have any peace of the soul; we risk to be either unhappy, because of the absence of these objects, frustrated, because of their disappearance, or anxious, because even if they are present, they might become absent, we don’t know when or how, and we have no real way to prevent this disappearance.

Of course, if we imagine that the initial news given to the monkeys implied a reduction in the amount of food provided to them, we will understand their emotional reactions, the anger they underwent. Food is a necessity, survival is of primary importance, and any reduction in the supply

provided by the authorities will necessarily provoke a feeling of discomfort, both physiological and psychological. Nevertheless, if we cannot change anything about a given situation, what is the point of getting upset about it? Either it is possible to do something, or not possible, but in both cases, there is no reason to let the situation affect our own mental state. For one, it does not help to do anything, and second, our suffering, if suffering there is, can only be amplified. And in the story of the monkeys, the consequence of the “new policy” could not have been too “catastrophic”, since the “second version” of the new policy seemed to please them. Although it can be here argued that the natural plasticity of the mind can in the end make us accept any given situation, no matter how intolerable. But the point of the story is to make us consciously determine if we should or not “accept” or “care” about any given situation. In other words, to give ourselves the power of autonomously determining our own internal state. And that is the point of “not-caring caring”. Probably we could summarize it with the principle of replacing “psychological caring” with “cognitive caring”. This implies to care about making deliberate and appropriate judgements on the external world and ourself, rather than undergoing impulsive and emotional reactions, unconscious and uncontrolled.

3 - Manipulation and power

The monkey keeper is definitely a smart man, although we should keep in mind that in a way, to “keep”, is to manipulate, since one exercises control. He manages to convince the monkeys about the new state of affairs, to make them accept their new impoverished diet, just by the convoking the power of words and grasping the processes of mental manipulation. One can wonder about the mechanisms by which this conversion process operated, its psychological and intellectual dynamics. Let us try to describe the internal sequence of events. At first, the monkeys receive some bad news: the story does not tell us, but visibly, they were told they would receive less food than before; otherwise they would not have been upset when hearing this information. They became angry, probably for a mixture of reasons: less food, the imposition of an arbitrary law, feeling victimized, etc. We should not forget that in the present story those animals live in a cage, a situation which implies that they already undergo a certain sense of unhappiness, of resentment, of powerlessness, a painful situation, especially for monkeys, who in their natural environment enjoy running around and jumping between branches, from tree to tree. Facing this situation of revolt and anger, the keeper decides to simply change the order of the diet, a rather cheap ploy, but for some reason he suspected the subterfuge would function. The question remains: why did it work? What did the keeper know about the monkeys, that

made him think his stratagem would be successful? Or what made the monkeys so predictable?

Here are different reasons that could account for the success of the artifice. First, the monkeys, who as prisoners must suffer with a sense of low self-esteem, felt recognized: after all, the keeper heard them, since he took the pain of rethinking his project, changed his mind and proposed a new diet. Second, they get a sense of freedom and power, when they forced the keeper to change something simply by expressing their unhappiness at his first proposal. Third, they reacted to the “initial impression” a well-known phenomenon in psychology, where the initial data or stimulus shapes the perception of the following events. In this case, four acorns at first and three later can be perceived immediately as more satisfactory than three acorns and four later, since there is “more right away”. Fourth, the monkeys react in an emotional way, rather strongly, but emotions are tiresome, because of their stressful nature, putting strain on the mind and the body: they cannot remain effective for a very long time. Thus, there is a natural tendency for the mind to pursue – consciously or not - for some kind of attenuation of this intensive and painful mode, through any opportunity. In this case the occasion was created by the “new” proposal. Fifth, the monkeys suffer from what can be described as emotional instability. Contrary to reason, which provides calm and equanimity, an emotional mind is in a state of permanent agitation, little prone to thinking. And one should be reminded that in the Chinese culture, the monkey is precisely

a symbol of such brainlessness, because of its emotional and mental agitation. And this agitation is fragile and easily manipulated.

Then, one might ask himself why Zhuangzi tells this story, describing a situation of manipulation and deceit. We know that he is not some sort of Machiavelli, telling us how to gain and maintain power upon our fellowmen. For example, we could learn from this story that content does not matter so much, the form is everything, the packaging, the spin, as today's communication experts "spin doctors" call it. The message is the message, to reinterpret Marshall McLuhan's famous expression. Classically, in order to manipulate, you need to present different options, no matter how meaningless they are. The keeper provides just enough leeway or latitude in order to give the "victims" a minimal sense of freedom and power.

Zhuangzi does not like power, at least in the sense of authority. He refuses it and criticizes it in many different places. But he promotes power in the sense of "De", the internal power granted to everyone by the "Dao", what gives each and every being some integrity and autonomy. A personal power that we easily forget or abandon. He would criticize "potestas", the power over others, but support "potentia", the power of self, its potentiality. Thus, it is not so much from the standpoint of the keeper he invites us to think, but from the standpoint of the monkey itself. He invites us to contemplate the powerlessness, unhappiness and ridicule of this animal, caged in his own pettiness and stupidity. A

monkey oscillating between survival needs and neurotic behavior. All this constitute the "intention" which for him prohibits us to reach the "celestial way", what maintains us too human. Either the monkeys have to accept the reality of the situation, at least for the moment, or they should act in a more free and creative way. But the way they react is rather primitive, thoughtless, and lack the "breathing" which for Zhuangzi is our way and power to access the "Dao", in order to free ourselves and obtain peace of mind.

The keeper does not represent for him an ego ideal in the sense of being a great manipulator. But he is a teacher, a provider, in the sense of providing us with a degree of consciousness, and in the sense of being "funny". The humorous dimension of his words and behavior represents the power and freedom of the one who knows how we get attached to words, how we cling to preestablished ideas, how we reduce ourselves to some ridiculous fears and pretensions. The character that can be viewed by some readers as a cynical and manipulative being is for Zhuangzi a master of life, by showing us, even though in a cruel manner, how we trap ourselves in a blatant and ridiculous way in our petty calculations. But of course, the temptation will be strong to identify to the monkeys and find some justification, emotional and intellectual, for the pathetic behavior of those so human animals.

4 – Static and dynamic

The psychological attachment we have described so far is not simply something affecting our subjectivity and our mental state: it affects our capacity as well to think, our capability to effectuate adequate judgments. Zhuangzi tries to warn us against this cognitive attachment. What he calls “To attach ourselves to the exclusive knowledge of a thing”. Which means to maintain a definite vision or particular idea about some subject or phenomenon. He is very critical of the inanity of fixed ideas, and their consequences on our speeches and behavior. He gives the example of the permanent debate between philosophical schools, where individuals and intellectual schemes oppose each other. “Then we have the Confucian and Mohist ideas of “right” and “wrong”. What one thinks is right, the other thinks it is wrong. What one thinks is wrong, the other thinks it is right.” He calls this general principle the “This is This, and That is That”, where contrary propositions exclude each other. And from this comes “the flood of rhetoric that enables men to invent wily schemes and poisonous slanders, the glib gabble of “hard” and “white,” the foul fustian of “same” and “different”, which bewilder the understanding of common men.” “Hard and white” was a common subject of debate between scholars and different intellectual school, debating the possibility or impossibility of combining predicates of a given object. The main problem with speech, as he explains it, is not that we name or describe things, but it is that we end up believing in words, our words

or the words of others. We expect speech to provide some unquestionable description of reality, some formulation we can cling to, some words than we can repeat with the utmost certitude. Too often, we hang on to meaningless differences and distinctions, and we are ready to fight for them. A position which signifies that our tranquility is quite fragile, because we attach ourselves emotionally to trivial affairs, and that we are ready to fight for nothing, for very secondary points, or rather formal and abstruse theories. We are unstable and unhappy, and easily manipulated, because we attribute value to facts, thesis, phenomenon and words that are deprived of such intrinsic value.

In opposition to this posture, in order to really think, we must indeed already know that “This is this. That is that”, but we must as well learn what can be called dialectical thinking: “This is also That. That is also This.” Indeed, everything has its “that,” everything has its “this”, there is some type of identity principle, where things are what they are, and not something else. “From the point of view of “that” you cannot see the “this”, but through understanding you can know it.” Understanding is what allows you to see what things are in a certain way. But further on, one must understand a deeper principle as well: “that “that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on “that” - which is to say that “this” and “that” give birth to each other.” We encounter this principle as well in Greek philosophy, for example Heraclitus, who held, in his constantly changing world, that opposite things are identical, and therefore concluded that everything is and is not at the

same time. A positioning that seems to escape logic, a reason why this thinker was called “the obscure”. Socrates, in his dialectical exercise, permanently showed that things are what they are within a relation to what they are not. And Aristotle writes later on that “opposites are born together”. But the path and the skills to make “this” into “that” might be a difficult one. So Zhuangzi specifies: “In order to make Right into Wrong, and Wrong into Right - then you'd really have to be sharp-sighted.”

As a general principle, he writes: “Don't be a thing for things, go back to the origin of things”. This signifies that once we have decided any “thingness” of something, we have chosen a specific option to describe and understand this thing, the fixity we ascribe to this thing reverberates on us, and we become a fixed entity as well. We stop thinking, we stop existing, we stop being alive. The origin of things can be called the Dao, but can be thought as the way things, beings or phenomenon come about, the generating principle, the dynamic of existence. And when we place ourselves in this perspective, we realize the inanity of oppositions, the superficiality of distinctions. This does not imply that we should fall into some lazy relativistic world vision, where reigns indifference and confusion, since those differences still capture some reality, a reality that we should not ignore. But we should not erect those differences into some kind of absolute, we should not view them as self-sustaining and categorical. We should understand the conventional and limited scope of those distinctions. In order to describe the

distinction between the usual way of thinking, and what Zhuangzi or Heraclitus propose, to distinguish those two world visions, we could use the opposition between the concepts of static and dynamic. In general, because of a sort of natural inclination toward stability, or a desire for comfort, laziness or inertia, the mind is inclined toward taking things “as they are”, which means to take things as they appear to us, following our own subjectivity, our intentions, our first and immediate impression, often connected to pleasure and subjectivity. It is more difficult to us, and rather unsettling, to take things within the context of their genesis, as a moment in a process, as the result of a cause, within a framework that could be called the “big picture”. We prefer too often to attach ourselves to the most obvious meaning or reality, a separate and fixed mental representation, and cling to it. This, just as the monkeys of this story, we are happy when reality fits our expectations, and sad when there is a discrepancy, without really understanding what is happening.

From the different standpoints we have developed until now, we can start understanding why Zhuangzi denounces the waste of our cognitive and emotional energy: “To exhaust one's mental power trying to make all things different and separate, without realizing that they are all the same.” In reality, from the standpoint of the Dao, from the standpoint of the origin, from the standpoint of the principles by which things come about, all things are one. But we struggle, for some strange reason, to see them as distinct, we believe and want to believe things are separate, even though reality and

reason show us the opposite. That is the moral of the “monkey story”, which is an illustration of our foolishness. And as a conclusion of this story, Zhuangzi tells us that: “Therefore the sage brings all into harmony, through assertion and denial, while he rests it upon the balance of heaven: this is called “walking a double path.” He does not want to abolish “assertion” and “denial”, he does not want to arrive to some nihilist position where “all is the same”, a situation where our minds, thoughts and actions would be useless. A harmony without any opposites to harmonize would be empty and powerless. We need to go through assertion and denial, articulate them, live them, enjoy them, and search the harmony between them. The “balance of heaven” would mean nothing, if indeed there was nothing to balance. From whence is developed the idea of “walking a double path”. Thus, Zhuangzi does not ask us to give up our own humanity, or deny it, but to be able to perceive it from the standpoint of the “heavens”, to lead and live this “double path” that us humans are condemned to, in opposition to animals that only know necessity, the path of the Dao and somewhat ignore separation and distance.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Why are monkeys happy about the change of diet?
2. Why do monkeys not understand the absurdity of the deal?
3. Is the monkey keeper smart?
4. Does the monkey keeper teach monkeys anything?
5. Where can one see “walking the double path” in the story?
6. Do the monkeys get what they want?
7. Is there a difference between the first and the second offer?
8. Are the monkeys human?
9. Why are monkeys so emotional?
10. Is the monkey keeper virtuous?

Reflection questions

1. Does a manipulator have any weakness?
2. Why do people focus on details?
3. Why do we often miss the obvious?

4. Should one strive to satisfy his desire?
5. How to distinguish the essential from the secondary?
6. Why are we so sensitive about what others tell us?
7. Are emotions an obstacle to consciousness?
8. Is it true that fundamentally nothing changes?
9. Do we overreact to external changes?
10. Is it more difficult to see what is common than what is different?

The wheelwright



桓公讀書於堂上，輪扁斲輪於堂下，釋椎鑿而上，問桓公曰：「敢問公之所讀者何言邪？」公曰：「聖人之言也。」曰：「聖人在乎？」公曰：「已死矣。」曰：「然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫！」桓公曰：「寡人讀書，輪人安得議乎！有說則可，無說則死。」輪扁曰：「臣也，以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫。」

Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright Pien, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, "This book Your Grace is reading - may I venture to ask whose words are in it?"

"The words of the sages," said the duke.

"Are the sages still alive?"

"Dead long ago," said the duke.

"In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!"

"Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?" said Duke Huan. "If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it's your life!"

Wheelwright Pien said, "I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard - you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old."

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1 – Authority

The present story deals largely with the concept of authority, in a challenging way, in different manners. This criticism of authority is in fact one of the characteristics of Zhuangzi, an aspect of his thinking that definitely puts him at odds with the Confucianist tradition. Right away, at the beginning of the narration, Pien shows his lack of respect for authority, in a rather scandalous way, from a common standpoint. Already, the simple fact of putting his tools down and entering the hall, without any order or invitation, on his own volition, like if he belonged there, is a quite hubristic action. He is a mere craftsman, a worker, he has no right to penetrate the aristocratic residence, unless convoked, which might be a rare event. Then, again on his own volition, he calls upon the duke, questioning him about his activity, an initiative that of course can be considered totally inappropriate and even gross. And we notice that the duke threatens him with execution if he cannot substantiate his claim, instead of being just curious about it: "If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it's your life!" There is therefore something threatening about this multiple challenge to authority.

