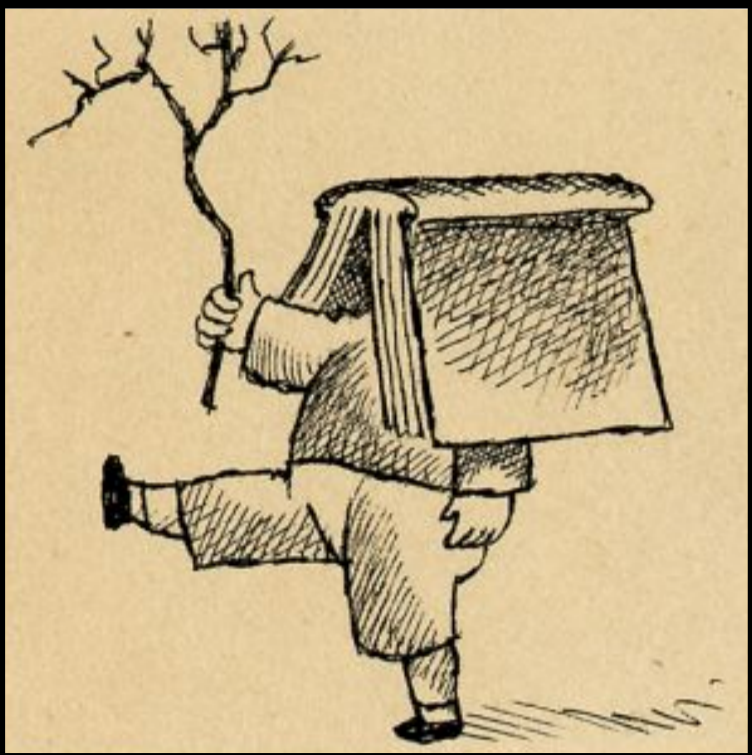
Zhuangzi

The Laughter of the Dao



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Introduction

Who is Zhuangzi? The question seems simple, yet it opens a gulf of uncertainty. Of his life, we know very little, and he did not write anything that we know. He is thought to have lived in the 4th century BCE, in the China of the Warring States, a time of political and intellectual upheaval that saw the flourishing of what came to be called the "Hundred Schools of Thought": an extraordinary blossoming of philosophical and intellectual movements, where masters and disciples freely debated political, moral, and spiritual paths. Beyond a few scattered mentions in ancient texts, however, his biography remains conjectural, almost ghostly. The name Zhuang Zhou, which tradition attributes to him, is shrouded in shadows, and it is difficult to distinguish the real man from the mythic sage.

The world he moved in nevertheless throws light on his thought. The China of the Warring States was a world in crisis: the ancient rites of the Zhou dynasty were collapsing, states were locked in endless warfare, and scholars searched for new paths of salvation. It was the age when Confucius and

his disciples called for a return to ritual and moral order; when the Legalists conceived a centralized, authoritarian state; and when Mozi preached universal love and social utility. Amid this ferment, Zhuangzi appears as a marginal, offbeat voice, one that rejected Confucian rigor, the cold rationality of the Legalists, and the moralism of the Mohists. The "Hundred Schools" bear witness to that intellectual effervescence, but Zhuangzi never claimed to establish a doctrine. Rather than a system, he offers stories, paradoxes, and images. His wisdom is not taught as a rule, but glimpsed through tales of dreams and metamorphosis, improbable dialogues, and strange figures that unsettle our certainties.

Posterity has often linked Zhuangzi with Laozi, the supposed author of the Daodejing, the two being placed together in the Taoist tradition. And indeed, they share a rejection of conventions, a distrust of rigid norms, and a taste for reversal. But what they share most deeply is their relation to the Dao, that mysterious, indefinable principle that signifies at once the origin, the path, and the rhythm of the world. In Laozi, the Dao is evoked through enigmatic paradoxes, as an ineffable source to which one must conform. In Zhuangzi, it reveals itself in the flow of transformations, in the multiplicity of perspectives, and in the humor of paradox. Where the Daodejing cultivates solemn aphorism, Zhuangzi unfolds an inventive, colorful, often ironic prose. One

could say he is the poet and humorist of the Dao, not seeking to define the mystery, but to immerse us in it. Both remind us, however, that the essential is not to explain the Dao, but to attune oneself to it.

The myth of Zhuangzi is also that of a marginal visionary who refused official honors and preferred the freedom of a withdrawn life to the confinement of power. Legend has it that he declined a prestigious post, choosing instead "to drag his tail in the mud", like a living turtle, rather than end up stuffed in the temples of authority. This refusal symbolizes his entire stance: disobedience toward glory and institutions, and fidelity to inner freedom. Thus, Zhuangzi remains elusive, at once philosopher, poet, spiritual master, and storyteller; a bit of each, but never entirely any of them, and that very indeterminacy is part of his power. Between history and legend, between thought and fiction, Zhuangzi invites us to follow him not into a system of truth, but into an adventure of perception. Like his characters who turn into butterflies or giant fish, he teaches us to shed our usual bearings and embrace the fluidity of the Dao, that ceaseless flow running through the world.

The fluidity of being

Once, Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering joyfully, perfectly at ease in his butterfly nature. He no longer knew he was Zhuangzi. Suddenly, he awoke, indeed, he was Zhuangzi. But he could no longer tell whether he was Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi. There lies a transformation of beings.

Reality This famous anecdote from Zhuangzi beautifully embodies the very essence of his thought: a radical challenge to what we call "reality", "identity", and even "consciousness". It opens a deep meditation on the nature of being, the limits of language, and the fluidity of human experience. The episode of the butterfly is not merely poetic; it is philosophical. It raises a fundamental question: how can we distinguish dreaming from waking? How can we be sure that what we are living now is not itself a prolonged dream, a passing illusion? In daily life, we take for granted that what we see, hear, and touch is real. But Zhuangzi seems to suggest that this certainty rests on fragile ground. If in dreams

we can firmly believe we are living something real, why should it not also be so when we are awake?

This radical doubt recalls that of Descartes, who, in his Meditations on First Philosophy, imagined a deceptive demon capable of making us believe in a false reality. Descartes thus sought an incontestable fixed point, with his Cogito ergo sum, "I think, therefore I am." But Zhuangzi does not seek to found an absolute truth. He prefers to dwell in ambiguity, in that in-between state where one no longer knows whether it is man who dreams or the dream that becomes man. Thus, where Descartes tries to escape doubt through reason, Zhuangzi finds in it instead a form of freedom. No longer knowing who one is may, perhaps, be the beginning of understanding what it means to be.

Identity Identity is often seen as something stable, continuous, coherent. We say: "I am this person", "I was born on this date", "I have these tastes, these memories, this story". But Zhuangzi invites us to see it otherwise. For him, identity is not fixed; it is shifting, changing, crossed by countless influences. Like the butterfly, the human being is in constant transformation. There is no permanent "self", only a succession of states, shaped by body, mind, environment, and circumstances.

This idea closely echoes the Buddhist notion of anatta (non-self). According to that doctrine, there is no permanent self, no immutable soul. What we call "I" is merely a temporary combination of physical and mental phenomena. Zhuangzi does not speak in Buddhist terms, but he shares the same intuition: the ego is a useful fiction, not an ultimate reality. He writes: "When I say I am dreaming, how can I know that I am awake? And when I say I am awake, how can I know that I am not dreaming?" This sentence encapsulates the challenge to any fixed identity. The individual is not an essence, but a temporary manifestation of a vaster cosmic flow, the Dao. It is a disconcerting thought, yet one that also frees us from the pressure of having to know who we are. For if no one truly knows, then perhaps what matters is not to know, but to live what presents itself.

More than a critique, Zhuangzi offers an art of living. It is not a morality, still less an asceticism. It is a release, a movement inward. A way of returning to oneself, of recovering one's breath, not to affirm oneself, but to forget oneself; not to build, but to unbind. In a restless world, he invites us to unsaturate, to become available to whatever comes, without projection or imposition. It is not a matter of doing nothing, but of acting with precision, like the carpenter who follows the grain of the wood. Zhuangzi teaches us to breathe more deeply. He

does not say, "Be yourself", but, "Stop trying to be". He does not say, "Become someone", but, "Become no one". That is his paradox: only by renouncing being something definite does one become fully alive.

Consciousness This story also raises a question about the nature of consciousness. Is it uniquely human? Can we imagine that the butterfly, too, has its own form of awareness, different yet real? And if so, who can say that human consciousness is superior or central in the universe? Zhuangzi refuses to draw strict boundaries between beings. He delights in telling stories where a fish becomes a bird, a man dies and is reborn in another form, or a craftsman discovers perfection in his gesture that seems a union with the Dao. All this suggests that consciousness is not reserved for humans, nor confined to any single organism. It circulates, transforms, unfolds. In this, Zhuangzi anticipates modern currents such as deep ecology, mysticism, and certain strands of Eastern philosophy that see consciousness as a diffuse property inherent in the universe itself. Yet he goes further: he does not describe consciousness as something to possess, but as an experience to undergo, always subjective, relative, and changing. To dream of being a butterfly is to enter a "butterfly-like" awareness; to awaken is to

live a human one. Neither is truer than the other. They are simply different.