The content of the questioning, dealing with reading books is as well quite surprising, coming from a craftsman, whose activity is primary manual and not intellectual, therefore again stepping out of bound. Furthermore, he asks about the authors of the books. In English, like in many languages, there

is a direct connection between the word "author", the one who writes a book, and "authority", the one who commands, both coming from the Latin substantive auctor, deriving from the verb augere: to increase, to originate, or to promote. This is not the case in Chinese, but the principle is clear that the one who writes a book has some form of authority, in a moral or intellectual way. Thus, by questioning about the "author" of the book, Pien asks who those people in authority are. A suspicion which is confirmed by the duke, since he calls the authors "sages", confirming their statute. Most likely they were connected to the category called "classics", that we will define later on, a body of works that represented a reading obligation for any decently cultivated person.

Now comes a rather funny moment in the dialogue, when Pien asks "Are the sages still alive?". This question can firstly be taken as an expression of extreme naiveté, even of ignorance, since almost by definition, as often, intellectual authorities are dead, even long time dead. This is the case in China like everywhere else, as we see when we list great philosophers. Just like if antiquity was a necessary condition of intellectual value, which in a way makes sense, since the longevity of a work, its survival through time, protects us from its success being a mere effect of the moment, a superficial ephemeral infatuation. But the question can in another way taken as a form of irreverence, if we suspect that Pien is well aware that those authors are long dead. Since such a question, as we will see further on, has a performative or rhetorical purpose of undermining the value of those authors, for being "old

things”, “has been”, or just “cadavers”. Thirdly, we can perceive in this question a key issue of the Zhuangzi philosophy. Life as crucial characteristic of reality, as a form of truth. Life, like the Dao, image of the Dao, is a moving process, in opposition to fixed things, which are dead, and not reliable, not worthy. Therefore, like for Plato and Socrates, the dialogue is crucial, written texts are mere objects, with “fixed” ideas. We encounter this in the works of Nicolas de Cusa, the “Idiot about the mind”, or the “The idiot about wisdom”, where the real philosopher is the “idiot”, a naive character who asks real questions, when the “official philosopher”, and Aristotelian, is formal and vain. In such a paradigm, there is little respect for the official “authority”, little appreciation for the author.

Of course, the answer of the duke is rather expectable, and rather fits the analysis we are presently giving. "Dead long ago", answers he to the wheelwright, an answer which can even be taken as ironical, if we want to enter the logic of the craftsman, for whom dead things lose their worth, lack any value. The man is quite brutal and crude about it, by calling this great and admirable wisdom of lore, “chaff and dreg”. This expression indicates the leftover, when the wine is being made, what remains in a rather unwanted way because it is useless: the undesired byproduct. In other words, the living persons are interested, but what they leave behind when they are dead is of no interest. One should realize that such a perspective is quite scandalous in the traditional Chinese culture, for which the cult of ancestors was a highly respected

component. As well, a common feature of it is the idea of the “Golden times”, as a sort of nostalgic perspective on some era of perfection. Lastly, the idea of the classics, the sacredness of the old canonical texts, which had to be learned and internalized, takes a beating in this severe and sarcastic comment.

As conclusion, we have to see that the present story represents quite a challenge to the established authority: the power of aristocracy, the social norms, the veneration of the ancestors, the value of writings and orthodoxy, everything that is authorized, sanctioned and respected is overthrown in the most brutal and even vulgar way. Such an attitude is quite revealing of the revolutionary worldview of Zhuangzi, one of the reasons why he periodically qualified as an extremist, a subversive or even an anarchist.

2 – Teaching methods

Zhuangzi criticizes a very critical of formal teaching, where an author writes a text, which the student reads and learns. What can be called a transmission conception of education, which primarily consists in the repetition of a content, the most common and traditional modality of teaching in most cultures. One authoritative figure, a teacher, is the beholder of knowledge, while a student is merely a receiver, a sort of an empty vessel that needs to be filled and cannot fill up itself, as

Aristotle described it with his “tabula rasa” concept. In China this mode of teaching still remains the most common way of educating: classrooms are filled with students silently taking notes, then memorizing the information and reciting it during an exam. A student is generally not supposed to interrupt a teacher or question him, as a priori the former has no knowledge to offer to the latter, much less is he able - or allowed - to doubt about the knowledge offered to him by a teacher. Throughout the school studies Chinese students are supposed to pass several major exams, each one marking a transition from one stage to the next, for example, from preschool to elementary school, from elementary to secondary and so on. The toughest and the most known exam is gaokao, the final exam, the result of which determines whether a student will be able to enter a university or not. It is sometimes called “dumuqiao”, which means a “single-log bridge”, an experience that is challenging and is bound to lead to numerous failures. This exam is internationally known as one of the hardest exams in the world and children as young as 6 years of old are informed of this future crucial event that they have to start preparing for right away, even if they have still 12 years to go before this “Rubicon crossing”. To pass this exam one needs to memorize loads of information and it mostly consists of tasks with multiple choice answers. There of course exists only one correct answer. Ambulances usually wait outside schools on the exam days and suicide rates go up. Some compare this exam to keju: an assessment of the knowledge on Chinese classics for government officials that

lasted for 3 days and was abolished only in 1905. The passing rate was reaching a mere one percentile.

European and American educational systems criticize China for keeping on this tradition of “robotic memorization” that according to them makes students incapable of any critical thinking. Chinese educators, on the reverse tend to express their disapproval of the Western educational system that is “too free and not structured”. To show how different a teaching style can be one can simply take a look at Finnish school system where children are not graded at all for the first 6 years of their studies, classes consist mostly of experiments and activities, where students work in groups, learn to create projects and present them. More and more Chinese students opt for graduating in the West, to escape stress and pressure. Even though the relation to knowledge is gradually changing in China itself, some schools passing from transmission teaching method to experiential method.

The latter modality is proposed by Zhuangzi in the present story: the wheelwright wants the Duke to abandon theory and realize that what can be experienced cannot be described and simply memorized. Experience can teach what is now called “soft skills”, as one cannot learn how to communicate, care, relate to others, solve problems or think from reading books and texts. Already Aristotle spoke about the importance of learning through action: one cannot learn how to be virtuous without practicing virtue, one cannot be vicious, then read everything on how to be virtuous, and through this become an example of moral life. He even proposed that our actions

develop our character and not the reverse. As a result, our educated character produces the desirable actions. If one starts acting virtuously, each following pious action will become easier and easier to perform. This is the approach that we can find among pragmatists, for example, Dewey, who defended necessity to engage directly with the environment, knowledge deriving from this interaction with natural objects. Such an approach gave birth to a “problem-based teaching method” that proposes to present students with problems and obstacles that they need to solve, this way motivating them to look for solutions and make dead knowledge “alive” because directly applicable. Information then is connected to life, comes from life and then returns back to life, by acting upon the surroundings and modifying them. One can claim that this is a more potent way of learning because it is active, in opposition to a passive consumption of “wise words”. Such an active teaching is nowadays often called a “flipped classroom”: students prepare all theoretical material at home and during a class together with a teacher set to apply that knowledge by making experiments or creating discussion groups.

One can wonder whether, since most of the acquired knowledge during school period is not then applied in life, social and thinking skills play a more important role than theory. That was an underlying principle of Steiner, an Austrian philosopher, who then founded the internationally known Waldorf school. There, the main purpose of education is to bring up free and socially responsible individuals, transmitting to a child an idea that the world around him is

fundamentally good. Such school system does not promote neither grading nor clear-cut subjects, the main goal is to “unfold one’s spiritual identity” through communicating with nature and with others. Although one might criticize this school system for its strong ideological or dogmatic dimension. Such an approach is related to the ideas of French philosopher J-J. Rousseau (18th century) and Swiss pedagogue Johann Pestalozzi (19th century). Rousseau was an adept of a naturalist vision of education, he was against a formal curriculum until a child reaches 12 years old and unlike Confucius he thought that morality cannot be taught, it is merely a sentiment, not a rational process, in opposition as well to Plato and Kant. He thought that books primarily prompted one to talk and to recite, but not to learn, that any learning comes from direct observation and experience. A child will then learn all the basic moral principles and be disciplined simply because he will see the consequences of his actions. But independently of how a child would develop, for naturalists it was more interesting to see a child the way he is, instead of being obsessed with what and how he could become in the future. Pestalozzi was defending very similar ideas, thinking that any education should be child-centered and not teacher-centered; he was famous for his idea that learning should pass through “head, heart and hands”, in other words, the more experience, the better.

Another important way of learning is through discussion: students reflect together upon some topic or a teacher questions students in order to provoke thinking process:

constructivism, the process of elaborating knowledge together, instead of giving it as an priori “revelation”. Such teaching does not presuppose any pre-established knowledge that is right and correct, there exist different views and each one has some reason to exist. The birth of this approach is found in Ancient Greece, with the figure of Socrates, who was incessantly questioning his fellow citizens, convinced that truth can be discovered only through dialogue. Dialectics was a tool that allowed examination of various opinions, even opposite ideas. Knowledge then is viewed as a dynamic substance, it moves, it remains all the time in a process. The one who questions can very well be surprised with the conclusions of a dialogue and discover something that he was not aware of before. Truth therefore always lies “elsewhere”, in alterity and confrontation. Plato, a student of Socrates, will later on say that any learning is a reminiscence; a subject’s soul already contains all the knowledge that it can be given, in a form of potential, and it simply has to be reminded of it through creative reasoning. That’s why one can be taught through being questioned: a question will bring forth an answer that one “knew” all along. Although one must remember that such a path is much more dangerous than a simple transmission of ideas: it is less certain and can even be considered less efficient: it is a slow process, and questioning can engender absurdity and nonsense as well. But the teacher has here to learn to accept that there might be more than one correct answer and that those answers can be found in the students’ heads. All this makes a teacher’s figure much less authoritative.

Even though not very popular as a pedagogical tool, a discussion approach was later on developed by different pedagogues, such as Vygotsky (beginning of 20th century), an author of a Social Development Theory. He argued that social learning precedes development and not the reverse, as it was considered by J. Piaget. One person needs to be challenged by another person in order to proceed in her education, otherwise development will be slow and insignificant. So discussion is crucial in one’s learning, truth comes through the other.

Questioning sometimes comes close to what can be called “non-teaching” or “negative” way of teaching”, through provocation, irony, humor or narration. This more radical form is commonly met in Zen Buddhism for example when a master “hits” a student, psychologically or physically, at the moment he takes a wrong position in meditation, without much explanation. Comparatively, even harsh questioning can be considered caring and accessible. Chinese Chan or Japanese Zen often use the koan, short contradictory stories, as a way of creating dissonance in a mind of student and it is then his responsibility to give meaning to it and to find “his mind” through doubt and paradoxes. Koans are known to produce insights that are not limited to reasoning or one’s own experience, it is an intuitive perception or illumination. One is left with himself, confronting his own self, there are no right answers or explanations. There is a known story where a master came into a room filled with students who were expecting some wise words from him and instead he was

sitting in front of them with a flower in his hand silently. Only one student understood the meaning of this gesture.

The same effect can be achieved through telling some narration that does not directly tell what to do or think, but leaves a reader with some bewilderment. This for example can be met in different Muslim Sufi or Buddhist oral and written traditions. We encounter this way of teaching with the famous Turkish character Nasruddin, who offers ideas that go against common sense or acts in a strange way, absurdities that in a very short time makes one realize something important about human nature. Zhuangzi is doing the same in his stories: he creates cognitive dissonance, as often his stories have an ironical and provocative dimension, showing a problem in the current state of affairs. Nothing is said outwardly, there are no obvious principles to follow, one has to go much deeper to encounter them, but a reader must do the thinking work by himself. Such teaching leaves most people puzzled and even frustrated, they complain that they do not know what to expect or they do not understand where all this is going. But this way of teaching can be considered as more real; a teacher simply tells a story, demonstrates what he preaches through his actions, makes an ironical remark and students can observe and make conclusions autonomously. Each one will take in only what he can take. Since in any way one can grasp only what one is ready to grasp at the moment and no amount of explanations can make him access an idea that he was not ready to access otherwise. This manner of teaching is as well very typical of esoteric traditions, where the faithful should

never be told what he cannot grasp, otherwise he could unknowingly commit blasphemy. Therefore revelation is given in small doses, without much explanation, to each the determination of his own pace.

This non-explicatory method is as well close to what cynics were doing in Ancient Greece: philosopher Diogenes would live in a barrel, walk naked and shit in the streets in order to show that an ascetic life is truer and more philosophical than a life filled with comfort in its form and nature. Would he achieve greater results if he gave a lecture on ascetic life and came up with an “algorithm” of the achievements of such a state? Would Socrates be followed by more people if he wrote a book on how to ask questions instead of questioning? Would Zhuangzi be more accepted in the society if he wrote similar injunctions and rules as Confucius, instead of enigmatic stories? Would students know more if they were invited to a real life experience in a classroom instead of taking notes? Vygotsky would argue that the less clear is a message on what to do, the further we might get away from a “zone of proximal development”: a zone where lies a potential of a student to learn. So one might say that when a wise man sends a mysterious message to his students instead of clearly indicating the true path, he primarily entertains himself and such an action has nothing to do with teaching. Such an attitude can easily be criticized as non-pedagogical or even counter-productive. This is the whole dilemma between the duke and the wheelwright: are the words of the craftsman

sufficient and efficient in themselves? Does one necessarily need a “chisel” in order to learn? Are words mere illusion?

A last word should be said about an interesting Chinese teaching concept: “wind teaching”. It originates from the ancient “Great preface to the Book of Odes” (Shijing - XIth – VIIth century BC). The songs of the Odes, frequently through simple, rustic subjects, conveyed extensive, elaborate allegorical meanings that assigned moral or political significations to the smallest details of each line. Those popular songs were seen as useful keys to understanding the troubles of the common people, and were often read as allegories; for example, complaints against lovers were read as complaints against faithless rulers. Although of course, those interpretations underwent many debates throughout the centuries. Some other poems, less allegorical, just invite the reader to share the charm and freshness of rural life, in order to pacify the soul.