Philosophical dialogues As we have seen, Zhuangzi engages indirectly with two major philosophical traditions: Buddhism and modern Western philosophy, here represented by Descartes.

With Buddhism, which teaches that all things are impermanent (anicca), that desire gives rise to suffering (dukkha), and that the illusion of self (anatta) binds us to that suffering. Zhuangzi does not reject these ideas, but approaches them with lightness, without moralism or spiritual rigor. He proposes no path to enlightenment, but rather a way of living within uncertainty and fluidity. Far from seeking to transcend the world, he encourages wandering freely within it, unattached, accepting change with grace. His wisdom is close to Zen, yet less severe, more poetic.

With Descartes, who sought a solid foundation for knowledge. He began with radical doubt, but ended with a precise assertion: I think, therefore I am. For him, thought was the proof of existence. But Zhuangzi seems to suggest that thought itself is unstable, fluctuating, shaped by external influences. Thinking is not necessarily being, since what we think changes constantly. Moreover, Zhuangzi does not privilege formal rationality as the main

path to truth. He prefers images, paradoxes, and absurd tales, devices that unsettle logic and open up another mode of understanding. In this sense, he is closer to existentialist or postmodern thinkers than to classical rationalists. Yet this does not mean he rejects reason. Zhuangzi's thought is rigorous, coherent in its movements, lucid in its analyses. Only, his rationality is not formal or demonstrative; it is supple, critical, and strategic, serving the unveiling of reality rather than the building of a conceptual system. Thus, "The Dream of the Butterfly" is not just a charming metaphor, but a doorway into the complexity of existence. It invites us to abandon certainties, to loosen our need for control, to accept that the human being is but one phenomenon among others, woven with continuities and ruptures, memory and forgetting, form and transformation. For to be, in Zhuangzi's view, is not to have a fixed identity, but to be in relation, in movement, in harmony with the flow of the world, to be butterfly, to be man, to be dream, to be awakening, all at once or in turn, without needing to fit it all into fixed categories.

Living Without Attachments

Free Wandering The first chapter of the Zhuangzi, entitled《逍遥游》(Xiaoyáo yóu), meaning "Free and Easy Wandering", opens with a striking mythical image: that of the fish Kun, a gigantic creature of the depths, transforming into the bird Peng, whose wings span the horizon. With a single beat of its wings, this bird rises beyond the clouds, crosses the celestial mountains, and flies toward the distant south, a symbol of absolute freedom, free of earthly burdens. This flight is not merely a physical feat; it embodies spiritual liberation: detachment from conventions, judgments, and both mental and geographical boundaries. "To wander joyfully beyond the limits of the world, forgetting all place and dwelling" could summarize this Taoist ideal, to belong nowhere, because one inhabits the boundless.

This wandering is not an escape, but an accomplishment. It corresponds to the figure of the sage, the "Genuine Person" (zhenrén) or "Perfected Person" (zhìrén), who no longer defines himself by roles, possessions, or attachments. He seeks nei-

ther glory nor gain, for he has dissolved the "self" into the flow of the Dao. Like the great bird Peng, he does not measure his flight. Yet while Peng soars ten thousand leagues, sparrows and cicadas perched in the bushes mock him: "Why rise so high? A hop to the branch is enough!" Their small world feels complete and sufficient to them; they cannot conceive of infinite space or the freedom of the great current. Their taunt is not malice but ignorance: captive to their scale, they cannot imagine a wandering without goal or limit.

This scene is not a simple contrast but a lesson, for the sage does not try to convince those who laugh at his flight. He transcends distinctions, oppositions, and even places. His joy comes from this absence of expectation, this rootless lightness. Zhuangzi thus invites us to unfold our own inner wings, to leave the invisible cages of habit, and to drift, without compass or harbor, through the vastness of possibility. For true freedom does not lie in changing place, but in forgetting that one needs to be rooted.

In a world where social norms, material ambitions, and external expectations so often dictate our choices, Zhuangzi offers a radically different path: that of yóu (游), free wandering, a word that literally means "to swim", "to roam", or "to move freely". This concept lies at the heart of his thought. It expresses a way of existing without

clinging to certainties, possessions, or even identities. Yet freedom for Zhuangzi does not mean doing whatever one wishes, nor escaping the world's constraints. It means living in harmony with the Dao, that is, with the natural flow of things, without useless resistance, without excessive attachment. It is not about fleeing society, but about not being its prisoner. The free person, in Zhuangzi's view, can act without being dependent on results, speak without needing to convince, live without fearing the loss of what he has. This idea faintly recalls the Stoic sage, able to remain calm amid life's storms, but Zhuangzi goes further. For him, freedom is also a mental fluidity, an absence of fixation on a single truth, a capacity to see the world from many angles without becoming trapped in any of them.

The Wandering Man In several passages of the Zhuangzi, we encounter figures of free men who travel, change form, occupation, or status, never settling for long. These characters embody a certain image of the Taoist sage, not a moralizing master, but a light, fluid being, always in motion. "The perfected man has no self, the spiritual man has no merit, the sage has no name." Such a man needs no material possession to be complete, no social recognition to exist. He lives in the present, accepts transformation, lets events pass like clouds

in the sky. He resembles figures such as Diogenes the Cynic, who rejected worldly goods and lived in a barrel, or Gandhi, who practiced voluntary simplicity. Yet unlike them, Zhuangzi does not preach asceticism out of moral duty, he simply invites us to live in accord with our natural essence, without artifice or strain.

Zhuangzi loves to use animal imagery to illustrate his ideas. Thus the tale of Kun-Peng, a fish and bird of impossible size, symbolizes the infinite potential of transformation in all beings. Like the fish leaving water, humans can change environment, state, or perspective, and this transformation is not a loss but a richness. At the same time, the fish is free in water, the bird in the sky, the human in the world, but if one tries to live outside its element, it dies. Likewise, if man seeks to impose a rigid structure on life, he suffocates. True freedom, then, is knowing how to adapt, understanding that each situation demands a different response, and that applying the same rules everywhere is absurd.

Without Attachments Attachment is a well-known source of suffering in many philosophical and spiritual traditions, notably Buddhism. Zhuangzi shares this intuition but expresses it with lightness and humor, without passion or austerity. He does not reject human relationships or daily activities; he neither

condemns wealth nor glory, nor preaches asceticism. He simply invites us not to depend on circumstances. If you lose your job, if your love leaves you, if your house burns down, you must still be able to live without being destroyed. This does not mean becoming indifferent, but cultivating inner distance, as if to say: "I care for this, but I know it can vanish".

Zhuangzi illustrates this with a moving story about the death of his wife.

As he hears about the death of his wife, his friend Huizi came to visit and found him sitting, tapping a pot and singing. Huizi was shocked that he was not mourning. Zhuangzi replied: "When she died, how could I not have been struck with grief? But I reflected on her beginning, the time when she had not yet been born, had no body, no breath. Out of the vague and indistinct came a change, and she had breath. The breath changed, and she had a body. The body changed, and she had life. Now another change has come, and she is dead. It is like the succession of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, the four seasons unfolding. If she is to rest peacefully in a great chamber, and I were to wail and sob aloud, that would seem out of place in regard to destiny. That is why I refrain."

Faced with his wife's death, Zhuangzi does not weep; he sings, a behavior that may seem scandalous. Yet for him it is logical: life is only one stage in an endless cycle, from the void, to energy,

to form, and back again. It is not mourning, but metamorphosis, like autumn following summer. To weep would be to resist the very movement of the Dao, that ceaseless transformation governing all things. Zhuangzi does not deny affection, but refuses to imprison the loved one within human drama. By drumming on a pot, he celebrates cosmic harmony, not rupture. His serenity is not indifference but lucidity: he has understood that death is only a change of abode. In this "great house" that is the universe, nothing is lost, everything transforms. That is true freedom: not to resist the world's flow, but to dance with it, even when it carries away what we love. This detachment is not cold; it is profoundly human. It simply recognizes that nothing is permanent, and that our suffering often comes from wanting to freeze what, by nature, must change.

Perspectivism For Zhuangzi, freedom does not mean the absence of morality. He does not call for anarchy or nihilistic relativism. He simply affirms that truth is multiple, that moral norms are relative and contextual, and that no single truth can claim universality. "What is good for humans is not good for fish; what is good for fish is not good for birds", he says.

This idea is close to that of the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty, who argued that truth is

"made by humans", not discovered once and for all, a kind of constructivism. It also echoes the cultural relativism valued by some modern anthropologists. Yet unlike them, Zhuangzi does not fall into paralyzing skepticism. He does not say, "Everything is false", nor "Nothing can be affirmed". Rather, he says, "Everything is partial", and therefore every truth may be affirmed. But precisely because each viewpoint is partial, we must learn to move among perspectives, to laugh at their absurdities, and never to be trapped in a single way of thinking.