“Wind teaching” implies to use a very faint and indirect way of influencing people, in particular by using poetry, an allusive and evasive way to communicate ideas and to educate everyone. This principle reflects the importance the ruling class attributed to the development and utility of literature and art in feudal society. To give an indication of the importance of this principle, there is a famous quote from Confucius: “Who does not study the Shijing knows neither to speak nor to act correctly”. Because it teaches both form – language itself – and content – primarily ethics. By singing and reciting this poetry, people could be morally educated,

develop aesthetic judgment and acquire good manners. Of course, the poetic mode is a very particular way of teaching, since nothing is said explicitly, and a work of interpretation is needed. From this “wind” concept come different other terms, which always imply to persuade in a curvy, indirect way, since “to wind” means to educate in a distant way or to reform a misguided person through persuasion. For example: “Feng Min” 风民 f: to wind the people, the ones who will be educated by the ruler, “Feng Quan” 风劝, wind persuasion in general. and “Feng Jian” 风谏, wind persuasion from the inferior to the superior, like the chief or the emperor. From this, “wind word” came to mean irony, another indirect way to teach and communicate.

3 - Teaching or learning

Just like in this story, an interesting problem about teaching and the impossibility of teaching is as well raised by Plato. Socrates, his teacher and main hero of the written platonic dialogues, is known as advocating ignorance as a virtue. Ignorance being for him the necessary attitude allowing thinking to take place. For example Socrates is quoted claiming: « I cannot bring knowledge to a man, but I can make him think.” Therefore, questioning people, inviting them to reflect and contemplate ideas, so they produce ideas by themselves, is the main and only substantial way to teach,

in the socratic tradition. This general principle applies just as well to the teaching of virtue, moral education. But Socrates observes a certain impossibility to teach those virtues, since “Virtuous men are incapable to transmit their virtues to their children”, as is repeated in different dialogues, such as Meno and Protagoras. For Socrates, teaching virtue is not a side issue, it is not simply teaching “good behavior”. It is practically equivalent to teaching philosophy itself, since in a way, for him the whole of philosophy is subsumed in the teaching of ethics. The reason is simple: he considers the “Good” as the transcendent concept par excellence, the crucial “meta concept”, as he works it through in the “Philebus” dialogue, a concept that is founding all other concepts, ontologically and epistemically. The “Good”, even above reason and pleasure, is the condition of possibility of all other concepts, they all derive from it. From the understanding and the contemplation of this unconditional or unhypothetical form, rather hard to define, is derived the right application, in a theoretical way, or the appropriate behavior, in a practical way. Thus it is as well in the « world of ideas » that are found, just as scientific truths, ethical values. Moral values are ideal essences, apprehended intuitively at the end of a dialectical process. They are founded on the absolute perfection, the idea of the “Good”, “Sun” of the ideal world, that one must contemplate. Indeed, it is engaged in the world of action, but it still should remain a disinterested or selfless endeavor, with a spiritual dimension. For Plato, it is the « bad thinking » which leads to “bad action”, we do wrong out of ignorance: the will derives metaphysically from the

intelligence, knowledge precedes action. Thus, Plato identifies morals to science: in order to live better, one must contemplate the ideal world. A position which implies that in order to live well, one must practice rigorous dialectics. But later on, the philosopher worries that such a demanding perspective would abandon the common person, incapable of such work, to the immoralism and the relativism of the sophists. Thus he proposes the reference to a lesser possibility, what he calls “true opinion” or “right opinion”. The establishment of rules, goals and principles that can be applied by anyone, in a formal way, even without having access to the epistemological foundation of these values. This is important in particular for the intermediary class, the “guardians”, who in spite of their lack of intellectual capacities, must conduct themselves in a more noble and elevated way than inferior classes, in order to guide them.

But he claims that if virtue is a science, it can be taught, if it is merely a true opinion, it cannot be really taught, not in any real way: we would be moral only accidentally, formally, or superficially. To summarize, in any rigorous way, the lesser order cannot be taught. It would be more akin to training an animal, a sort of behavior modification process, since profound understanding and the use of dialectics is for him a necessary component of knowing, and therefore of teaching.

Thus Plato’s ethics is fractured, between a moral of the absolute, where virtue is a science, reserved to the elite than can learn it, and a moral of the empirical training, for the vulgar, those who will never escape from the cave. He then

concludes that « right opinion » and « science » are both capable of guiding us properly, the former being not a lesser guide than the latter, in terms of the appropriateness of actions, or in other words, both are equivalent in relation to practical purpose. This echoes the distinction the ancient Greek language made between “episteme”, most often translated as knowledge or science, while “techne” is translated as either craft or art, the former being more theoretical, the latter being more applied and practical. In a way, one can say there is an impoverishment of the “ethics”. Although Plato defends the idea that from a practical standpoint “right opinion” does not lose anything, compared to science. But he admits on the reverse that « right opinion » does not have the same stability than science, primarily because such morality by “obligation” is more susceptible to be vanquished by desires, in opposition to morality founded in thinking, more grounded in the being and the personality of the self. “From the standpoint of action, right opinion is neither less good nor less useful than science. And the man who possess it is as worthy as the thinker.... True opinions as long as they remain, are beautiful things, they only produce advantages. But their weakness is that they soon escape from our human soul.”

We don't know why some “golden souls”, as Plato calls them, while others , “silver souls” or “bronze souls”, cannot be taught in any real way. But what remains is that learning as a purely formal repetition of principles, if it can have some utility, does not really teach. And there is some mystery about

the learning process. “I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me”, claims the wheelwright. A very radical statement that leaves us pensive about what allows teaching to go on, and if any teaching is actually possible, if it remains mere wishful thinking on the parts of “pretended teachers”. The “mystery” dimension seems to us merely to criticize the idea of formal teaching, connected with the idea that a teacher, just by speaking, would educate the student. But the story, thought the wheelwright, does not explain anything. Why does Zhuangzi not explain? Is it in order for the teaching process to remain a mystery? Or is it because he wants to apply what he preaches? If he would explain to us the process, he would be falling in the trap of precisely what he criticizes: the principle of telling the students, so that they listen, memorize, and then know. This contradictory behavior is often displayed by pedagogues, be they parents or teachers: it is the famous “Do what I preach, don't do what I do!”. For example, the pedagogue explains at length why the teacher should not speak too much and should merely ask questions. Actually a little bit what we are doing in writing the present text...Thus, since Zhuangzi, in this story, claims that books don't teach, that words don't teach, he will not use words in order to teach us the “secret” of the wheelwright.

Thus, since we are betraying the master, let us betray him all the way and reveal what we think is the secret. The only way that he could teach someone to carve a wheel, would be to give him a piece of wood, a chisel, and tell the student “Get to work”. Of course, he will make many mistakes, he might

destroy the piece of wood, hurt himself, produce a weird crooked wheel, but not accomplish anything worthy and useful. He will probably feel depressed or irritated about the difficult task, complain, want to give up, or he might through his ordeal discover little insights that will give him some hope. During this whole endeavor, he might express his feelings to his teacher, or ask him questions. We don't know how Zhuangzi would react to this, but we know that Socrates would keep questioning his interlocutor, not for pedagogical reasons, but because he himself is interested to discover something about human functioning. Zhuangzi is more unpredictable. He might answer by silence, tell a story or a joke with no apparent or immediate connection to the situation, give some nonsensical indication, or maybe as well give some advice, like the description of the two different problems in chiseling described by the craftsman: the angle being too perpendicular and sharp, or too tangential and smooth. Although he would remain conscious that those "technical" advice cannot in any way solve the problem of the student. No more than an art teacher would think that by giving some technical advice, he would allow his student to produce a masterpiece.

Then what is left as the key to learning an art or mastering a skill? We propose that what determines primarily the learning process are two aspects. First the relation of the subject to himself: his capacity of understanding, of taking initiative and trying gestures, his will, his patience, his tranquillity. Second his relation to the product, to the substance he has to work with, be it wood or other hard matter, language, dialogue,

sounds, etc. There it will be his sensitivity, his capacity of perception, his relation to this substance, etc. One cannot know a priori how those way of being, gift or capacity, will come out and evolve. But what we know is that the only way to develop them is to invite the subject to set himself to work, to test those capacities, to feed his gift, which otherwise will never emerge. Thus, giving to the subject the minimum needed to do the work and just give him a task to accomplish, or even give him no task but just watch what he does, he the best way for him to grow and learn the trade. The what happens what happens: maybe he makes it, maybe he does not, maybe he manages easily or with difficulty, but whatever happens, no formal instructions could really modify. Of course, once the process takes place, the teacher can give bits of advice or make criticisms, but those words will be useful only to the extent they are appropriate and correspond to the actual psychological and skill situation. If it is not the case, telling the student anything might just divert him from the task, feed his insecurity, or give him the illusion of knowing, all of which being counterproductive, or even sterilizing the live process. In other words, just like with Plato, we have to accept that people are that they are, and not maintain the illusion of the omnipotence of the teacher, the mirage of the almighty readymade speeches. And if we want someone to learn, we should not behave toward him like the mother hen which regurgitates the digested food in the throat of her small ones, but we should trust the student, put him to work, and see what happens. In a way, the best teaching is no teaching.

4 - The Classics

Most main Chinese canonical texts are classified under the name of “The classics”. The most common abridgement of these texts is presented as “Four Books and Five Classics”, this name being established in the Neo-Confucian period. The classics are sometimes as well known as the “Thirteen Classics”, some books being added during the Tang and Song dynasties. These texts contain an array of thoughts and documents on the most important subjects: divination, philosophy, poetry, agriculture, history, art, astronomy, lexicography, rituals, etc. The oldest texts date back to the pre-Qin period, before 221 BC. The “Five Classics” are sometimes referred to as the “Six Classics” because of the 6th book: the Classic of Music that was lost during the Qin unification of China.

The “Four books and Five classics” became the core of the official curriculum for civil service examinations during the Ming and Qing dynasties. No one could become a government official without demonstrating their knowledge on this subject. All the discussions between political representatives were filled with references to these books and at some point one had to know the texts even to become a military officer. This was imposed in order to make sure that everyone shared the same set of core values and views. The “Five Classics” was a compilation of different texts: the Classics of Odes (a collection of poems and eulogies, hunting and festal songs),

the Book of Documents (a variety of historical documents, apparently dating as far back as the 6th century BC), the I Ching (known as the Book of Changes, consisting of 64 hexagrams and presenting a divination and philosophy system), the Spring and Autumn Annals (a chronicle relating the reign of the twelve rulers of the state of Lu) and the Book of Rites (ancient rituals and ceremonies). The “Four books” are: the Analects (dialogues between Confucius and his disciples), the Doctrine of the Mean (a part of the Book of Rites focusing on how to gain a perfect virtue), the Great Learning (one chapter from the Book of Rites, sometimes considered a “gateway to learning”, expressing the main themes of Chinese philosophy) and the Mencius (conversations of Mencius with different kings and his students). Beside this, the “Thirteen classics” contains some additional texts, such as the Book of Filial Piety (portraying dialogues between Confucius and one of his disciples on the issue of children’s filiality) and the Erya (comments on the Zhou dynasty terms). These books were sometimes required to be memorized by heart; mostly boys, from elite families, would learn some of them, after learning the Hundred Family Surnames, containing about 500 surnames that presented almost all basic ideograms.

In opposition to such a curriculum, It is interesting to remark that the Classics do not contain any works of some prominent thinkers such as Zhuangzi or Mozi: they were qualified as masters but not classics, most likely because some of their perspectives do not fit the ideological or dogmatic aspect of

the established orthodoxy. For example in Zhuangzi the defense of the concept of individuality and the rejection of rituals. In Mozi, the criticism of the traditional Chinese over-attachment to family and clan structures, that he tries to replace with the concept of "universal love", since he believed people should in principle care for all people equally.

An official demand for studying Classics came with the ruling of the Emperor Wu around 141 BC, who institutionalized these classics and created a procedure for learning the texts and passing exams. All this contributed to creating the "Confucian state". Before that, China went through a process of unification that cost a lot of lives of Confucian scholars and the destruction of numerous intellectual texts. Around 460 scholars were burned alive and anyone who owned books from the Classics was forced to bring them for burning, or they were threatened to be executed. Criticism or any reflection about the present state of events was forbidden, as well under the menace of death. About 100 years later these texts would become a base for the governing principles of the state.

Nevertheless, the general idea of obtaining knowledge on the path of becoming a virtuous person came a long time before that, around the 6th century BC: during that time appeared the notion of "junzi", "man of good" who would represent an accomplished person because of being knowledgeable about the classic texts. Later on such people would be called "literati" or "scholar-gentry", they would serve the government but only after earning academic degrees through

examination procedures. Knowledge was more important than determining laws or understanding general principles: the one who possessed this knowledge would represent law and order. For this reason, some of the western scholars considered this as a Chinese weak spot: the incapacity to rule according to laws, but being totally dependent on specific men, "experts", who were the holders of some particular knowledge.

Some of classical texts were more "rigid" and pursued a goal of conveying the formal outlines of good behavior, for example, through describing rituals. Others were more philosophical, inviting to work on oneself. For example, the Doctrine of the Mean, considered to be written by the grandson of Confucius, offers a guidance on a way to perfecting oneself, mainly by striving to reach the mean, the way of the "zhongyong", the "unwobbling pivot". This meant acquiring the capacity to remain in a state of constant balance. "Zhongyong" is a complex and loaded concept, which means moderation, rectitude, objectivity, sincerity, honesty, truthfulness, propriety and lack of prejudice. The Doctrine had three basic guidelines: self-watchfulness, leniency and sincerity. In order to be self-watchful one would have to ask himself questions, practice self-discipline and self-educate. Leniency comes close to the Christian recommendation: "treat others the way you want them to treat you". Sincerity deals with the connections between Heaven and Earth: the one who is sincere can reach Heaven. The idea of "mean" is found as well in the Western philosophical tradition, for example in

Aristotle, who recommended the golden middle way, as the path that is not inclined towards any extremes, the “center” where true virtue can be achieved, through measure, temperance, absence of excess. Similar ideas can be found in Christianity and Judaism where any discordance with measure and temperance represents evil.

However, one can ask himself to which extent memorizing or reading those injunctions could in itself make you virtuous, or if they inevitably required some practice. Can someone question himself naturally and maintain this practice all by himself, simply by reading prescriptions to do so? To which degree all of the ideas listed are wise and interesting, but nevertheless remain inert and useless knowledge for the one studying them? One can argue that unless such ideas are put into practice they are mere words, even though they can fascinate the mind. One can just learn by heart and recite those lines, but not put into practice their recommendations. One can truly speak about it only after having experienced it, just like the wheelwright implies in the story. Even though he goes one step further, with the idea that true and profound knowledge cannot even be framed through language: after describing his own experience, he states: “you can’t put it into words”, or “I can’t teach it to my son, nor can he learn it from me”.