Zhuangzi never preaches directly. He prefers absurd tales, paradoxical questions, and provoke his interlocutors with surprising arguments. This manner of philosophizing is itself an expression of freedom. To speak freely is to fear neither challenging received ideas, nor criticizing intellectual authorities, nor playing with words and concepts. It is also to accept that one can be wrong, that one can change one's mind, that truth is not a treasure to be guarded but a light that dances and shifts with the angle of view. In this, Zhuangzi anticipates the philosophical dialogue, like Socrates, or like Montaigne and Nietzsche, who saw philosophy not as an exact science but as a way of inhabiting the world with curiosity, irony, and lucidity.

Thus, to live without attachments, in Zhuangzi's sense, is not to live alone or without emotion. It is to live knowing that everything passes, everything

changes, and that it is precisely this impermanence that makes life precious. To wander freely is to navigate among worlds, among social roles, among beliefs, without clinging too long to any of them. It is to learn to dance with the wind without trying to tame it. It is to understand that what matters is not what we possess, but the way we move through life. And perhaps, in this wandering, one discovers a deeper peace, a lighter joy, a truer presence. To live without attachment is to accept that reality always appears from multiple angles, that what one sees as gain another may see as loss, that what one calls useful may seem useless elsewhere; nothing has fixed meaning in itself, everything depends on the adopted perspective and on circumstances. Zhuangzi thus teaches us not to absolutize our viewpoint, to recognize that each gaze is limited and partial, and that there are a thousand ways to describe the same world. To wander freely is therefore to change perspective as one changes garments, to experience the plurality of visions without becoming confined in any of them. This perspectivism does not abolish truth, it merely reminds us that truth cannot be captured by a single voice, even if we may have certain personal preferences. This is the case in the many dialogues he presents, where we clearly hear the diversity or opposition of voices, and even their intrinsic legitimacy, as in the exchange between the frog and the turtle, but where we nevertheless

understand that Zhuangzi takes sides, and invites the listener to do the same.

The Art of Non-Action

Heaven does nothing, and that is why it is serene; Earth does nothing, and that is why it is at rest. From the union of these two inactivities, all things are born.

Wuwei In a world that glorifies action and achievement, where one must do, produce, succeed, reach goals, Zhuangzi offers a simple yet radical idea: to act without forcing, not imposing one's will upon the world, but moving with its natural flow. This key Taoist concept is called wuwei (无为), literally "non-action" or "effortless action". Yet the term is no call to inertia or resignation. It means acting without effort, without resistance, following the natural flow of things, without obsession for results.

To illustrate this, Zhuangzi often compares the wise person to water. Water never resists; it flows

around obstacles, adapts, and always finds the spaces and openings where it can pass. And yet, no one can deny its power, gentle but unstoppable. As Laozi said: "The soft and the weak overcome the hard and the strong." Those who live in accord with the Dao share this same quality, the ability to yield without giving in, to be still without being inert, to let things happen without being passive. Water is the perfect image of wuwei: it forces nothing, yet it always finds its way. Likewise, the one who practices wuwei does not fight against the current; he learns to recognize it and let himself be carried by it.

Fluidity Many people believe that success comes from willpower, decision, planning, and control. But Zhuangzi invites us to another vision: a fluid movement between being and the world, where conscious effort gives way to natural, spontaneous, almost instinctive action. He tells stories of artisans or hunters who achieve perfection in their craft not through force or will, but because they are fully present, relaxed, and in harmony with their task. A famous example is that of Cook Ding, who carves an ox with extraordinary grace and efficiency. Yet he explains that he is guided by the Dao, not merely by technique.

"At first, when I began carving up oxen, all I could see was the whole ox. Three years later, I no longer saw the ox as a whole. Now I meet the ox through my spirit, not through my eyes; my senses are at rest, but my mind moves freely. I follow the natural patterns of Heaven, opening the great joints and following the large hollows, according to what is naturally so."

Cook Ding is not merely speaking of butchering an ox, he is describing a spiritual path. At first, he saw a solid obstacle, an opaque form: the whole ox. With time, he began to perceive the spaces, the openings, the invisible lines where the blade could pass without resistance. At last, he no longer needed his eyes, his spirit alone guided the movement, in perfect harmony with the natural structure of things. This is the art of wuwei: acting without forcing, without clashing, following the grain of the world. The butcher does not struggle with matter; he dances with it. He forces nothing, he follows natural forms, he anticipates empty spaces. Such mastery is not technical but cosmic: it comes from attunement to the Dao, from reverence for "what is naturally so". Every action thus performed becomes grace, economy of effort, and freedom.

A Critique of Ambition Zhuangzi often criticizes those who seek to impose their will upon the world.

In such ambition, he sees a form of violence, not only against others, but also against oneself. This is often what hides behind the desire to "improve" things according to our own biased and limited standards. As Zhuangzi tells it, a man sees a wild bird flying freely; he catches it, puts it in a cage, feeds it the finest foods, plays refined music for it, and the bird dies of sadness within three days. The problem is that he tried to "improve" the bird's life according to human criteria, without understanding its own nature. He explains: What is good for humans is not good for fish; What is good for fish is not good for birds. He identifies several problems in such behavior. Interference: wanting to change what is already complete by nature. Pride: believing that our idea of what is "better" is universal. Violence: even with good intentions, imposing one's will destroys natural harmony. Self-destruction: by trying to force the world, one cuts oneself off from the Dao, exhausts oneself, and becomes lost. This is how many people act when they try to shape reality according to their desires.

One of the essential aspects of wuwei lies in the grace of action itself, in that precise gesture that follows the shapes of reality without forcing them. It is not a matter of acting to obtain a result, but of acting in accord with the situation, with a fluidity that reveals the union between the agent and the world. Wuwei values the quality of movement rather than

its end, the elegance of the process rather than the obsession with success. It is efficiency without tension, presence within the act rather than calculation about its effects. From this perspective, action becomes a form of self-respect, for it does not reduce the subject to a mere tool bent toward a goal; it acknowledges him as a living presence, attuned to the moment and worthy in itself. In contrast to the instrumentalization of the self, treating oneself as a means in the service of performance or success, wuwei offers an ethics of integrity: to be wholly in what one does, without betraying oneself in pursuit of an outcome. It is fidelity to an inner movement, an action that does not tear itself away from itself.

Wuwei is also a social critique. It denounces political, educational, and economic systems that impose rigid, standardized, and constraining models. For Zhuangzi, a just society is one that allows each being to follow their own nature, free from excessive pressure.

Spiritual Dimension Beyond daily action, wuwei is also a spiritual way of living. It is a fundamental attitude toward existence, accepting that we do not control everything, that the universe follows its own rhythms, and that wisdom lies in aligning with them rather than resisting them. In this, it recalls Zen teachings, which advocate presence in the moment

without mental resistance, immediate, intuitive action, as in Zen archery or martial arts, where there is no longer separation between thinker and action, an "absence of mind" (mushin in Japanese), very close to the state of wuwei. It also resonates with Stoicism, which teaches us to distinguish what depends on us, our judgments, values, and actions, from what does not, external events and nature itself, fundamentally in harmony with the spirit of wuwei: act virtuously in what lies within your power, and accept serenely the course of the world for the rest. Yet Taoist wuwei places greater emphasis on naturalness and spontaneity, letting oneself be carried by the flow of the Dao, like a branch in a stream, whereas Stoicism relies more on reason and inner discipline to accept fate. Thus, where the Stoic may seem cold or rational, Zhuangzi remains poetic, light, and often ironic. He does not give commandments; he shows paths. He does not say, "You must do this", but rather, "Look how the butterfly flies, how the water flows. Perhaps you too can learn to go with the current."

Thus wuwei is not reserved for hermits or sages withdrawn from the world. Zhuangzi presents it as a philosophy of life, applicable to everyone, in every situation. In work: do not try to control everything, but understand the natural flow of a project. In human relationships: do not seek to change others, but cultivate listening and resonance. In artistic

creation: let inspiration come instead of forcing it. And more generally, learn to observe without immediately judging, to breathe, physically and mentally. Many modern practices, therapy, self-development, and the like, unknowingly repeat what Zhuangzi taught over two thousand years ago: sometimes one must do less to succeed better.

This approach to wuwei is inseparable from another pillar of Zhuangzi's thought: ziran (自然), literally "that which is so of itself", meaning natural spontaneity and authenticity. It calls for freeing oneself from social pretense. To act through wuwei is to align one's actions with one's true nature, like water following the slope of the ground, instead of exhausting oneself swimming against the current to meet external expectations or material ambitions. Zhuangzi warns against the "chains of reward" and the "bondage of success". When we become obsessed with results, with others' opinions, or with the accumulation of wealth, our action grows tense, calculated, and loses its natural flow. The craftsman, the musician, or the athlete who truly excels is the one who, at his peak, forgets glory and wealth to become one with his movement. In ceasing to impress, one becomes truly effective; in ceasing to chase success, one accomplishes what lasts, because it springs from genuine talent, not social performance. In this sense, wuwei is an act of liberation: it replaces artificial agitation with right

action, an action that arises from our essence and naturally contributes to harmony, without forcing it.