Zhuangzi takes in this story a very radical position against “formal” knowledge, knowledge through words. And one can wonder whether indeed any real knowledge has to pass through the filter of the “know-how”. The idea that one would

need to use the chisel in order to determine the right amount of pressure and the right angle is beyond words, showing the inevitable and irreconcilable gap between theoretical knowledge and actual reality. Thus what Zhuangzi criticizes in the story, through the words of the wheelwright: the knowledge that the Duke gets from the books is nothing but “chaff and dregs of the men of old”, he misses “life” or “reality”, what no books in fact can teach. Although one can as well very well criticize the position of the wheelwright, when he attests that he will always remain within the frame of his single lonely experience, impossible to communicate. While the words of the wise men will show what is impossible to truly grasp on one’s own, because we are not capable of experiencing or putting into action what they describe. The “solution” here probably lies in the capacity to oscillate between knowledge and practice, confronting both realms, without scorning upon either, but viewing each one as a challenge for the other.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Is Pien teaching Duke Huan?
2. Why does Pien want his teachers to be alive?
3. Why can't Pien teach his son how to use a chisel?
4. Does Duke Huan know something that Pien does not?
5. What makes Pien courageous enough to object to the Duke?
6. Is Pien narrow-minded?
7. Which different ways of teaching does the story offer?
8. Should the Duke keep reading his books?
9. Would Pien be a better wheelwright if he read books?
10. Is one using a better learning technique than the other in this story?

Reflection questions

1. Is it possible to teach?
2. Is experience a better teacher than books?
3. Does all knowledge derive from experience?

4. Can we be taught something that we don't want to learn?
5. Is practice a condition for learning?
6. Should one burn the books in order to really learn?
7. Can knowledge be certain?
8. Is each one condemned to learn in a certain way?
9. Why do some people want to teach?
10. What stops us from learning?

Crooked Shu



支離疏者，頤隱於臍，肩高於頂，會撮指天，五管在上，兩髀為脅。挫鍼治癰，足以餬口；鼓箠播精，足以食十人。上徵武士，則支離攘臂而遊於其間；上有大役，則支離以有常疾不受功；上與病者粟，則受三鐘與十束薪。夫支離其形者，猶足以養其身，終其天年，又況支離其德者乎！」

There is Zhi li Shu (Thin, the deformed man). Chin stuck down on his navel. Shoulders higher than head. Hairs in a bun, pointing at the sky. The acupoints of the five internal organs twisted upwards. Both legs in his armpits. He sews clothes, he cleans laundry, enough to feed himself. He winnows cereals, he purifies the grain. He gets enough to eat for ten persons. When the ruler raises an army, Zhi li rolls up his sleeves and waves his arms. When the ruler asks for collective work, Zhi li uses his handicap and does not receive labor. When the ruler distributes millet to the invalids. He receives three big measures of it, and ten bundles of firewood. Even if his body is deformed, he still gets enough to feed his body. And finish the years Heaven granted him. How much more would it be, if his virtue was deformed.

CONTENT OF THE STORY

1 - Survival

2 - Appearance

3 - Individualism

4 - The concept of “De”

5 - Questions

1 – Survival

The most striking feature of Shu is his survival capacity. In spite of his severe physical handicap, he seems to manage rather well. He labors a lot, be it the work he does with clothes: sewing them, cleaning them, or his work with the cereals: winnowing or sorting out the good grain. We learn that just with this activity, he already gets enough to feed ten persons, although he is alone, implying he gets quite rich from the large surplus. But he manages as well to obtain his share of the allowances, seeds and firewood, granted to the handicapped, even though he has no need for this charity. It is specified in the story that this assistance is supposed to be given out to the invalids, a term that paradoxically does not fit Shu.

Of course, the reader can here notice the duplicity of this dubious character: he obviously has all the appearances of a severely handicapped persons, but he is definitely not handicapped from the standpoint of functioning and activity, quite the contrary. A duplicity that is not accidental, since it somewhat remains at the heart of the survival principle. In this dangerous world we live in, just like animals in the jungle, one should project on the world the image needed in order to protect himself or get what he wants, one should hide his real needs or intentions, as a way of being more efficient. There is no place for truth in a world of struggle and survival. As a general concept, survival is important as an anthropological

invariant. We can call it the “animal” side of the human being. Animals have to survive, they have to keep themselves alive, that is their main preoccupation and activity: to maintain their being, to avoid death and destruction. Therefore, they focus on feeding themselves, protecting themselves, housing themselves, as well as mating and reproducing, which is the way life instinctively goes on, a tough reality where we have to protect our own species and engender our progeny. Within this framework, in this perilous world, we have few allies, if any, and many foes. If nature is the milieu within which we live and evolve, it is what provides us with necessary resources, but it represents as well a threat, since we compete with many other beings in this striving. Either because we want the same thing as them, nourishment and space, or because one being is the nourishment of another, a deadlier menace. In both way we severely compete. Human beings transfer this “survival” principle in an existential and psychological dimension, where the same “struggling” and “competing” is extended to a larger array of worries and preoccupation, largely connected to the “image” production: identity, social status, power, greed, etc. Of course, the human mind, contrary to a pure “biological being”, can both amplify the animal behavior or can overcome it, through his capacity to grasp universal principles, such as access to reason, to harmony, which transcends his attitude, his actions, his behavior. The epitome of this perspective in the Chinese culture is the “Dao” concept, the Way, a sort of universal principle, an abstract and difficult concept, which refers more or less to “the way things function”, or natural law. This

principle is considered, by Zhuangzi and many other philosophers, as an ideal, a higher order mode of action, towards which all humans should strive for, in order to be happy and free. A perspective which of course is totally opposed to the survivalist perspective, quite common among humans, that Shu represents in a caricatural way.

In many ways, Shu is quite human, precisely because he incarnates the way we spend most our time and energy. Striving to survive, in order to satisfy our primitive needs, a dynamic in which we compete with everyone else, where we need to fight and struggle, as much for material resources as for status and recognition. In this scheme, what one gets, the other one does not get, man is a wolf for man, as Hobbes coined it. When the Dao principle invites us in opposition to see how we rather share something in common, how our real interest is to privilege unity and harmony. Of course, one could here object that life is harsh, that China always suffered from some form of overpopulation, that the agricultural tradition is one of hardship and struggle. In this sense, Shu can represent some form of ideal”, since he manages so well to succeed, to become prosperous and probably to have a long life, as the story suggests, two crucial criteria of success in a pragmatic culture.

2 – Appearance

Shu is ugly. More than ugly, he is deformed, gnarled, broken, fragmented, as the Chinese word “zhīlí” brutally indicates. There is something almost inhuman with him, a grotesque, scaring or disgusting appearance. His chin is stuck down on his navel, which implies that he cannot stand, he is stooped, when erection is precisely the first characteristic of the human animal, his pride, in opposition to four legged animals that are bent, inclined toward the earth. To stand up is a sign of worth, to bow is to be lesser being. And Shu is permanently bowing, indicating his structural inferiority. His shoulders are higher than his head, confirming the lowness of his being. Someone lowering willfully his head in a such way would be ready for base actions, a position too excessive to be honest, a forced humility. Even though we are suggested that he is like this by birth, we cannot avoid interpreting his posture, if only because of the feeling that imposes itself on us. The hairs in a bun, “pointing at the sky” rather provides a sense of ridicule, like if the heavens themselves were laughed at by pointing at them with a hair bun, while the body and the eyes are looking down. “The acupoints of the five internal organs twisted upwards” represents a major distortion of “nature” since those acupoints capture the essential dynamic of the body, the way they capture the fundamental principle of nature, the general principle of nature and life, the energy points through which all the energy fluxes go through. Traditional Chinese medicine practitioners believe that the body's vital energy, or

“qi”, flows along invisible channels called meridians, of which the blockages and distortion cause pain and disease. Thus, the description of Shu renders us highly suspicious of his status, of his health and stability, for his betrayal of the natural rules and model. As for “his legs in his armpits”, we cannot avoid thinking of the monkey, this creature which at the same time is close to man, but seems to be a caricature of humanity, which explains why “monkey” is so often, in many cultures, an insulting and derogatory way to describe someone.

Once we have noticed the appearance of the hero, through a rather intense description, the author describes for us the activity of this weird looking creature. And as we described previously, he is largely involved in a survival activity, quite close to most of human daily basic support activity. We can then ask ourselves if being and appearance fit together in this text, or if there is a discrepancy between them. One way the discrepancy can be perceived is through the inconsistency between a very normal person, in terms of behavior, trying to get the most out of his actions and out of the system, out of society, and the monstrosity of the hero's looks, the abnormality of his bodily shape. Of course, from the standpoint of Zhuangzi, this divergence can be accounted for. One of his main criticism of human life and activity is precisely the meaningless, the shallowness, the pettiness, the illusion of human activity. What he calls the “human mode”, in opposition to the “celestial mode”. And what is considered normal to most of us is normal because it is done a lot, following the norm of the majority, but it is not “normal”

according to “heavens”, according to the “Dao”, according to the “gentleman”. Therefore, he considers monstrous the usual way of behaving, a man reduced to groveling for food and wealth, contrary to the usual perspective of normality.

Another aspect of the treatment of appearance in this text, in terms of its discrepancy with reality, is by showing that the way we look is not conceived in terms of truly expressing who we are, but is more a decoy, a disguise, a mask. Be it in order to seduce and lure, or in order to hide, one has to “calculate” his manifestations and presentation. There are moments to look strong and dangerous, moments to look weak and harmless, moment to be visible and moments to remain invisible. Thus, Shu is an actor. He knows how to look strong and efficient when he sells his services, he knows how to look weak when it is time to get some help or when he wants to avoid the duties and chores every valid person is normally compelled to accomplish. He even plays with his appearance, displaying a certain form of outright cynicism, when he is described “rolling up his sleeves” and “waving his arms” in front of the army. This rather ambiguous expression lets us imagine, as we see with different translators, how he might wave goodbye to the soldiers, how he might pretend himself to play the soldier, or just act as a fool, forgetting that those men are out to defend the country and risk their life. Although we might think here as well how Zhuangzi himself would laugh at those soldiers, in view of his derisive view on most human endeavors, especially when it comes to imposing some perspective on someone else. His only difference probably

with Shu is that the latter is overdoing it, he has something to prove to himself and others, like a form of superiority or arrogance in order to compensate for his social rejection and the scornful glance people might have on him, and the resentment that this probably suscitates in him.

3 – Individualism

The first name of our hero, Shu, means “thin”. In this sense, the word means that he lacks “thickness” or “substance”, because of his isolation, his deprivation of any real social or family bonding. As we have seen, he is totally focused on himself, he is only preoccupied with his own person, his survival and his greed, a situation which in this cultural context definitely makes him a lesser man.

In ancient China, like in many traditional societies, the individual was defined by a network of family ties, local (village) or extended (clan), to whom he belonged.

Some rare voices have defended individualism, in the long history of China. Such as the philosopher Yang Chu (300 BC), who advocated a radical theory of selfishness, claiming “he would not sacrifice a single of his hair for the empire”, and refused to serve in the army. He of course was quite criticized, and this type of perspective remained marginal. On the other side, more established was the legalist philosophy (Guan

Zhong 7th century BC, Mozi 4th century BC), one of the classical schools of thought of China, which advocated that “The individual must sacrifice to the State his thinking, his work and even his life if the sovereign demands it, without any consideration for his personal desire and happiness” would have a much more lasting success. It will be replaced as state doctrine by Confucianism, which only provides a slightly more considerate vision of the separate individual, insisting heavily on the importance of hierarchy and interpersonal relations. Confucius himself would have said that “A great army cannot be deprived of his general in chief, but the individual man cannot be dispossessed of his will”. Although the way he was historically understood and used by the Chinese imperial power more contributed to the self-effacement of the individual within a hierarchical structure. The subjects owed obedience to the emperor, the son to the father, brothers were linked to fraternal duty, friends had an obligation of fidelity. Confucianism recognizes to a certain extent individual interests and desires, but it invites us to moderate those tendencies, being very critical of individualism and hedonism. The primary consideration is to maintain social justice and harmony, moral rules, and a sense of responsibility should prevail above our personal endeavors. Not forgetting as well the harmony with nature or with heaven, which is the primary principle and must guide our actions.

The strong moral accent in the Confucianist thinking distinguishes the man of value (Junzi), the man of noble

value, from the small man, the man of petty preoccupations (xiǎorén). The latter does not grasp the value of virtues and seeks only immediate gain. He is egotistic, self-centered, and does not consider the consequences of his actions. These includes the ones who continually indulge in sensual and emotional pleasure, who are interested merely in power, wealth and fame, the ones who ignore the long-term benefit for others. We can call it empty individualism, only concerned with oneself and one’s interest. On this particular angle, Zhuangzi rather maintains his affiliation with the tradition. But the moment where the divergence takes is on the problem of conformism, in particular on the issues of the rituals and social rules, a point on which Confucianism is either ambiguous or downright formal, in particular on the issue of the rituals and respect of social rules. One could say that Confucianism oscillates between the obedience to human rules and heavenly rules, when the Taoist clearly opts for heavenly rules, criticizing any concession to traditions and customs when those go against more fundamental principles. This is particular visible on the ritualistic obligations, such as hierarchical obligations, bereavement rules, norms of respect, etc. The perspective of the ritual contains simultaneously an ethical, political, cultural, logical and esthetical dimension. For Confucianism, the established conventions, as a social order, represent some kind of absolute. Basically, the criticism of Shu, the nature of his “thinness”, from this traditional standpoint, would be his lack of consideration for society, since he is primarily, if not exclusively concerned with himself and his greed. His refusal

to participate to collective work and his cynism toward the army are the two best expressions of it. While his ignorance of virtue, his exclusive pursuit of material wealth, his ignorance of the Dao, would be more clearly the Daoist criticism for his individualism, since he separates the preoccupation of his existence from the fundamental principles of nature or reality. His duplicity, his petty preoccupations, the fascination with his own human needs and desires, would be the main angle of criticism. Although there, again, Confucianism would tend to agree as well with this angle of criticism. The main difference is that for Zhuangzi, his acute sense of individualism would not be considered a problem if it was focused on some higher and lofty goal and concern.