The Paradox As often with Zhuangzi, wuwei is a paradoxical concept. How can one act without acting? How can one succeed without trying to succeed? How can one advance without effort? How can one act without concern for results? Yet it is precisely within this paradox that its depth lies. For it is not a logical contradiction, but an experiential truth: we all know those moments when we succeed without intending to, when a solution arises the moment we stop thinking about it, when we love without trying to hold on. Zhuangzi does not seek to resolve paradoxes, he seeks to live them. He invites us to step outside the habitual frames of thought, to see differently, to feel differently, to exist differently.

In modern interpretations of Zhuangzi, the concept of wuwei (无为), often translated as "non-action", is frequently misunderstood. It is associated with passivity, abandonment, or a gentle resignation to circumstances, "just let things happen", "go with the flow", "don't force anything". Wuwei thus becomes an alibi for withdrawal from the world, a philosophy of ease, comfort, or lazy detachment.

But such an interpretation betrays the very spirit of the Dao and of Zhuangzi's thought.

Zhuangzi does not advocate laxity, but adjustment. And such adjustment requires work, precision, and discipline. It is not about waiting for things to happen without one's participation, but about becoming capable of acting at the right moment, acting without forcing, yet not without knowing. Thus, when the famous Cook Ding carves an ox, his gestures are so harmonious, so fluid, that he seems to be dancing. He does not struggle against the flesh; he moves through it. His knife never dulls, for it follows the invisible lines that open before him. Yet this ease is not innate: it comes from years of practice, from a long intimacy with matter. It is through practice, patient attention, and respect for life that Ding attains his virtuosity. Non-action, here, is the culmination of work.

The same goes for the wheelwright Pien, who refuses to pass on his craft in writing, for what he does cannot be expressed in words. His hands know what language cannot teach. He speaks of a knowledge that arises "between the strokes of the hammer", knowledge born of experience, of an adjusted gesture, of a form felt rather than imposed. Here again, wuwei is not the absence of effort, but the fusion of action and reality.

Even the cicada catcher, absurd as his task may seem, catching insects with a rod, shows the rigor

of the path: he spends months training, placing his pole, steadying his focus. If he succeeds in capturing the insect without harming it, it is because his body, will, and breath have become one with the wind and the branch. Zhuangzi does not celebrate a careless wanderer, but a man of sharpened sense and supple mastery.

Thus, wuwei does not deny effort, it transforms its meaning. It is not about acting through willpower, but letting the gesture arise from listening, from inner harmony. The world is not an obstacle to avoid, but a partner to attune to. One must not flee reality, but learn to dance with it. Far from the popular image of the languid Taoist, Zhuangzi proposes a profound demand: to work at forgetting oneself in order to act more truly. To let action emerge from one's connection with the Dao is not inaction, but right action, unseen, effortless, mastery without mastery.

In wuwei, effort is not denied but transformed. It is no longer a matter of constraining the world, but of attuning to it. This effort is inward, discreet, almost invisible: it consists in making oneself available to the flow rather than opposing it with rigid will. First comes the effort of attention, to observe the movements of reality closely and perceive the right moments. Then the effort of relaxation, allowing one to act not out of tension or domination, but in the natural continuity of things. Next comes the effort

of patience, that calm vigilance that knows how to wait for the kairos, the right moment. The effort of simplicity, which allows one to shed what clutters action, illusions, ambitions, unnecessary complications. Finally, the effort of presence, which anchors the act in the instant, without distraction or ulterior motive. Thus, the effort in wuwei is not a struggle against the world, but a work upon oneself, a subtle discipline through which action accomplishes itself, without strain or excess.

Thus wuwei, or non-action, is not the absence of action. It is another way of acting, more fluid, more respectful of the world and of oneself, a philosophy of suppleness, patience, and trust in the nature of things. For Zhuangzi, the world should not be shaped by force but received with intelligence. One advances best not by pushing, but by letting oneself be carried. One persuades not by speaking endlessly, but by knowing how to listen. One finds peace not by seeking to control everything, but by accepting not to. And perhaps, in this profound non-activity, one discovers a truer, freer kind of action, one more in tune with one's genuine nature.

Perpetual Transformation

Life and Death Zhuangzi writes: "The Way has neither beginning nor end. Living beings are born and die, without ever remaining fixed in a single form. Now empty, now full, they never remain in a single form. [...] Neither the years can be gathered up nor time brought to a halt. Decline and growth, fullness and emptiness, they end and they begin again. In this, one can speak of the great principle underlying things, and discern the principles of the universe." From this, we may conclude that all creatures come from a common source, and that all will eventually return to it.

Although Zhuangzi never refers explicitly to the *Yijing* (*The Book of Changes*), his vision shares its cosmological spirit: all things flow, transform, and return. Just as the Yijing's hexagrams represent transient states of reality, Zhuangzi sees life and death not as fixed opposites but as phases within an endless cycle. The "Great Beginning" recalls the Taiji, the primordial source from which the ten thousand transformations arise. Breath, form, life,

death, all obey the same law of ceaseless change, like the seasons or the alternation of yin and yang. Nothing endures; everything circulates. This is the great lesson common to both the Yijing and the Zhuangzi: to resist the flow is to suffer; to accept it is to enter into harmony with the Dao and to find peace.

Zhuangzi never speaks of death with solemnity or gravity. He neither dramatizes endings nor sanctifies beginnings. For him, living, dying, and being reborn are merely modes of the same process, phases in a universal cycle that has neither fixed origin nor ultimate destination. Everything moves and transforms; what we call "life" or "death" are only moments along an infinite continuum. Death is not a rupture, still less a negation of being, but a natural metamorphosis, like the caterpillar becoming a butterfly or the seed turning into a tree. Existence is a current, carrying each being through form, dissolution, and reconfiguration. Hence, as we have seen, Zhuangzi does not lament his wife's death. Why grieve for what is natural and inevitable? Why fear what belongs to the Dao?

Impermanence Everything in the universe is in motion. Day turns to night, warmth yields to coolness, summer blends into autumn. Human beings too are born, grow, decline, die, and perhaps are

reborn in another form, they are never static. To think of identity as fixed is to blind oneself to the mobile nature of reality. Zhuangzi joins other traditions that affirm impermanence: Buddhism with its anicca, or the shamanic cosmologies. He sees the universe as a perpetual play of transformations, an endless exchange between the visible and the invisible. This perspective radically transforms our relation to finitude, for death deserves neither fear nor lamentation, as it is a continuation, not an extinction. Human error lies in wanting to fix what, by its very nature, escapes all fixation. From this desire comes anxiety, the wish for things to last when they are made to change. Hence Zhuangzi proposes a wisdom of release: to accept disappearance not as resignation, but as understanding that disappearance is also a birth under another guise. It is not we who die; rather, a certain form of us dissolves, like a wave returning to the sea.

In modern societies, death is often treated as a scandal, an injustice, a personal or medical failure. We hide it, delay it, deny it. For Zhuangzi, it is the resistance to death, not death itself, that causes suffering. He writes: "The true men of old did not identify with life, nor did they reject death. They felt no joy at being born, nor aversion at dying. Without effort they came; without resistance they departed. They did not forget their origin, nor did they seek to know their end. They received

life gladly and yielded it peacefully when the time came." To live according to the Dao is thus to live with death, without fear, without obsession, without excessive solemnity. It is to walk at the pace of the world, without pretending to control its cycles.

Zhuangzi does not speak of reincarnation in the religious sense; he does not claim that the soul migrates from body to body with its identity intact. Rather, he suggests that what we are, body, mind, energy, breath, returns to the great cosmic fabric, to be redistributed, reorganized; we are not destroyed but recomposed. As in nature, nothing is lost, everything transforms. And this transformation, far from tragic, may be welcomed with serenity, even joy. Once we release the illusion of a fixed self, the fear of its disappearance vanishes.

Thus, when one contemplates the death of a loved one through Zhuangzi's eyes, it is not a tearing away but a change of form, a continuation otherwise. Grief is not erased but transformed. Sadness is not denied, but given another meaning, not that of loss, but of participation in a greater cycle. What we loved has not vanished; it has simply changed its state. To be born, to die, to be reborn, these words do not mark separate stages, but movements within the great river of reality. The Dao neither begins nor ends; it circulates, transforms, and plays with our mental categories. And we, human beings, are but one of its countless faces. To understand this is

to be freed from a fundamental anxiety. It is not a denial of the pain of separation, but a way to place it within a broader frame, where life and death no longer oppose each other, but respond to one another. It is to accept being only a shifting fragment of an indefinable whole. To read Zhuangzi, then, is to die to an illusion and be reborn into a freedom.