4 - The concept of “De”

The notion of “De” (德) is a very important concept overall in Chinese culture, especially in Taoist philosophy, considered second in importance, right after the concept of Dao. Although it presents a problem for translators, since it has more than twenty possible meanings. Confucianists often give it a clear moral connotation, translating it as “virtue” or beneficence, when Taoists rather claim that “De” indicates “power”, “internal force” or “integrity”. In the latter case the meaning is broader, since we are not anymore restricted to the ethical field, but broadening it to the ontological domain

as well. “De” in this case indicates the power of the Dao, its potency, or its actualization. For example, the title of the founding work of taoism: “Dao De King” would mean, “The book of the Way and of the Power of the Way”.

As Zhuangzi wrote: “Dao produces a thing and De maintains it”, indicating that “De” is an internal force that allows Dao to realize itself. Some thinkers consider that every living thing possess a “De”, each particular being in this case manifesting a particular representation of the Dao. “De” is neither good nor bad but a potent drive, which then can be connoted negatively or positively. Although one can see why potency can be easily considered a virtue, since as a power of the Dao it will necessarily accomplish good things; it is a positive force or will, in the sense that it carries no negation within itself.

It is interesting that the two words 德 and 得 are pronounced the same way – “de”, but have different meanings: first one is “de” which means virtue or integrity, while the second indicates “obtaining” or “gaining”. This has led to various puns and ironical jokes, laughing at the idea that the one who “has got it” would actually be the virtuous one. Zhuangzi himself would often play on the meaning of both words, creating an ambiguity, as we can suspect him of doing in the present story. Shu is depicted as a man of action, one that despite his handicap managed to do a lot and gain a lot, ten times more than what he would need to survive, but is not so virtuous. One could think that the last sentence of the story presents Shu as someone virtuous, with a hypothetically deformed “De”, but if we look closely, we can see the irony of the whole

situation. Zhuangzi used to say that 至德不得 –“a perfect De does not De”, which means that a perfect power does not obtain anything, “In a way, De” should be empty. And Shu is anything but empty: he lacks in his physical appearance, but he doesn’t lack in his physical power, and does not lack in greed. His being is too outward, too visible, too grotesque, his “De” is sticking out, as shown by his bodily appearance. Even when he already has enough, he cannot restrain himself from obtaining more. This same drive to obtain what he wants can play its role in perceiving Shu as virtuous: he is a hard worker, all despite his hardships and physical shortcomings. One can admire his attitude towards life, considering that many people cannot accomplish what he can accomplish in spite of this handicap. One can say that his virtue is in the fact he is not giving up.

“De” is potency, but it is a “kingly potency”: it is broad and boundless, it emerges suddenly and moves abruptly and then thousands of things follow it. Shu, on the other hand, has a “peasant potency”: he doesn’t make things follow him, but he follows things, trying to gather them, to possess them. This echoes a traditional Chinese philosophical term of “junzi” often translated as “gentleman” or “superior person, which for Confucius indicates the ideal man, in opposition to the “petty man”. For the latter, like in the case of Shu, all his actions are directed towards himself: he has no family, he is not preoccupied with the needs of the society, he is only surviving. He is satisfying his own needs, acting only in order to patch the holes. Even when he does more than necessary, it is still

around assembling goods. It is “petty” in the sense that it is not a free action, but a forced and reactive one, stemming from shortage, even though it seems powerful and efficient. Some interpreters of “De” would even criticize Shu’s physical strength, saying that it is opposed to the real “De”, as it should be a force of the spirit, implying that any obvious and apparent corporal efforts would go against it, or corrupt it, as those efforts would take the energy away from working on one’s mind and soul. In the case of Shu, a very busy man, plunged into laborious activity, the problem is enhanced by his physical condition, as we can imagine that those efforts are costly.

Finally we can look at the etymology of the word “De”: it consists of ideograms meaning “step”, “straight” and “heart”. So the concept means walking straight, being erect, which goes well together with the idea of potency and power. If we look at the hero of our story, we see an evident contradiction: Shu is bent, his chin in his neck, shoulders higher than his head, both legs in his armpits – he is far from being straight. Zhuangzi seems to have chosen an ironical subject to demonstrate the true nature of “De”.

Both Laozi and Zhuangzi criticized a “De” that would be visible: it would not be “De” anymore; “De” comes with inner peace and calm, perceivable by others, but without manifesting itself in any obvious or palpable way. This provides another reason why we can be suspicious of Shu’s virtuous side: his way is too visible, both in his monstrous appearance and his over arduous actions, everything in him is

exaggerated. Both him and his “De” are deformed. And it seems that the more he moves, the more deformed his “De” becomes. One can wisely conclude that when a virtue is shown, it is not a virtue anymore.

The ending of the story leaves us puzzled: “how much more would it be, if his virtue was deformed”. On one side the sentence implies that Shu is virtuous, as we can imagine because of all his ceaseless activities. But the ending seems to indicate that he would be even more successful and rich if his virtue was deformed. The peasant would become the king. A crooked Shu would be then really crooked. A deformed virtue funnily enough would make him even more prosperous, which shows the corrupted side of this virtue. In this case it is not the “De” that allows one to pass to the celestial mode, it is the “De” that makes one even more human.

The celestial mode is the Dao: the necessity of how things function, the law of the world, the way everything is. The human mode is on the reverse, getting trapped in the intentions: desires, fears, needs and their satisfaction. Once we are inside the intentions, we do not see the Way anymore, as we are too busy with our own way. The De is then too human.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Is Shu handicapped?
2. Is Shu virtuous?
3. Why would Shu receive more if his virtue was deformed?
4. Is Shu a liar?
5. What does Shu represent?
6. Why is Shu depicted as ugly and deformed?
7. Why does Shu work so much?
8. What is the main problem of Shu?
9. Is Shu primitive?
10. Does the conclusion of the story make sense?

Reflection questions

1. Are men fundamentally individualistic?
2. Is life unfair?
3. Should one try to survive at all cost?
4. Is every human handicapped in a way?
5. Is it an obligation to be virtuous?

6. Is it possible to be virtuous?
7. What is the advantage of being a victim?
8. Does survival imply competition?
9. Should one be a hypocrite in order to survive?
10. How can a virtue be deformed?

Chaos



南海之帝為儻，北海之帝為忽，中央之帝為渾沌。儻與忽時相與遇於渾沌之地，渾沌待之甚善。儻與忽謀報渾沌之德，曰：「人皆有七竅，以視聽食息，此獨無有，嘗試鑿之。」日鑿一竅，七日而渾沌死。

The Emperor of the South Sea is called Rapid

The Emperor of the North Sea is called Sudden

The Emperor of the central region is called Chaos

From time to time, Rapid and Sudden meet in the land of Chaos

Chaos treats them quite nicely

Rapid and Sudden decide to reward Chaos for his virtuous behavior

They say: human beings all possess seven openings

They use them for seeing, listening, eating, breathing

But only Chaos does not have any

Let us try to dig holes in him

Each day they bore one opening

And on the seventh day Chaos dies

CONTENT OF THE STORY

1 - Speed

2 - Differentiation

3 - Benevolence

4 - Chaos

5 - Questions

1 – Speed

Two of the main heroes of this stories have to do with time and haste: Rapid, Emperor of the South Sea, and Sudden, Emperor of the North Sea. They are the main agents of the action, since Chaos seems to be more passive in the unfolding of the narration. And both have in common some form of speed. The first one is fast in terms of rhythm of the action, the other one is fast in terms of initiating the action. A relatively secondary distinction, in relation to the nature of their behavior and what it indicates. The primary consideration being that the velocity of their being, since we don't know so much about them, implies some kind of "catastrophe", in this case the death of Chaos (Huntun), Emperor of the central region. Of course, one can take for evident, and even as an easy concept, the fact that "speed" is the cause of major problems, through the obvious explanation that if one does not take the time to think, if one is hasty, his behavior will most likely be problematic. Here we can remind the reader about the warning of Descartes: "to carefully avoid haste and prevention" as one of the rules of good thinking, since haste implies that we go for the most obvious, most immediate, less thoughtful hypothesis. But it seems to us that in this case, a mere warning against haste would be a rather limited interpretation, since the story bears some ontological or epistemological dimension, which can help us understand the world vision of Zhuangzi.

As enlightened by this story, the first problematic aspect of “speed” is first of all that it is too focused on the result, it is oriented toward an end, otherwise there would be no need for any type of eagerness or hastiness, be it in taking of the decision, or in implementing the action. In opposition to such a perspective, we could propose a process-based world vision, where the movement or the action is itself worthy of attention, independently of its results. And even further, we could envisage a “Dao” based world vision, where the process is as well fundamental, but a process deprived of any determination, a process not hindered or constrained by any intention, a sort of “natural” process. If the process is determinant, no expectation is therefore driving the movement to some end, no pressure will be applied in order to accelerate the proceedings. Things will happen the way they happen, no impatience is to be expressed, no artificial force is to be exerted.

In this sense, Chaos is timeless, it has no beginning and no end, it has no rhythm nor internal temporal structure, it is not bound of even related to any external time, which makes it totally impermeable to the concept of temporality, and it is totally foreign to the idea of rushing. In opposition to Chaos, we could say that “everything rushes”, as “time” in opposition to “eternity”. Of course, outside of chaos, compared to chaos, everything seems to hurry and to rush, for the simple reason that specific processes and orientations have been unleashed or established. That is why Chaos is in the center, the locus of indetermination: he is symmetrical, he moves within himself,

in a totally indistinct way. When the South Sea and the North Sea are off-centered, they are positioned in a particular area, they will necessarily orient their movement away from themselves, and once unbalanced, they necessarily drive toward the chaos, which is in the middle, as the story tells us. As well, they are “oceans”, they are dynamic, unstable and fluid, when Chaos is a region, a specification that seems to indicate earth, and therefore stability. Let’s not forget that the Chinese culture is fundamentally an agricultural tradition, where the earth represents the anchoring and the stability.

The fact that both sea Emperors meet in the land of Chaos is rather significant. It implies as well that the natural tendency of unstable beings is to go toward some kind of stability, just like rivers go downhill toward some lake or ocean. Everything goes to the minimal energy level, following the principle of entropy. And such a process could not be slow: an irrepressible thrust pushes both sea Emperors toward the stable land of the middle. And there, the story tells us, they are treated quite nicely. An expression which indicates that they were fitting well, thus they felt “comfortable”. For one because they had arrived in the place where there was stability and tranquility. Second because they could meet and combine their opposites, south and north, therefore reaching some kind of equilibrium. No reason for speeding anymore, they have arrived at the resting place, at their final destination. Except, as we can imagine, nature commanding, they “had” to go back to their initial place, to their “natural” place, to their “original being”, from which they will come back again and

again. This permanent movement probably represents the shuttle between the center and periphery, between the combination and the isolation, between the balance and imbalance, between genesis and destruction, life and death. A movement that accounts necessarily for the maintenance of haste.

2 – Differentiation

Rapid and Sudden, being from the south and the north, are differentiated beings, they come from a certain side of reality, they have a certain way of being, they are partial and biased, they are therefore imperfect and incomplete. And of course, they enjoy very much to meet in the land of Chaos. First of all, because they meet each other. Like a perfect couple, they encounter in the other, their opposite, their alter ego, their mirror image, since the other represents exactly what is missing to them. Through this periodical rejoining, they undergo a sense of plenitude. This reminds us the myth Plato tells in the symposium, where we are told that couples were originally a single entity that was later on separated, and suffering from this separation, they eternally seek for each other, longing for their missing part, this recoupling being a necessary condition for their feeling fulfilled and happy. The second reason for their pleasure is that the land of Chaos represents the absence of necessity, since there is no determination: the place where nothing is lacking.

Determination, partiality, differentiation, is the mother of necessity. If we are not separated, if there is no particularity, if there is no difference, why would there be any need? The concept of need implies to require something which is essential or very important, not just because we would like to have this object of our lust, but because its absence implies a sensation of shortage, a sense of lack, a feeling of deprivation, in other words a form of pain. In Chaos, which is undifferentiated, there is no need, since nothing is really separated, no partial form of existence has yet come to be.

Of course, one can wonder why both Emperors abandon this wonderful place and go back to their off-centered area. The first answer is rather an obvious one: they really are the Emperor only when they reside in their dominion; outside of it, it is only an honorific title, not an effective reality. In the land of Chaos, they are mere guest, they are deprived of any power, of any identity or statute. Yet, as humans do, as any living being does, they want to exist, and the exercise of power is the first manifestation of power, its primary articulation. No wonder they will – willfully or not - end up killing Chaos.

One obvious proof of this very human character of both Emperors is their postulate that the human way is the “way”, since they want to humanize Chaos in order to improve his being. Not understanding that precisely this “non-human” way of being is the very nature of Chaos. And by humanizing him, they will therefore kill him. Both because he will lose his essence, opposite to the one of “humanity”, and because by becoming human he is bound to die, as all humans. The

second proof of their humanity is their attitude toward Chaos, their benevolence, this quality of being well-meaning, through kindness and recognition. But we will deal with this specific issue later on. Thus we can say that the desire to exist is the motivation, the specification of the self, underlying the impulse of differentiation.

Although we can claim as well that this desire of differentiation operates not only within the subject, within the self, but also in the relation to any object: the desire to distinguish and separate things, to differentiate the products of our thoughts, to identify and categorize the entities we encounter in our environment. We want them as well to exist, to have a separate existence, otherwise we feel like we are getting lost, we become impotent. There is an interesting sentence of Zhuangzi that can enlighten us on the issue: “They take off like the triggering of the crossbow when they judge about the true and the false.” For some strange reason, making judgments produces a strong fascination, to which it is hard to resist. And behind the idea of “This is true” or “This is false”, is the idea that “This is this” or “This is that”, the “this” implying some specific identification, in opposition to being something else, and especially in not being “nothing”. We need to recognize the identity of everything, in order not to get lost, in order to gain control over reality. We will remark that again, Zhuangzi utilizes the criteria of “speed” to qualify the action of judging, an extreme speed, since he uses the analogy of the triggering of a crossbow, a very swift motion. Differentiation is not a choice, it is visibly a strong

impulsion, it is a need, as we observe in daily life, in spite of the all the warnings and interdictions on the issues of judgment we encounter in the tradition. Human beings really have an allergy toward indetermination of knowledge: judgment is constitutive of knowledge, as Kant writes, in the sense of attributing a predicate to a subject. Therefore, poor Chaos, who in this story represents the undifferentiated origin of all things, the celestial mode so dear to Zhuangzi, suffers from this strong need or compulsion for differentiation, as an analogy or a metaphor of the manner in which we think when we want to specify the nature of all things. The permanent “What is it?”, that begs for a name of an explanation. That is how the author wants to show us how most of the time, with the best intentions in the world, unconsciously, we forget, silence and deny the “Way”: at all moments we kill the Dao. It is too uncomfortable to be sustained, although it is the best road to the tranquility of the soul, and the most adequate perspective on the world.

Last and major point, the way Chaos is killed is here quite significant: boring holes in his body. This is precisely the symbol of differentiation. His body is initially one and undifferentiated, it has integrity. The different holes will create parts, a specific topology and structure will be elaborated: Chaos will have thenceforth an anatomy. And if he has an anatomy, he will as well have a physiology, he will endure different specific processes. Therefore, he now will have a “subjectivity”. He now will have an inside and an outside, a dualism that implies his separation from the

“whole”. He now will be subject to action and time. Being in space and time, he will lose his eternity, his tranquility, he will be dispossessed of his very essence. Therefore he must die!

3 – Benevolence

Most likely, Zhuangzi was educated in the Confucianist tradition. Thus, many of his writings have to be read in terms of those views, either in accordance, or as a review or criticism of the principles and ideas of this well-established tradition. Confucius himself will periodically appear in the Zhuangzi, portrayed under different lights, favorable, depreciative or neutral. One of the points on which we find a recurrent difference with this tradition is on the concept of “ren”, very present in the Confucian texts, that the Taoist master will periodically undertake to criticize as a lesser value. The concept of ren is a founding concept of Confucianism, and it has been interpreted in different ways, some of them partially expressed in English renderings such as “humanity”, “humanness”, “goodness,” “benevolence,” or “love.” All these interpretations, however, share two notions: every human being has the capacity to possess ren, and ren expresses itself when a virtuous person treats others with humaneness. Confucians associated the humane individual with the junzi, or cultured gentleman, whose exemplary behavior distinguishes him from the petty person (xiaoren; literally a “small person,” like a child). One could say that within the

Confucian worldview, ren embodies the virtue of humaneness required so that one become an ethically mature human being.

Already, in the Laozi, founding work of Taoism, we encounter a criticism of this “benevolence” or “humanity”. It is written: “When the Tao is lost, there is goodness. When goodness is lost, there is morality. When morality is lost, there is ritual. Ritual is the husk of true faith, the beginning of chaos.” This famous statement, describing the Taoist ethical axiology, implies that if benevolence is a quality of the person, since it derives directly from the Tao, it already represents a certain degradation of the fundamental principle of all things. It is the first step toward a certain decay, a loss of the Tao. Zhuangzi will take up this same line of criticism, although with a dialectical turn, or paradoxical, as often with this author: “Perfect benevolence knows no affection,” or again “He shall dispense his favors to all ages without being benevolent.” Of course, this provides an ambiguous status of “ren”, which can be understood from the standpoint of the opposition between the “human way” and the “celestial way”, the latter referring to the Tao, a distinction that we will treat later in a more specific manner. For now, our point is to focus in the present story upon highlighting the criticism of the “human way”, the suspicion shed upon “humanity” and “benevolence”.

As we have already described it, the Emperors of the both seas are quite human. And one of the crucial manifestation of their goodness is of course to “do good”, to be benevolent. Obviously, “doing good” is “good”, a statement which is rather

tautological, or pleonastic. Thus what are the characteristics of this “doing good” that could be criticized, or defined as “not good”? First of all, within the Taoist scheme, it represents a certain betrayal of the fundamental, because we act out of an intention, and not out of necessity. There is a calculation, implying that action is taken out of “getting something” of “producing a specific effect”, and not out of the greatness of the action itself: the intention represents the beginning of corruption. As we have seen with the polysemy of the “De”, we go from the power itself toward the idea of getting something: the “De” is downgraded, bastardized. Thus the “giving” becomes suspicious, since in reality we want to get something out of our actions.

Let’s take the case of the Emperors. Neither do they understand the reality of their situation, not do they grasp the reality of Chaos. Chaos is actually doing nothing, he just lets events follow their own course. The Emperors seek each other, their opposite mirror image, because they are themselves incomplete, and they seek a place of tranquility and completeness. But the Emperors, not understanding the dynamic of the situation and the reality of Chaos, attribute a quality of humanness to this Chaos: he is nice and welcoming. Therefore, he does something “for them”, and he should be rewarded for this very reason, the same way one rewards a good child that has done a good deed. Of course, this implies that there was both an effort and a desire to please the other, if not a desire to be loved and recognized, an anthropomorphist projection totally irrelevant to the nature

of Chaos. Thus the Emperors, coherent with their function or identity, as men of power, decide that a reward should be attributed to Chaos for his “good deeds”. And that is exactly what happens in an action of benevolence. One places himself in a situation of authority and power, decides that the other person is weak and suffering, that he has needs, and that he has good intentions, more or less manifested, and that therefore this person should be rewarded. For this, we will make some extra effort of kindness, we will help him, and “generously” grant him some “gift” that will make him happy, or “happier”, since it implies that he is not already happy.

What does one get for himself within this process of benevolence? First of all, it provides the author with a “good” or “clear” conscience, allowing him to feel good about himself, a sense of self-worth. Second, it is a form of pleasant barter, where the alternation of “gifts” and “counter-gifts” will engender a comfortable and secure situation of “relational business”, quite reassuring. A system of permanent recognition and reward. Third, the author feels potent, since he gives himself the power to determine the psychological and physical state of the other person. It is a common feature of “good willing” persons to decide unilaterally to “help” others without even checking if the “other” wants to be helped, or how he would want to be helped. The “helper” thinks he knows what is good for the other. As is the case in this story, where benevolence leads to the destruction of the victim of this imposed “assistance”. Fourth, the “benevolent” person obtains social recognition, he is considered virtuous, a process easily

leading to some form of pharisaism, a self-righteous attitude, where one wants to make sure his “benevolence” is visible to all.

As a general criticism, we could claim that the desire to please or reward the other blinds us from a more profound or substantial order of reality or necessity: we become too focused on the other person, and especially on ourself and our desires. In other words, “benevolent” persons are “needy”, they are not free, they are not even conscious or honest, since they don’t know or don’t admit their own motivations, to others or even to themselves. They are so human, too human would say Nietzsche, that they “suffocate” their “victim” with all their benevolence. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”, says the proverb.

4 – Chaos

The concept of chaos, in many cultures, has been used as a representation of the primordial unity, or primordial indifferentiation, a form of existence before existence. It represents a paradoxical form of absence and totality, since at the same time “nothing is”, since there is an absence of singularity, and “everything is”, since it represents the potentiality of everything that can be, a totally “confused everything”. One of the differences in the perception or understanding of the chaos rests on the vision of it as a

“potential to be” or “power to be”, in the positive sense: everything can come from it, it is the birthplace, the power that can engender everything, or in the negative sense, as a “passive substance”, a “total absence”, an impotent potentiality, that necessarily needs an external power in order to become fecund and engender reality. The Tohu wa-bohu of the Bible is an example of the second case, which represents the condition of the world before the creation. It was formless, unseen and empty, representing a conception of pure impotent matter. Thus it needed the intervention of God, the Almighty, the power of light, which brings differentiation within the undistinguishable darkness. Such a myth conceived of matter as a passive possibility that might be actualized by an active powerful principle, a form provider, giving real existence to the world. In this sense, humanization of chaos, ordering the wilderness of nature, gives a positive sense to history.

This negative idea of chaos is what we encounter as well in the Greek theory of “form and matter” known as hylomorphism, a view defended by Aristotle. The principle is that form needs matter the same way that matter needs form. Chaos in itself, as an absence of form, is therefore not-being. This comes in opposition to the concept of hylozoism (living matter) that perceived of matter as something alive and even conscious, which therefore does not need an external force, but that engenders itself.

Another difference of perception is the view on connotation of chaos: in one case it is thought of as a primordial state before

creation of the universe, the infinite void containing all the possibilities, that is the way both archaic Greek philosophy and Taoists conceived of it, and in another case, chaos is a negative substance, a state of confusion and negation that need to be fought. The latter vision can be often found in Confucian texts. Chinese chaos or Hundun (渾沌) was often presented as a mythological creature, often without eyes and ears, sometimes without arms and legs or faceless. It could be aggressive or very stupid and needed to be “taken care of” or presented a certain wisdom in order to establish order. In many stories Hundun has eyes, but cannot see, has ears, but cannot hear, has knowledge, but cannot know. This “incapacity” can be viewed both as a fundamental lack, a handicap, a potential, that has not yet actualized itself, even though it has all that is needed for it, but it awaits some power that will push it in a direction, will provide it with some intention. On the other side, it can be seen as the original state, something desirable that can and should be reached, eternal peace and stability, being everywhere and nowhere. One can say that once we have eyes, we cannot see anymore because we see only a part of reality, narrow and reduced, once we have ears, we can hear only certain sounds and therefore we don’t hear, once we have knowledge, we are inclined to a certain way of thinking and therefore we don’t know. Chaos, on the reverse, is the One, the unity of all. Creation gives it a direction, just like the holes in the present story do. And once Chaos acquires a direction, it loses its divinity. In its original pure and untouched state, it is undifferentiated, but complete, since everything is there at the

same time, within the same modality. At the moment any differentiation comes, its power will be diminished or will vanish totally. This Chaos is like the Dao – once you know the Way, you have lost the Way: any determination or fixation is deadly for it.

In many interpretations though, Hundun is presented as a being that takes sides. Both Confucians and Taoists seem to claim that Hundun is on the side of the non-virtuous. But the former ones condemn him for it while the latter praise him. In some Confucians texts, Hundun is an Emperor devoid of virtue, shameless and stupid. He later on will be chased away, alongside with three other monsters, together forming “four evil creatures of the world”. In Taoists text, on the reverse, we can find Hundun that punches the virtuous and stays with the non-virtuous. Based on the present story, we can understand why. The benevolence of the virtuous people deprives Chaos of its power; virtuous people always have a specific direction, which makes them in a way less free than the non-virtuous, since they are bound by morality and blinded by their knowledge. Just like Rapid and Sudden, from the story, they are in the scheme of debt and reward, apology and gratification, knowing what should and should not be done. One then can see the virtue of the non-virtue.

Taoists did not think of Hundun as a something that should be avoided or fought, in their eyes Hundun is a sort of a lost paradise, a state that even precedes yin and yang. Zhuangzi, for example, defends Hundun, viewing it as the Origin, the “place” one should come back to. He proposes to “spit out

hearing and eyesight”, to “undo the mind” and then join the undifferentiated chaos, to go back to the origin of things and stop being a prisoner, to let things naturally take care of themselves and transform. No external action is needed, no need to wait for some absolute power to modify the world, no God required to give shape or a human to drill holes. Unlike what the Bible tells us, getting rid of the Chaos is not something desirable, the Chaos itself is desirable.

One should not try to understand Hundun, as it is incomprehensible, just like the Dao. For this incomprehensibility, it is often laughed at: it is periodically depicted as ignorant and dense being. For this it is criticized: something ignorant cannot be virtuous, as it is in lack. In some stories Hundun is an untalented son: he gnaws on its tail, going round and round, like some silly animal, chasing its back. He doesn't know that he has to find direction, he doesn't even know any direction, caught inside himself. This can be viewed as something ridiculous that wisdom saves from or we find here an apology of the stupidity: Hundun is the primordial simplicity, since it is all at once. It has no holes, as having them would be a complication: it would communicate, it would enter in relation with the outside world, which would extract him from his radical simplicity. In various writings of different periods, some authors reminisce about Hundun, by condemning the ones who drilled holes in the eternal Chaos, forcing humans to piss, shit and eat, condemned to be chased by needs and desires, forever caught up in everyday

complications and preoccupations, merely dreaming of the everlasting primitive state. Ignorance is blissful!

But in most writings, Chaos is still described as shocking. It is chased from everywhere, be it for its non-virtuous side, its stupidity or its monstrous self. It is either repelling or unfathomable and therefore provokes awe and terror. One should really be non-human to consider Chaos a paradise, to want to go back to where it all started, to be trapped in a place with no holes. Unless one sees Chaos as *creatio continua* of Dao: a cyclic movement and eternal transformation where there is no before and after, reality being thought as a snake gnawing on its tail.

As a conclusion, we should remind the reader that we should not be surprised of the fact both Emperors did not understand the reality and actions of Hundun. They gave him motivations, they granted him quality, they wanted to modify his nature, so many projections of their own self that they imposed upon Chaos. They actually never understood that Hundun had no existence, and by wanting him to take a specific form, a human one', they just killed him. They destroyed nothingness by making it something. A very typical and human behavior. Anything is good to escape incertitude and provide ourself with a fixed reality. If those two emperors were contemporary, they probably would have taken a photo of Hundun, and post in on their FaceBook page, to show their friends the reality of what escapes apprehension, the same way tourists take a picture of a sublime piece of art in order to have it under control.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Why are the two emperors called Sudden and Rapid?
2. Why is Chaos in the central region?
3. Why did Chaos die?
4. Why did Sudden and Rapid want to make Chaos more human?
5. Does the story have a sad ending?
6. Is Chaos powerful?
7. Why did Chaos have no openings?
8. Why did Chaos let Sudden and Rapid bore the holes?
9. Why were the holes not done all at once?
10. Do Sudden and Rapid understand Chaos?

Reflection questions

1. What is wrong with good intentions?
2. What is wrong with intentions?
3. Do we know what others need?
4. Is benevolence a form of control?

5. What is the reason for gratitude?
6. Do all actions contribute to chaos?
7. Do selfless deeds exist?
8. Why do we want to make distinctions?
9. Is chaos necessary?
10. Why do we want to change the order of the world?

Shadow and Penumbra



罔兩問景曰：「曩子行，今子止；曩子坐，今子起。何其無特操與？」

景曰：「吾有待而然者邪？吾所待又有待而然者邪？吾待蛇蚺蜩翼邪？惡識所以然？惡識所以不然？」

The Penumbra questions the Shadow, saying:

“First you moved, then you stop

First you sat, then you stand

How is it that you have no great integrity?”

The shadow replies: “Therefore I depend on something else, no?

And I depend on something which therefore depends, no?

Do I depend on the scales of the snake, on the wings of the cicada?