Existence as Movement For Zhuangzi, constant change is not limited to life and death; it touches every dimension of existence, from thoughts to emotions, from identities to circumstances. Nothing remains fixed or stable, not even our opinions, our knowledge, or our desires. The mind itself is fluid, in motion, crossed by silent transformations. The sage does not cling to what changes but moves with it, like a fish in water or a bird in the wind. Change is not a problem to solve, but a reality to embrace. Thus, freedom arises not from control over the world, but from an intimate accord with its instability. Here are a few examples.

In the famous dialogue between Zhuangzi and Huizi about the happiness of the fish in the river, Zhuangzi shows that truth depends on perspective. Let us recall the scene. When Zhuangzi says, "Look how happy the fish are!" from the bridge, his logician friend Huizi replies, "You are not a fish, how do you know what makes fish happy?" Zhuangzi's answer

is not logical but intuitive and empathic: "You are not me, how do you know that I do not know what makes fish happy?" The central idea is that truth is not a matter of objective, verifiable facts, but of experience and perspective. Zhuangzi does not prove the fish's happiness; he perceives it through communion with nature. He suggests that genuine understanding arises from intuitive connection with the world, beyond linguistic debate. It is a defense of empathy and subjectivity against narrow rationalism. Truth depends on the perspective one adopts, and there are ways of knowing that go beyond mere demonstration.

This reversal of perspective is a form of inner transformation. It shows that to think differently is already to become different. The passage where Zhuangzi dreams he is a butterfly, then wakes and wonders who he really is, reveals that identity itself is unstable, caught in a constant movement between states of consciousness. It is a transition between forms of self, a transformation of reality. He also often speaks of natural or climatic changes, of wind, seasons, water, and sounds that appear and vanish, showing that nature is a perpetual theater of metamorphoses, without tragedy and without finality.

Man must learn to move as nature does.

Zhuangzi evokes figures such as the wheelwright, the cook, and the woodcutter, embodiments of skills rooted in intuitive experience. Their craft is

never fixed but constantly adapting to the material, wood, flesh, and so on. This shows that right action arises from fluid change, not from rigid method; it entails existential shifts in one's way of being. In these concrete examples, what changes most is posture over time, a progression in the exercise of one's role. It is an inner transformation of one's relation to activity, for these craftsmen follow no fixed manual. Their work is not bureaucratic or codified but a living process. Each act, each gesture is attuned to the moment, the material, the situation. In doing so, these figures continually renew themselves. They are not mechanical executors, but artists of the everyday. Their authority does not come from rule or status, but from embodied wisdom. Their role thus becomes a living expression of the individual, not a fixed social label or rigid technique.

Mastery evolves with age and experience. The wheelwright grows old, the cook refines his art. The roles remain the same, yet their execution transforms with time, with attentiveness, with the body. Each role is inhabited differently at different moments of life. For in Zhuangzi, the role is not abolished but de-essentialized: it exists only in and through transformation. It is not the role that defines the person, but the ever-changing person who gives life to the role, a view that recalls Sartre's existential claim that existence precedes essence, and not the other way around, as tradition assumed.

Language too is in transformation, for Zhuangzi distrusts fixed words and rigid definitions. To speak is already to transform reality, to translate it, to bend it. This is why he plays with paradoxes and shifts in meaning, to make us feel that meaning itself is fluid, and that one should not cling to words. In Zhuangzi's view, change is the very texture of reality, present even in its most subtle layers: meaning, perception, identity, speech, and action. To resist change is to harden oneself against life; to embrace it is to draw closer to the Dao.

The Reversal of Values Within the intellectual landscape of ancient China, Confucian and utilitarian, Zhuangzi stands as a radical exception. He does not merely offer an alternative to dominant values, he undertakes to overturn them entirely. For him, notions such as good and evil, usefulness, success, and knowledge are artificial constructions, prisons of the mind that estrange us from the natural harmony of the Dao. His philosophy is a plea for absolute freedom, won through a joyful, sardonic rejection of social norms.

His sharpest social critique targets utility, or profitability. Society, he observes, is governed by a deadly principle: usefulness. A man must be useful to the state, a tree useful to the carpenter, an act useful to one's career. This frantic pursuit breeds

endless torment. It drives people to bustle without aim, to chase empty honors, to mutilate their minds to fit a model. Against this frenzy he sets the superior wisdom of the useless. The most famous example is the crooked tree: a huge tree whose wood is so gnarled and irregular that no carpenter wants it. Everyone calls it "useless", yet precisely this uselessness is its value, for thanks to it the tree lives out its natural span without being felled. Its uselessness is what is most useful to it, and the "usefulness of the useless" becomes a refrain. By having no value in the eyes of the world, one escapes its grip, its exploitation, its constant demands, and gains peace and the preservation of one's life.

Zhuangzi's project is not nihilistic. He demolishes conventional values only to free us and lead us back to a deeper harmony, that of the Dao. By renouncing the urge to be useful, important, or recognized, one ceases to fight the current of the universe. One learns to "ride transformations", to live in natural spontaneity (ziran). One tastes a tranquility honors cannot give. The greatest success, in the end, is to have none in the eyes of others, and true worth is to have none. In abandoning every claim to judge and be judged, one finds the ultimate freedom Zhuangzi advocates: a lightness of being, a quiet joy in simply existing, useless and perfectly free, in the infinite flow of the world.

It is essential to clarify that this "uselessness" and this "non-action" (wuwei) are by no means a call to idleness, laziness, or apathy. Zhuangzi does not urge us to remain inactive, but to act in a radically different way. The point is to abandon calculated, strained, self-interested action, the kind that seeks to impose one's will on the world for gain or glory, and to prefer spontaneous, fluid, and responsive action that follows the natural flow of things. It can be compared to an expert swimmer in a current: he does not stay still, for that would mean drowning; he does not fight the current frantically, for that would waste his strength; instead, he uses the power of the flow itself, letting it carry him while adjusting his movements with supple precision, moving with perfect grace and efficiency. His action is both complete and effortless, because it is in perfect harmony with its surroundings. Thus, the skilled craftsman, the inspired musician, or the master cook described by Zhuangzi are not idle. They act with consummate mastery, yet their action seems to flow by itself, without resistance, as if it accomplished itself. Their "uselessness" in the eyes of the business or political world is precisely the condition of their sublime effectiveness in the art of living. They do not act to profit or to impress, but express through their right gesture the creative spontaneity of the Dao itself. For Zhuangzi, true idleness is in fact to exhaust oneself chasing vain social goals, just as

true action is to align oneself with the deep dynamic of life.

The Reversals of Social Order Zhuangzi constantly mocks social roles, titles, and fixed identities. He celebrates the fool, the useless tree, the worker, the hunchback, not as models to imitate, but as signs of freedom beyond social norms. The artisans, the wheelwright, the cook, the cicada catcher, stand above scholars, nobles, and intellectuals, not by rank but by embodied wisdom, for they live the Dao in action. Such reversals were shocking in his time. An aristocrat humbling himself before Cook Ding, becoming his student, only to be told that he has understood nothing, because he sees only technique. Or Wheelwright Bian, mocking Duke Huan of Qi, a powerful ruler reading an ancient classic. Bian dares to tell him that what he reads are only the "leftovers" of the ancients, an audacious insult to the learned culture of the age. In these scenes, nobles bow before commoners; power kneels to practice. Simplicity surpasses prestige. The artisan's mastery, rooted in living skill, outshines the sterile knowledge of the elite. When envoys from the King of Chu offer Zhuangzi the post of prime minister, he refuses with biting irony. He wishes to preserve his freedom, his authenticity, to avoid being trapped in the artificial mask of office, bound by duty, hierarchy,

and the corruption of politics. For him, power and honors are a form of slavery, a slow spiritual death. True worth does not lie in recognition or rule, but in inner harmony and accord with the natural current of the Dao. His refusal is not laziness or rebellion, but the expression of a deeper wisdom that places freedom of spirit above worldly success.

Zhuangzi trusts no authority, not emperors, not scholars, not moral teachers. He mocks the entire social order, for power corrupts not only those who wield it but also those who revere it. He scorns careerists, the ambitious, the "useful men" too serious to think, too busy to live. One story makes this clear. A court official named Cao Shang pleased his king so much that he was rewarded with a hundred chariots. Proud of his success, Cao Shang went to show off before Zhuangzi, sneering at his poverty: "It is my talent that wins me a hundred chariots from a great prince", he boasts. Zhuangzi replies sharply: "When the king is ill, the doctor who lances a boil earns one chariot; the one who cures hemorrhoids earns five. The lower the service, the higher the pay. You must have licked his hemorrhoids, how else could you have earned so many chariots?" The story condenses Zhuangzi's disdain for material success, titles, and political favor, a fierce critique of flattery, submission, and the degradation of the soul.