How can I know it is so!

How can I know it is not so!”

CONTENT OF THE STORY

- 1 - Stability and instability
- 2 - Causality
- 3 - Shadow and Penumbra
- 4 - Knowledge and control
- 5 - The “I Ching”
- 6 - Questions

1 – Stability and instability

Visibly, the penumbra is bothered by the behavior of the shadow. It finds the instability of its behavior quite unsettling: “Moving, stopping, sitting, standing...” So are we, very often, that we would like to rely on the fixed reality of things and events, otherwise we feel lost. We need some permanence in our surroundings, for we want to be able to establish some regularity and routine in our perceptions, our knowledge and our actions. If everything changed all the time, if all events would be unpredictable, the effect would be quite anguishing, rather anxiety-inducing. And for this reason, the innumerable attempts to find causalities in order to explain what surrounds us seem to represent an anthropological invariant. For if reality is ever changing, as we can observe it, finding stable explanations, by establishing some reliable causal principles, will somewhat compensate the troubling effect of variability and fluctuation: the steadiness of the rules ordering those transformations will somewhat compensate the anguish provoked by the volatility of reality. Therefore the human mind naturally endeavors to find some regularity susceptible to account for a changing world, since we cannot avoid facing such irregularity and impermanence. And that is exactly what the penumbra is doing, by asking the shadow to explain the situation, in order to account for the bothersome observable events.

The tone of the questioning is not one of pure curiosity or intellectual interest. The description of the changes is abrupt and laconic, the question itself is aggressive, since it quickly accuses the interlocutor of being deprived of morality: lacking “integrity”, a rather strong accusation. And one can wonder why the unpredictability or someone’s or something’s behavior would have such an effect on a given subject. As a first hypothesis, it seems that this psychological feature of our behavior, demanding predictability, can be explained by a desire to control the surroundings, rooted first of all in our pragmatic permanent struggle for survival. If the world is unpredictable, we will never know where the danger comes from, we will never know how to act in order to obtain what we need. As a second hypothesis, we can propose another psychological explanation, rather instinctive as well, which is the fundamental need animals have for the determination of a given place they can relate to, the quest for a locus where we can feel integrated, where we can establish an identity for ourselves through identifying the environment and identifying to the environment. The drama of the human animal, its dereliction as Heidegger indicates it, the feeling of being “lost”, is precisely that we have not such a “natural” place, as animals do. We are thrown into the vast world. Therefore our knowledge, our understanding, our reason, has to create such a place with the totality of space, with the whole world, so we can feel at home within it. After all, what is home if not the place where everything is familiar and known to us, reliable, and that is why we feel comfortable in it. Thus, to make this world ours, homier, less arbitrary and cruel, we invent

explanations, with religious, scientific or other tools, all types of rationalizations that will account in a more or less satisfactory way for the shifting reality of the world.

Let us now examine the nature of the criticism, the “lack or absence of integrity”. It has two meanings: ontological and ethical. Ontologically, the idea and etymology of integrity means “untouched”, which implies “original” and “entire”, from which we can derive a sense of cohesion, of unity, and from this a further connotation of durability and solidity. And indeed, if Shadow keeps changing its behavior, we ignore what it is, what it does, its nature, since its manifestation and appearance keeps changing without any warning. What is the nature of something that keeps changing? Of course, we can use the famous paradox, dear to Chinese thinking, that the primary reality is that everything changes. But still, in our daily life, in the human realm, we still have a need to rely upon something sturdy, total and fixed, if only for practical reasons. And if it changes, we must know how and why it changes: this change must be comprehensible, accessible. Thus we can understand the criticism Penumbra makes, the expression of its frustration toward the shadow, which remains unbearably unknown and mysterious. In order to remain calm and distant about it, it would have to accept the mutability of all things, remain with the pure phenomenon and not desperately search and expect some “stable essence”. Penumbra is in this sense very human.

On the ethical side, we criticize people lacking integrity when they are “not themselves”. There are two ways by which

persons can be thus criticized. First because they lie: their words are not conforming to their actions, or not fitting their thoughts, either because they hide their own private reality or because they pretend to fabricate some other reality, through diverse sordid calculations. A phenomenon occurring either because they want to protect themselves or because they want to unduly obtain something they don't deserve, that is that they are animated by fear or desire. Second because they are inconsequent and whimsical, lacking any determination, or shifting their behavior according to the circumstances. That constancy is precisely the function of morality: it sets rules of behavior that should regulate our actions and therefore provide some constancy, independently of our subjective impulses.

In Chinese, the word for integrity: "Cao", has a connotation of rigidity and restrictions: it cannot be something else than "this". A rigidity that fits rather well a moral connotation. And as well, it has a pragmatic dimension, since it is commonly used as a verb as "to use" or "to operate". Therefore the Shadow is a scandal, from an ontological, a pragmatic and a moral standpoint, a feature that in a way, probably brings it closer to the Dao, to the invisible, strange and deeper reality of things. A positioning that in its radicality remains a rather non-Confucianist perspective. It is too unsound to common sense, too unreasonable to be thought, too weird to be acceptable. It is too close to Chaos to be "good".

Let us add a final comment on the question of "integrity". Integrity implies autonomy, since we remain intact, nothing

affects us, endangers us, destroys us. If we lack integrity, the dependence is infinite, since the least action from the outside affects and transforms our being, depriving us of our true self. Thus dependence causes a lack of integrity, as Penumbra discovers. Since everything depends on a chain of causes that goes beyond our knowledge, our "personality" and "difference" seems to vanish in thin air. The question that remains is to determine if our dependence on something else that our immediate self does corrupt or not our integrity. To the extent we want to maintain this concept of integrity. For one might easily think that Zhuangzi asks us to abandon such a concept. Would our only substantial integrity rest in the Dao itself? For if everything is dependent, as shadow implies, "individual integrity" might just be an illusion. A message very similar to Buddhist philosophy and other oriental philosophies.

2 - Causality

As we have seen, the problem for the penumbra is both the behavior of the shadow, quite unstable, but as well its inexplicability, its absence of reason or causality. And it is that second aspect that will be dealt with in the answer of the shadow. At first, penumbra denounces the permanent changes that characterize the shadow, which astonishes it. Then through its questions, we understand its presupposition: entities should have some integrity, meaning some constancy.

And she is interested in causality, since she asks for the reason of this phenomenon, a request that implies that the mutability of things would be more palatable if we had an explanation for it, something that would make it less strange and more under control. Causality refers here to the more objective dimension of the phenomenon, its actual coming about, when reason would rather refer to the way the mind explains things or justifies it. Two important concepts that can overlap or even be undistinguished (for example they are the same word in the Russian language) but that have to remain conceptually different because of their respective potentiality.

In the first part of its answer, Shadow accounts for the changes through a chain of infinite causalities. Everything is the effect of a cause, which itself is an effect as well. In way, everything is interconnected. But here we find the absence of any “causa sui”, unlike the concept of God in the Christian epistemology, or any other “first cause” scheme, which would be the origin and the first explanation. Therefore, one can wonder what such a causal chain points out toward, since it is infinite. It seems to propose an undetermined origin, through an “infinite” that is actually an “indefinite”. This can be put in relation to two concepts of Zhuangzi: the idea of the “origin of things” and the idea of “chaos”. If everything that is points toward something else as its cause, then we arrive to some type of “nothingness” or “indetermination” that can very well be called chaos. In the Greek tradition, this can be called “non-being”, a concept that opposes itself to “being” precisely because of its indetermination. The whole debate about it, for

example between Parmenides and Plato, would rest on the “actuality” or the “reality” of this “non-being”, an entity which “is not” for Parmenides, when “it is” for Plato. Therefore, the implicit explanation of this “chain” is that everything comes from some indetermination, a sort of hazard, but a hazard that further on provokes a type of determination, an arbitrary power that actually engenders necessity, since causes have a specific effect, and phenomenon have a specific cause, no matter how arbitrary is the cause. In other words, chaos is the primordial reality, but reality is not chaotic. Strangely enough, chaos engenders order. The chaotic dimension of reality is not viewed here as a transcendent entity, but as an immanent power that hovers around and inside the finite and determined reality. It is not the description of a dualist universe, like in the case of “God and the world”, but a monist view, where reality functions upon two modalities: determination and indetermination, parallel and intertwining, permanently echoing each other.

In order to insist on the fact that reality is not “pure chaos”, the shadow engages in a new line of argumentation. By referring to the “scales of the snake” and the “wings of the cicada”, he brings up another type of causality, or at least a more determined and specific one. Here, let us remind the reader that both the scales of the snake and the wings of the cicada are the means by which those animal move: we therefore understand the process and cause of their motion. Let us call such a phenomenon an organic causality, for different reasons. First, it has to do with biology, with forms

of life, of which the development is rather coherent. Second, life processes have a very integrating function, where the development of the parts are interconnected in a holistic way, as manifestation of a totality, a unified whole. Third, because this process occurs in a slow and natural way, rather than suddenly and artificially, which brings us back to the predictability and understandability of the phenomenon. Although for some reason, the shadow wants to distinguish its existence from this type of organic transformation. It insists on its own hazardous nature by ironically asking if its own “accidents” are of such nature, with an implicit negative answer. Probably to push further the lesson and make the penumbra - and the reader - accept the principle that all things are not predictable and controllable.

The conclusion goes further in this direction, stating the unknowability of reality. We know it can be so, but we don't know if it is so. One important specification about the thinking of Zhuangzi is that he does not deny the use of reason. Through our thinking, we can understand certain things, like causality. But his point is that we should not blindly “believe” the ideas crossing our mind, and we should abandon our quest for certitude. The concluding remarks of the shadow clearly points in this direction. It does not say we cannot know, it does not recommend abandoning any attempt to understand facts and processes as being futile and useless. That is too often the way some readers of Zhuangzi interpret his work, or tend in this direction: as an attempt to deny the use of reason. The last remark rather invites us to meditate

upon the adequacy of our mental productions. In other words, it invites us to a meta-reflection upon the use of reason. The idea is not to give up reason, but to invite reason to reason on its own production and processes. This can remind us of the attempts of some western philosophers, such as Kant or Spinoza, who have tried in a more technical and developed way, to describe the conditions of possibility for a functioning reason, and the traps of fixed opinions, excessive emotions, determined beliefs and desire for certitude. Of course, the Zhuangzi is more allusive, but the basic principle and work on attitude is rather of equivalent nature. Use you reason, but see how it works, don't fall in the trap of “evidence”. Do not think that “I know”, and keep close to the background of “unknowing”, a perspective that is the basis for any adequate knowledge, as Spinoza called it. For him, the third and ultimate level of knowledge, was how all is one in God. A perspective that reminds us the “origin of things” of Zhuangzi, this principle that allows us to think and not become “a thing for things”.

3 – Shadow and Penumbra

This strange dialogue between shadow and penumbra, seems to bring us in an allusive way to the limits of what defines existence. For this reason, we here perceive a work on what defines or separates being and not-being, although as such these concepts do not exist in Zhuangzi, at least not in an

explicit form. One will revendicate that this formal concept does not belong to Chinese culture, a criticism which in a way is right, but our claim is that before being framed into a word, a concept refers to an experience. And the experience of “being and not-being” is a fundamental human experience, that brings us to reflect upon the reality of things, of the world, of the self, and to the degrees of existence of all, some entities seeming to exist more or less than others.

The shadow is the dark shape a physical entity makes on a surface, for example on the ground, when they are between a light source and a surface, to the extent there is a sharp contrast. It has a physical reality, since we can perceive it, but we know that it lacks some reality, since it cannot “be there” on its own: we know it must be the “trace”, the “imprint”, or the “remnants” of something else. In this sense, it is a mixed reality: it is “itself” and “not itself”, implying that it both “is” and “is not”. When things are in the shadow, when there is shadow in some place, we desire ironically and instinctively to shed some more light on the situation, because we want to see more clearly what is happening, we want to “know the truth”, the “whole truth”, we cannot be satisfied with a mere shadow. The only moment a shadow can be satisfying is when we want to hide, or when we get tired of the light, when we prefer not to see in order to rest. Often, shadow has a negative connotation, like in the expression: “He is a shadow of himself”, which implies that he has lost some “being”, some “power”, some “substance”. Shadow implies a “lack”. Either a lack of “perception”, or a lack of “existence”. Both

connotations are connected, for very often, both existence and perception are psychologically connected. According to the famous sentence of the English philosopher Berkeley, *Esse est percipi* (To be is to be perceived). This is the reason why most of us try to be seen and recognized, as a proof and confirmation of our own existence. Thus the shadow, indicating the darkness in a place or on something, where we cannot easily see who or what is there, including our own self, creates some discomfort and anxiety.

Another way how the concept of shadow indicates a “lack of existence”, is when it indicates heteronomy: the fact of being determined by something else or someone else than the “own self”. Peter is the mere shadow of Paul means that Paul is more “real” than Peter, since he is more powerful, more self-determined than Peter, this “pale representation”. Shadow indicates as well that something is not happening, since there is an obstacle. Physically, some object stops the light from arriving at the right place. Metaphorically, some event, situation or person stops something from happening, stop someone from acting or existing. Here we can remember the famous request of Diogenes to Alexander the Great: “Stand out of my light!”, since the powerful man was shadowing the sun. Thus shadow points toward a misleading appearance, an imperfect image of something, and timewise, an ephemeral phenomenon. It indicates as well uncertainty, problem or difficulty, a cognitive obscurity, a lack of clarity, so it is the tone for sadness, as we see in paintings where there is shadow in opposition to light. Although this tonality, rather

melancholic, invites us to meditate upon the finiteness of reality, upon the fleeting, imperfect or limited of all existence. Shadow make us worry, it darkens the spirit, it disturbs the serenity of the spirit, but it makes us think.

The interplay between shadow and light is not such a common pictorial tool in Chinese art, as it is in western paintings, Rembrandt and his constant usage of the “chiaroscuro” being a good example of it. But there is a common usage of the shadow in the “pi ying », the traditional shadow puppet show. Its uses flat articulated cut-out figures which are held between a source of light and a translucent screen, producing silhouettes. The ancient repertoire included traditional or religious legends, dramas that took place between gods, magical stories, etc. Therefore the shadows were useful to recreate an eerie scene, strange, mysterious and frightening atmosphere, precisely because this “deeper” reality is not so clear and determined: we cannot tell and know exactly what is and what is not. This can give us an insight in the choice Zhuangzi made of shadow and penumbra, two silhouettes, in order to discuss the reality or illusion of beings.

If the concept of shadow represents an intermediary and subtle reality, the one of penumbra goes further in this direction. Penumbra is in a way the shadow of a shadow, or a part of the shadow, its border or its limit. It is the area of a shadow which is between darkness and light, a sort of in-betweenness. From its Latin etymology, it is the “almost shadow”, the area where only a portion of the light source is obscured by the occluding body. It is as well used in a

metaphorical to indicate the surrounding or adjoining region in which something exists in a lesser degree. Thus, penumbra is less shadowy than shadow, less obscure, and paradoxically less clear upon its identity, since more dependent and less defined. In the shadow, we see nothing but the contour, the external shape of the projection. The penumbra is more allusive, since it is a mixture of darkness and light.

In the present story, Penumbra seems freer, more thinking, since it astonishes itself, since it questions the shadow, since it desires some autonomy. But in the Zhuangzi perspective, it is a very human behavior, in a problematic way. Shadow will offer as a response to her anxious behavior a rather tranquil perspective of necessity, as we have seen earlier. The question is then, where is there the most freedom? Or what is the more adequate perspective? Through deciding by ourselves what to do, or by inscribing ourselves in the general order of things? This is the debate between Descartes and Spinoza, where the first thinks that freedom lies in our capacity to decide, when the second judges that freedom lies in our capacity to perceive and understand our own determination. Zhuangzi clearly stands on the side of Spinoza, by letting the penumbra discover how illusory is any pretention to determine your own actions and their cause. It is either the result of a very long chain or evens, or a quite natural and predictable organic process. Penumbra seems freer, but it is actually anxious, confused and delusory. The idea here is that freedom is quite often – if not always - an illusion of choice, a pretentious and vain attempt to exist more, to “overexist”, when in fact it is the

form that our human “intention” takes, when it forgets to inscribe itself in the broader reality. This human tendency is actually the cause of our demise, since it engenders worries and disappointment. Shadow is what it is, without asking questions, it does not want to be bothered, it just wants to be. It does not worry about what it is and what is not. When Penumbra has an identity issue, it wants to know “why”, thus fragilizing her own being and psyche. It is unsatisfied with the impermanence, indefiniteness and ignorance of being. That's why this questioning is for it fundamental. Penumbra raises the question because it has a problem with the instability of its own being, while shadow does not. Can we say that there are beings who know what they are and those who will always look for what they are, without ever reaching satisfactory answers. Thus Penumbra refuses what it is, it does not know the tranquillity of being. In conclusion, Zhuangzi invites us to take a rest in the peaceful perspective of the celestial mode, the large ocean where we can peacefully exist in a “real” way. In this sense, the obscurity of the shadow is clearer than the semi-semi darkness of the penumbra. But to do so, we have to let go our desires to control events and our wish to separate our little self from the totality and the fundamental.

4 – Knowledge and control

Penumbra questions, penumbra wants to know, like all of us. We all “want to know”, in general to the extent that obtaining

this knowledge does not require too much work. For the human mind is rather lazy. But the quest for knowledge - within its cultural, historical and personal limits - indeed seems to constitute an anthropological invariant, something that the human has always done, and will always do, no matter the period or the context. This desire and its results seem to be a crucial characteristic of human history. Many traditional narrations take this drive as a central problem of their morality, with a positive or a negative connotation; For example, the Bible, which takes the desire of knowledge as a symbol of human pride and greed, explains our suffering through the transgression that this desire represents, a transgression with the divine order, a transgression with the natural order. In general, in common sense, knowledge carries a positive connotation: one should learn, one should know, and parents everywhere transmit this obligation to their children, no matter what the object of this knowledge is, be it mathematics, how to hunt better, moral duties or social obligations. Although periodically, in traditional tales, religion, literature or else, we do observe a sort of suspicion or criticism against the quest for knowledge, a warning against the pursuit of it, or at least against its drawbacks and excesses. And this seems to be the case of the present story, where the pursuit for knowledge of Penumbra is tainted with a shadow of skepticism.

Let us forward the hypothesis that the main angle of criticism against knowledge is that it represents a quest for power, or more specifically, a desire to control the environment, if not to

be master of the whole world. “Master and possessors of nature”, as Descartes coined it, a very deprecated sentence in our postmodern world. But that is indeed what we can notice, a very characteristic historical phenomenon, when we observe humanity, which through knowledge, more than any other species, has acquired a capacity to affect and determine the nature of its surroundings, of its habitat, to the extent we actually modifies the whole earth. It is even now affecting the space around the earth, through the many satellites, rockets and other engines floating in the atmosphere and above. “Knowledge is power”, explicitly states some sayings or proverbs that want to promote such value, for moral and practical reasons.

The way Penumbra questions Shadow reveals some important aspect of the relationship to knowledge. The main aspect of its interrogation, after observing the diverse modifications in the behavior of Shadow, is to ask for the cause of those changes, which implies that one should know the cause of each behavior, as a sort of categorical imperative, even though it does not state it directly. Basically, he is asking the following questions: “Why do you move?”, “Why do you stop?”, “Why do you sit?”, “Why do you stand”? and “Why do you go from one behavior to the next?”, or “Why do you go from one action to its opposite?”. But his general questioning reveals what bothers him: the idea of change, which signifies to “have no integrity”. This absence of integrity can be considered at the same time a moral issue, a psychological issue, and an ontological issue. It is a moral issue, since to have integrity

means to be faithful to oneself, to have identifiable and constant ethical principles, called honesty, and in general to fit some collective responsibility. It is a psychological issue, since integrity implies a coherency of thinking, of emotions, of words and actions, as determined by a given subject, which therefore becomes recognizable. It is ontological in the sense that integrity signifies that the whole particular being is present, to himself and to the world. He should remain undivided, since a scattered being would be deprived of a self, he would have no integrity.

The question we might ask ourselves is: “Why is Penumbra bothered by the changes in the behavior of Shadow?”. One could say it “just curious”, but as often with curiosity, it is visible that there is an agenda, either a desire or a fear, an intention, that accounts for the “curiosity”. And for Penumbra like for the quest of knowledge in general, we can suspect that the issue is one of control: we cannot accept that something escapes our understanding. Since we do not understand, we do not know what will happen next, and this unpredictability makes us feel powerless, makes us feel stupid and vain. Knowledge is understanding; it means to grasp, to command, to apprehend, to master, to accomplish, all words of “control”, because with knowledge we are capable of “doing things”. In other words, knowledge is pragmatic, it always leads to a know-how. And against this know-how, we encounter the danger of incertitude and unpredictability, that deprives us of our powers.

5 - The “I Ching”

The “I Ching” or “Yi jing”, translated in English as the “Book of Changes” or “Classics of Changes” stands as one of the most important books ever written in the history of humanity, from the standpoint of influence, and the oldest Chinese written text. Although it was and still is mostly used for divination purposes, it offers rich material for philosophical analysis. The I Ching consists of 64 hexagrams (卦), which in their turn are based on 8 trigrams. Each hexagram is a combination of six continuous and discontinuous lines, the unbroken lines being “yin” (feminine, dark, cold, receptive) and broken ones “yang” (masculine, active, brightness, passion, growth). The earliest Chinese characters for yin and yang are found in inscriptions made on “oracle bones”, skeletal remains of various animals used in ancient Chinese divination practices at least as early as the 14th century B.C.E, primarily turtle shells. As a practice developed over the centuries, the lines were constructed according to the results of throwing of coins or usage of the yarrow sticks; the composition of these lines then telling you which hexagram you were supposed to examine. All hexagrams are presented as concepts, each one offering one essential idea, although sometimes complex. The list of concepts is structured by pairs, in which both members have an opposite complementary and dialectical relation. A principle of unity (Dao, De, Qi) is expressed through the long list of dualities.

The “I Ching” is often described as a representation of the universe and all the processes of change that occur there. Throughout the ages different thinkers were arguing to which extent this work can be considered philosophical or if it serves only the purpose it was created for: guidance for future actions, or in a more reductionist way, prediction. The composition of the I Ching is first devised by an initial list of hexagrams, attributed to Fu Chi, largely enriched by layers of interpretation, by such authors as Tseng Tse, Zhu Xi, and especially Confucius.

The Great Commentary of Dazhuan described the I Ching as a microcosm of the universe that provides symbolic illustration of the processes of change. So the I Ching would give a wise man a possibility to see beyond the immediate, to be able to grasp the patterns behind events and therefore not despair in the material world. Later on, some of the neo-Confucians would reject this interpretation, saying that it is an overstatement to see any philosophical implications in this work and it should be conceived solely as a text on divination. Another reason to deny it a philosophical meaning is that I Ching is vague and difficult to interpret, making it very difficult to claim any objectivity in such interpretations. One of the main obstacles is that the form of the text is coherent with its content, all about change, nothing is clearly determined: fixed meanings are slippery, one idea always slowly evolves into another.

The 64 hexagrams or concepts are not stable entities, they reflect a continuous flow and transformation. For example,

the first hexagram, creative power, qián, (pure positivity) gives way to the second hexagram, receptive power, kūn, (negativity), without which the former would not be able to deploy itself. Freedom gives way to peace and decadence, as things cannot infinitely develop in their freedom. Possession of a great measure gives way to modesty and only then comes satisfaction. Not one single state can maintain itself without its opposite, not one state can be born without this ceaseless movement. In the “I Ching”, the stability of the world finds itself in a state of perpetual instability: just like in breathing, every inspiration should be followed by exhalation, every assertion should be accompanied by its defeat. It is hard not to see philosophical implication in such a work: the 64 concepts and their relationship adroitly define the Chinese vision of the world. One does not even need to have a precise hold upon what is originally meant by such or such concept: looking at the way these concepts relate with each other would suffice. In spite of the terrible reputation of the I Ching, as a very abstruse and complicated text, probably the main reason why most Chinese do not read it, one does not need to go far beyond the first pair of concepts to see the dynamic of folding and unfolding, just like in breathing.

The “I Ching” is concerned with global processes, depicting the universe as constant movement: one thing becomes another, opposites transform into each other, smoothly, without any ruptures and oppositions. The change is invisible, it is fundamental and remains the matrix of everything. Nevertheless, because of its invisibility it is often not

perceived and not thought of: human beings are more prone to see the obvious and immediate, while the global remains in the background, as a condition of possibility of everything.

One could here define this perspective as a vision of process, a principle of negativity, in opposition to a vision of drama, the struggle between good and bad. In the former, no real subject is introduced, no action stems from any subject, unlike in Christianity, where for example the Bible describes the moment when God’s word pulled the world out of Chaos. Chinese thought has no such singular moment, no singular being or action. There is no determined event, but a mere permanent reorganization of things. As well nothing that can inhibit those processes: positivity will always be resigning its powers to negativity and negativity will nourish positivity, on and on. It seems that every time any resistance manifests itself, it is right away appeased by a force of an opposite nature. This immense process is the background, the main stage, the matrix where all actions take place. But it requires a great deal of intellectual distance to be able to examine the patterns, the forms of thought, the order the world, without searching for a myth or a type of certitude, giving some definite grounding to our own existence.

In the story, Penumbra is bothered by the constant movements of Shadow: it complains about the apparent arbitrariness of the movements, that Shadow explains through some causal principle: it moves when other things move, stands when other things stand. Having no integrity, according to Penumbra, it simply follows a seemingly hectic

course of events. Penumbra wants some definite cause that would become a sort of a foundation, taking away the anxiety necessarily produced by the absence of certitude. But Penumbra seems to neglect a bigger pattern behind the actions of Shadow: it does not see the stability of the instability, the greater reason for things to occur. Penumbra wants Shadow to have an identity, to exist on its own, in a way to become a free and independent subject. It therefore wants tension and passion, since identity always brings resistance and in a way, drama. Penumbra would like Shadow to have a separate existence that would distinguish itself from other things; it views dependency as a lower form of existence. In the I Ching, on the reverse, dependency is praised as a condition of possibility of existence: greatness depends on humility as much as humility depends on greatness. Such dependency produces a freedom of different kind: it is not the free will that Penumbra seems to crave, but a freedom of necessity, a transcendent or immanent order of things. A distinction is made between an immediate, illusory freedom that comes as a result of apparent deliberate action, and a true freedom of inaction, wu wei. The last one is at length depicted throughout the I Ching: all things have an immanent and innate power that is not dependent on the external will of some deity, caused by circumstances, produced by an event or modified by an internal desire. There is no subject that can truly disturb this course of events, no force can undo it, no intention can trouble it. There is no real conflict, just a natural combination of opposite processes.

Table of “I Ching” concepts

Ontological: activity, passivity, abyss, junction, decrease, increase, breakthrough, encounter, exhaustion, minimal stability (water well), modification, transformation, established, endless change.

Existential: retreat, flourishing, progress, harmful accidents, progress, marriage, abundance, departure, entering, satisfaction/joy, dissolution, regulation

Psychological: difficulty at the beginning, youthful folly, nourishment, doubts/conflict, modesty, satisfaction, following, motivation, troubles, contemplation, recovering family, estrangement within family, certitude, excess.

Sociological: the army, holding together, suspension of singular, rituals/association, peace/prosperity, stagnation, fellowship of men, great possession, influence, duration, gathering, elevation

Action: decisive action, grace, splitting apart, return/backlash, conformity, success/big stop, nourishment, growth/excess, difficulty, deliverance, mastering instruments, rest.

Some questions to deepen and prolong:

Comprehension questions

1. Why is Penumbra bothered by Shadow's instability?
2. Does Shadow lack integrity?
3. Does Shadow answer Penumbra's question?
4. What does Penumbra want?
5. Is Penumbra freer than Shadow?
6. Is Shadow wise?
7. Is Penumbra preoccupied with itself or with Shadow?
8. Why does Zhuangzi choose Shadow and Penumbra as the characters of the story?
9. Does Shadow have a real existence?
10. Why is it Penumbra who questions Shadow?

Reflection questions

1. Should we worry about our own identity?
2. What is bothersome about dependence?
3. Are we always a shadow of something?
4. Why do we want to know the cause of things?

5. Is there stability in life?
6. Are we prisoners of our self?
7. Is there such a thing as a "first cause"?
8. What allows more freedom: stability or instability?
9. Is knowledge a form of control?
10. Is our integrity determined by ourselves or by others?

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