Here Zhuangzi diverges from Laozi. Laozi still prescribes, he seeks to heal the world through return to the Dao. He advises rulers, imagines peaceful villages, a modest humanity, a quiet civilization. Zhuangzi laughs at all such ambitions. He mocks kings, moralists, strategists, even well-meaning sages. He offers no political doctrine, only fables, irony, and paradox. For him, the world cannot be managed, it is too fluid, too chaotic. True peace will never come from institutions but from detachment, from an inner freedom that lets one flow with what cannot be ruled. Zhuangzi is no reformer: he does not seek to make society better, but to live apart from its noise, in dance, in listening, in silent accord with what cannot be named.

A Paradoxical Morality

Zhuangzi's "Immoralism" Periodically, Zhuangzi is accused in turn of cynicism, skepticism, relativism, or immorality. It seems to us that this last "ac-

cusation" deserves some attention. Certainly, the charge of egocentrism seems plausible if one judges Zhuangzi by Confucian or even Laoist criteria that value social engagement. Laozi addresses the ruler with a "non-acting" governance (wuwei), advocating withdrawal, discretion, and trust in the spontaneous order of the Dao; the citizen should therefore make himself small, humble, avoid excess, ambition, and desire so as not to disturb the balance of the world. Confucius is fully involved in the city, multiplying counsels, rites, duties, and functions that everyone must assume. The first seeks to reduce human intervention to let natural balance arise; the second strives to order society through embodied wisdom, hierarchical roles, and a strict relational ethic. For Laozi, the world falls apart from wanting too much to set it right. For Confucius, it is lost for lack of framework, example, and active virtue. Thus one distrusts engagement, the other makes it a moral requirement. Zhuangzi is more radical: he rejects the political stage as a true space of transformation. Where Confucius values moral commitment in society, and where Laozi proposes an indirect reform of power through discreet wisdom, Zhuangzi mocks every claim to govern or straighten out the world. He dismisses both Confucian rites and the calculated wisdom of the sage. For him, to admit the social order is already to be caught by the illusions of the useful, the common

good, or public virtue. The true sage, in his view, seeks neither to reform institutions nor to advise the powerful: he cultivates his inner freedom, attunes himself to the breath of the Dao, and lets things follow their course. Far from court, far from office, he chooses wandering, non-belonging, and sometimes even madness as supreme forms of lucidity.

A Cosmic Responsibility Thus, faced with the charge of irresponsibility, Zhuangzi would probably reply that his approach is precisely the most responsible, for it recognizes the impossibility of controlling the external world and chooses to work on the only thing one can truly transform: oneself. This seeming irresponsibility is in fact a critique of authoritarian political systems, of any intervention by rulers, and an act of trust in the spontaneous order of the Dao. His position is consistent with his metaphysics of perpetual transformation. As counsel to the "powerful" as well as to anyone at all, he proposes the "fasting of the heart", which consists in suspending excessive emotional attachments, deliberately letting go of desires, nostalgia, or resentments that saturate the inner space, an ascetic discipline of emotional detachment that aims to recover clarity of soul and availability to the essential. This askesis is not a selfish retreat, but a prerequisite for action that is genuinely just. Zhuangzi does

not deny responsibility; he redefines it in depth. His non-interventionism is not indifference, but a radical respect for the autonomy of the natural and human world.

That is why he categorically refuses any official post for himself, as in the anecdote where he declines the offer of the king of Chu. He regards politics as a dangerous and alienating game, a sacrifice that wears down the individual for a vain cause, something that can indeed appear as selfish disinterest in the common good. But in reality he gives absolute priority to inner freedom. His sole aim is to preserve and deepen his inner tranquility. Wisdom is a strictly personal matter. He does not seek to "save the world", nor to convert others; he gives priority to individual realization, which can pass for egocentrism. This appears as an indifference to moral values, a lack of respect, as when he sings at his wife's death, an indifference to social conventions and even to conventional emotions, an attitude that can be perceived as affective and social irresponsibility.

Individual Liberation But one can reply that this accusation of egocentrism is a misunderstanding, for all of Zhuangzi's philosophy aims to undo the ego, the tight, separate "me", not to reinforce it. The "fasting of the heart-mind" is precisely a practice

designed to "empty the self". He narrates the example of woodcarver Qing, who wanted to sculpt a bell-stand. He first purified his mind through fasting and mental discipline, letting go of all distractions, rewards, judgments, and even his own body. Then he entered the forest in perfect focus, and let the natural form of the wood reveal the bell-stand's design to him. His craftsmanship became an act of unity between his skill and the wood's inherent qualities, as if guided by a spirit beyond himself.

Therefore wisdom consists in identifying with the flow of the Dao, not with one's narrow personal interests, radically the opposite of egocentrism. For him, the only authentic responsibility is not toward human society, but toward the vital principle of the universe; thus to act against one's nature in order to conform to social expectations is a betrayal of this ontological responsibility, a metaphysical morality that transcends the more conventional and arbitrary social morality. The true person is "responsible" for preserving unity and spontaneity within. By remaining faithful to his nature, he contributes, without even intending it, to the harmony of the whole, for true morality does not rest on external norms or imposed duties, but on an intimate attunement to the Dao. What is truly good for oneself is not what flatters the individual, satisfies primary desires, or social expectations, but what harmonizes the individual with his own deeper nature and coincides with

the order of the cosmos. True good is therefore not an ethical good in the Confucian sense, but an ontological good: that which allows being to follow its own path, to align spontaneously with the flow of the world. To act thus, in echo with one's own nature, is to contribute, without even thinking about it, to the harmony of the universe.

There is therefore, in Zhuangzi, no separation between what is good for oneself and what is good universally: to be faithful to the impulse of the Dao within is in fact to work for the Whole. Moreover, correcting the world from the outside is a violence, whereas harmonizing with it from within is a genuine form of non-coercive influence. His apparent "irresponsibility" is in reality a critique of the human pretension to "manage" or "improve" the world, for he reminds us that we are only an infinitesimal part of a far vaster cosmos. Wanting to "save" or "correct" the world is above all a manifestation of pride. True humility is to recognize our place and act discreetly, without disturbing the natural order, hence a radical critique of "humanist" pride. Whereas Laozi can be seen as a "mystical strategist" who thinks good governance, and Confucius as a "moral legislator" who thinks social order founded on rites and relational virtue, Zhuangzi is a "spiritual anarchist" who thinks individual liberation. One cannot accuse him of egocentrism and irresponsibility if one considers that the supreme responsibility is a sociopolit-

ical engagement in the conventional sense. But for Zhuangzi, this form of engagement is an alienation. His responsibility is ethical and cosmic: to preserve life and spontaneity within which is the most authentic contribution possible to the harmony of the whole. It is a philosophy that frees us from the anxiety of "changing the world" in order to focus on the only transformation truly within our reach: that of our own perception and our way of being in the world. In this sense it is not irresponsible, but profoundly apolitical, even anti-political, and, strangely, of radical modernity.

Critique of Confucianism In the colorful, subversive pages of the Zhuangzi, the figure of Confucius is omnipresent, but almost always displaced, inverted, mocked, or transfigured. If Laozi criticizes Confucian morality as an excess of codification and intervention, Zhuangzi goes further: he exposes its artificial, superficial, and sometimes hypocritical character. For him, the Confucian "man of worth" (junzi), full of proclaimed virtues, filial piety, respect for rites, justice, loyalty, is often only a social actor, a conventional mask, a rigid construction that betrays the living movement of the Dao. He compares men hemmed in by Confucian morality to fish out of water, and concludes: "In the same way, rather than praising the merits of the sage-kings and con-

demning the conduct of the tyrants, would it not be wiser for people to forget both, and to follow their natural inclinations?" Moral will, in fact, violates life itself.

Morality, for Zhuangzi, does evil through its desire to produce good: "the evil generated by the desire to accomplish good" reveals that the concern to act well sometimes engenders superior, vainglorious attitudes, ultimately more destructive than chaos itself. This somewhat recalls Nietzsche's formula: "Good people repel me, not because they do evil, but because they feel no shame in doing it: their justice is all the colder for their believing themselves just."

Zhuangzi displays a mistrust of morality as an instrument of social power, where good takes the form of exhibitionist virtue, a quest for respectability, even a way of humiliating others under the guise of altruism. He sees in these behaviors the seed of conflict: as soon as codes are imposed, their opposite, evil, inevitably arises. To want to order is already to exclude, judge, separate, and thus to fall into artifice and hypocrisy. "Confucian goodness" is seen as dangerous: it pushes toward domination by virtue, the will to save others against their will, and, at the extreme, to generate the suffering required to justify the savior's position.

What Zhuangzi denounces is not morality as such, but the pretension to fix the good in universal norms

and obligatory behaviors. He ridicules Confucian attachment to funeral rites, codified tears, and repetitive gestures. He shows that authentic virtue is not proclaimed, nor taught by rules, but manifests spontaneously when one is in accord with the Dao. Where Confucius sees morality as a pillar of civilization, Zhuangzi sees in it a trap: that of conforming to others' gaze, sacrificing one's own being to fit an image.

One of Zhuangzi's fundamental reproaches toward Confucianism is its stiffness. It imposes on everyone a single form of the good life, ignoring differences of nature, situation, temperament. By advocating public virtues, it fosters dissimulation: each learns to appear just, rather than to be at peace. Morality then becomes not an inner path, but a discipline of seeming. Worse, it favors false sages and flatterers, those who excel at playing expected roles without cultivating the least genuine wisdom. Thus Zhuangzi mocks the ruler who claims to do the people good without even understanding the movement of Heaven and Earth. The Confucian moralist, in his obsession with order and hierarchy, forgets the essential: the perpetual transformation of things, life's unpredictability, and the fact that wanting to do good is often the surest way to harm. In this, he does not merely criticize Confucianism; he reveals its pathological root. It is not so much morality that is at issue, but the use made of it by those who wish

to control, teach, impose. Through his humor, paradoxes, and taste for the unexpected, he invites us to distrust fine words, severe faces, and excessively virtuous men. For often, behind that façade hides fear of chaos, fear of oneself, fear of living without a prop. Now he invites us to dance with chaos rather than fight it, for the peace he embodies is inner and existential, not circumstantial. For him, the world is ungovernable, changing, chaotic, and true peace will never come from a social order, but from inner detachment, from deep de-identification. True wisdom begins, in his view, when one stops seeking to justify oneself. In his ideal, no positive morality should substitute for the natural. The Daoist sage is neither good nor bad: he simply is, and adapts to circumstances like the dragon or the snake that change form according to time and place.

Reason Without Dogma

A Critique of Reason Zhuangzi is not a rationalist in the classical Western sense. He builds no rigorous philosophical system, no chain of syllogisms like those found in Aristotle or Descartes. Yet he still makes use of reason, subtly, indirectly, often poetically, but always in a deeply philosophical way. He does not deny reason; he transcends it. He does not reject it; he frees it.

In several passages of the Zhuangzi, we find a critique of rigid logic, intellectual certainties, and moral discourses that claim to define what is true, just, or good. For him, those who seek to fix distinctions, such as between good and evil, lose themselves in details and forget the essential. The wise person does not let himself be trapped by words, for words may say much, yet remain superficial. But Zhuangzi does not merely set limits; he plays with them, bypasses them through images, absurd tales, and unexpected dialogues. For him, reason becomes dangerous when it is used to impose a single, categorical truth; it becomes tyrannical when it believes

it can understand everything, forgetting that it is only a tool, not an end. He has a paradoxical view of reason: he often uses it against itself, like a distorting mirror that exposes its own limits. He does not employ formal logic; instead, he prefers to ask questions that logic alone cannot resolve. He invites an open form of reasoning, one that can live with doubt, ambiguity, and the unknowable. He uses reason not to build, but as a tool of deconstruction, to dismantle the illusions of absolute knowledge. He shows that what we call "reason" is often conditioned by culture, that our categories, such as good and evil, true and false, are relative and circumstantial. Moreover, rationality can become tyrannical when it claims to explain everything. In this, he shares an intuition close to that of certain modern thinkers like Nietzsche or Foucault, who also saw in reason an ambiguous force, capable of both liberating and confining. He offers a fluid kind of wisdom, where reason is not sovereign, but a companion.

Analogical Reason He proposes a poetic and figurative rationality, preferring analogy to deduction, metaphor to concept, narrative to theory. This does not mean he ignores reason, but that he employs another form of it: one that connects phenomena to one another. He identifies structures, rhythms, and transformations, forming an organic, fluid, co-

herent, yet non-rigid rationality. One might call this a holistic, organic, transversal, or relational approach, in which the mind does not divide the world into sealed compartments but perceives the invisible links between things, for he believes that every thing, every idea, can transform, evolve, and take another form. Let us consider a few examples.

Zhuangzi speaks of a "lamp flame" that is passed on and seems never to be exhausted. He refers to the principle of combustion, which endures as long as there is fuel. Fire feeds on wood, but wood is not fire; the flame is a continuous transformation. Zhuangzi uses this image to describe continuity through change. Life, consciousness, and energy are not fixed entities but relational processes that sustain themselves by taking ever-changing forms. It is an "organic" rationality, one that perceives flows and transformations rather than stable substances.

Confucius observes a man swimming effortlessly in dangerously turbulent waters. The swimmer explains that he does not fight the current, for he "is born with the whirlpool and rises with the eddy." He moves in perfect accord with the flow of the water, with no personal will set against it. This is not a swimming technique but a kinesthetic and contextual intelligence. Wisdom is not a set of rules, how to move one's arms or legs, but the ability to discern

and harmonize with the dynamic, shifting structure of a situation.

Huizi the logician owns a giant gourd that he deems too large to be of any use, so he breaks it. Zhuangzi reproaches him for his stupidity and lack of imagination: "Why didn't you turn it into a great raft and sail on rivers and lakes? You complained that it was too big and cumbersome, but you failed to see the vastness of its usefulness." Against Huizi's narrow utilitarian logic, which assumes that a gourd must serve as a liquid container, Zhuangzi sets a way of thinking based on potential function and relationship to context. The "solution" was not to change or discard the object, but to change the context in which it is used. It is a form of rationality that seeks effective relations between an object and its environment, rather than one that imposes a rigid function.

A man's shadow complains to him: "Just now you were moving, now you stop; a moment ago you were sitting, now you stand. Why this lack of independence and constancy?" The shadow itself is then questioned by the "penumbra", which reproaches it with the same dependence. Zhuangzi uses this fable to show that all existence is relational and interdependent, always in motion, nothing absolutely autonomous. The idea of an independent "self" is an illusion. Our being is like the shadow, defined by its countless relations. This is a form of rationality

that thinks in terms of systems and interdependence, not isolated entities.

These various examples show that for Zhuangzi, "reason" is the art of discerning connections, processes, and potentials that escape an essentialist logic of classification and fixation.

Critique of Intellectualism Zhuangzi mocks intellectualism, the tendency to slice reality into concepts, to complicate it in order to dominate it, and no one embodies this obsession better than Huizi, his favorite sparring partner, who delights in logical subtleties and endless distinctions. Huizi wants to prove, argue, and define. Zhuangzi listens, then smiles; he does not refute directly, but tells a story, a story of wind, of fish, of useless trees, each a fable revealing the futility of thought trapped in its own nets. Huizi believes he enlightens, but Zhuangzi speaks of another light: "the illumination of the obvious", that simple clarity that appears when one stops forcing thought, letting things show themselves as they are, without confining them to categories.

By striving too hard to know, one ends up seeing nothing. The obsession with distinctions breeds a subtle blindness: we think we understand, yet drift away, the real does not need justification; it requires attention, not explanation. The task is to return to

a living simplicity, not as ignorance but as transparency, for the Dao cannot be understood, only experienced, and the sage does not discourse, he lives. Yet Zhuangzi is no enemy of thought, nor an advocate of anti-conceptualism. He works with concepts indeed, as seen in his subtle passages on shadow, penumbra, causality, identity, and language. He too handles ideas, exploring abstract notions such as the relativity of language and the tensions between name and reality. But he works differently, not to fix or conclude, but to open, unsettle, and shift. He does so not to produce a system or impose a doctrine, but to loosen the grip that concepts hold over perception. He does not oppose thought itself, but thought that idolizes itself, that systematizes. He does not reject distinctions, only those that claim to exhaust reality. Where Huizi, through his love of endless classifications, ends up circling within his own logic, Zhuangzi uses the concept as one would use a raft, to cross, not to cling to. Hence his critique of intellectualism is not a call to ignorance, but to a fluid, supple, and light form of thinking. A thought that illuminates rather than confines, a thought that undoes itself once it has served its purpose, like the finger pointing to the moon, but not lingering on it. Zhuangzi does not want us to think less, he wants us to think better: from within the world, in dialogue with experience, not against it. His "illumination of the obvious" does not con-

tradict reflection; it fulfills it, when at last the concept no longer obstructs vision. If one contrasts him with Socrates, one could say that Socrates seeks to clarify, while Zhuangzi seeks to liberate; Socrates aims to define, while Zhuangzi disorients in order to rediscover. Yet both understand the importance of passing through confusion and transcending the self. He invites a fluid rationality, capable of seeing contradictions, laughing at itself, and recognizing that truth is multiple, changing, and alive, in other words, to use reason without becoming its prisoner.

Undoing the Concept Zhuangzi thinks without imprisoning. He speaks, yet does not seek to fix meaning. He philosophizes without wanting to establish a doctrine. This apparent paradox runs through all his work: he uses words, images, and reasoning to undermine the certainties language creates. He criticizes the scholars' knowledge, the sages' pretension, the moralists' arrogance, and employs allegories, dialogues, and even subtle arguments to lead us elsewhere. For him, the concept is not sovereign but provisional, a fertile decoy meant to dissolve once its effect is achieved.

The essential task, then, is not to explain the Dao but to attune oneself to it, an idea that may seem difficult to grasp. To be in harmony with the Dao without being able to explain it requires a different

mode of relation than that of the concept. To explain is to seize, define, and confine within words; yet the Dao eludes such capture. This does not mean it is inaccessible. One can live it, as one lives music without knowing how to read a score, as one dances without describing each step. Harmony with the Dao belongs to the realm of attention and adjustment. Zhuangzi shows that the sage does not impose his will on the world: he listens to its rhythms, follows its transformations, and lets himself be moved by change. Cook Ding cuts the ox effortlessly not because he knows a theory, but because he has learned to feel the invisible spaces. Harmony is not something to be thought of, but practiced, for it is by letting oneself be shaped by reality that one comes into accord with it. Zhuangzi offers several paths toward this: cultivating wuwei, developing flexibility of mind, embracing multiple perspectives, and practicing the "fasting of the heart". Thus, not explaining does not mean ignoring, but simply recognizing the limits of language. Explanation freezes, while harmony flows. The Dao is not understood through definitions, but through an art of living, through receptivity and adaptability.

Where Confucius codifies and Socrates seeks to define, Zhuangzi deconstructs. He does not invite us to conceptualize the Dao; he refuses even that it be treated as a stable or knowable object. The Dao

cannot be understood, it must be lived. It reveals itself in the intervals of language, in silence, in the metamorphoses of the living. To try to grasp it is already to betray it. That is why Zhuangzi multiplies paradoxical images, absurd tales, and stories of fish, deformed beings, or butterflies. He does not seek to convince, but to awaken, to unsettle, to unlearn. And yet, he thinks. He produces a rigorous but organic, non-linear thought, a thought of flow, of change, of indeterminacy. He does not abolish reason; he frees it from its classificatory and normative pretensions. He shows that rationality can become a prison when it forgets that it is itself a product of life, of perspective, of language. He calls for another kind of lucidity, one that does not cling, that does not claim to name the ultimate, but remains open, light, attuned to the transformation of the real. Zhuangzi does not despise the concept: he turns it around, empties it, bends it until it breaks. For only by stripping language to the bone can one encounter what no word can contain. A reason without rigidity, a knowledge without pretension, a speech that leads to silence, this is the art of the thinker who speaks in order to make words forgotten. When we look at how philosophy is generally taught in the West, especially in academic settings, it appears as a collection of contents and skills. Students are expected to master the doctrines of Plato, Descartes, or Kant, and to acquire

techniques of logic, analysis, and argumentative precision. Philosophy thus appears as a discipline, a kind of conceptual craftsmanship, where learning means knowing theories and practicing rules of reasoning. Zhuangzi offers something entirely different: he does not transmit doctrines to memorize or methods to repeat. His writing stages experiences that cultivate attitudes, openness to paradox, humor toward seriousness, flexibility where rigid distinctions collapse, detachment from dogma and from the fixed identity of the mind. What he offers is neither knowledge nor skill, but a way of inhabiting thought, a posture of the mind that enables inner transformation. Thus, whereas academic philosophy teaches what to think, how to analyze, and how to construct an argument, Zhuangzi teaches how to let thought arise, a practice that involves remaining in motion, welcoming uncertainty, staying perpetually surprised, and living the question rather than rushing toward the answer. His philosophy is not a training in content or technique, but a school of inner disposition.

Zhuangzi, of course, works with concepts, he creates them, shapes them, plays with them, but he never lets them harden into dogma. His concepts are alive, provisional, mobile; they resemble what he calls "fish traps made of words": useful for catching meaning, but meant to be discarded once the catch is made. Indeed, Zhuangzi theo-

rizes about the Dao, transformation, perspective, language, and so on, but his way of treating ideas is not to present them as content to be possessed or repeated. Rather, they are tools meant to loosen the grip of rigid thinking and induce a fluid experience of thought. He shows how a concept can be at once sharp and ironic, illuminating and self-destabilizing. In this sense, his work is not opposed to conceptual thinking, but it proposes a unique relation to concepts: never reverence, always play, always a readiness to let them dissolve when they begin to ossify. It is philosophy too, unusual for us, but a philosophy that laughs at itself.

In Zhuangzi, if there is any intellectual or moral imperative, it takes the paradoxical form of inner availability. It is not about following a rule, a duty, or a universal norm, but about being fully open to reality, its transformations and its unforeseen turns. True virtue does not lie in the rigid application of a principle, but in the suppleness of the soul, in the capacity to adjust to circumstances without fixing upon a rigid identity or absolute goal. To be available is to renounce mastery, to let go of the arrogance of knowledge, and to enter into resonance with the Dao. This ethic of availability is neither laxity nor indifference; on the contrary, it demands a high degree of awareness and simplicity. For only one who clings to nothing can truly welcome what comes and act with precision, without forcing.

The Equality of All Things

Deconstructing Distinctions Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, "The Equality of Things" (齊物論, Qí wù lùn), is the longest and most philosophically foundational of the book. There, Zhuangzi develops the idea that all distinctions we make, between good and evil, true and false, life and death, self and other, are arbitrary constructions of the human mind, not absolute realities. Since all things are transient, changing manifestations of the Dao, all beings and all perspectives are fundamentally equal. The sage's task is to transcend the usual limited and self-centered point of view, which Zhuangzi illustrates through several examples found throughout the text. The frog at the bottom of the well, archetype of satisfied ignorance and narrow perspective. The sparrow who mocks the great bird Peng, unable to grasp what surpasses him. The angry monkey, deceived by his trainer because of his attachment to appearances and names. Opposed to them are figures of freedom: the bird Peng itself, of unimaginable size, soaring to vertiginous heights

and traversing infinite distances, symbolizing the sage's mind that has transcended petty distinctions to adopt the point of view of the Way; and the "useless" tree, so twisted and gnarled that no carpenter desires it, embodying liberation from the world's utilitarian standards. The goal is to reach the higher, unified perspective of the Dao, from which "the ten thousand things are one", where everything that exists has its own reason for being and legitimacy, freeing the mind from sterile debate and anxiety.

He even offers a concrete practice for doing so: the "fasting of the heart-mind". It consists in emptying the mind of knowledge and prejudice, of egocentric desires and partial understandings that clutter and obstruct perception. This fasting of the heart counters discursive and self-centered thinking, binary judgments, and the will to control. It opposes calculating reason, self-centered emotions, and the urge to act. A mind "empty" like a mirror can then reflect all things impartially, without distortion. Or else, through forgetting: to reach unity, one must "forget" distinctions, forget the boundary between good and evil, between self and other, and ultimately even forget the Dao itself. "Sitting and forgetting" is a liberating forgetfulness that allows the natural spontaneity (ziran) of each being to express itself.

Ontological Respect In Zhuangzi's tales, it is not uncommon for a man to speak with a skull, for a deformed man to be honored, or for an unknown bird to become the equal of a king. All forms of existence have dignity, regardless of appearance, utility, or conformity to human standards. The universe is not ranked by power, beauty, or rationality. It is traversed by a deep, living unity linking insects and stars, fools and sages, sages and fish.

Hence Zhuangzi calls for a radical loosening of borders, between beings, species, states. This is not abstract egalitarianism but a felt sense of interconnection, an ontological respect for whatever exists, because all partakes of the Dao and nothing is excluded. Every form of life has value, shown through strange figures: the pig who prefers mud to a clean pen; a lame horse unfit for war, free to graze in peace; a talentless man who is free precisely because he is overlooked; the fighting cock that no longer reacts, no more than a wooden rooster.

Zhuangzi distrusts utilitarian categories and our habit of valuing only what serves, shines, or performs, and thus ranks. He flips the dominant logic: the useless becomes precious; the marginal, exemplary. Thus, throughout his writings, what is considered "human normality" is constantly called into question. Intelligence, beauty, strength are not criteria of superiority. An animal, a plant, a senile

elder may access the Dao as much as the brightest scholar: the living need not conform to be worthy.

Critique of Hierarchies As we have seen, this reversal of values leads to an implicit yet radical critique of all social hierarchies. Distinctions of master/student, noble/commoner, man/woman, human/non-human are exposed as constructs. They estrange us from the Dao's simplicity, which neither classifies, nor judges, nor compares. The sage does not seek to dominate or distinguish himself; he withdraws from the social game, not out of contempt, but lucidity. The need to be "above" others is a symptom of separation: one seeks height only after losing contact with the whole's unity. Humility here is not a moral virtue, but the recognition of an ontological fact: no one is superior to anyone, nothing is superior to anything, for all beings partake in the same vital breath. This critique also targets rigid morality, absolute laws, binary judgments. Zhuangzi does not claim that all things are equal in some vague relativism; he simply asserts that each thing has its own perspective, its own way of existing, feeling, and understanding, and that no single point of view can ever encompass them all. In this he recalls Leibniz's monads, each capturing the whole world from a particular angle. He offers a cosmology of coexistence in which the human is

not center but part; mountain, bird, and rain have as much right to be as the most learned individual. We must leave the illusion of mastery for an attentive participation in the world.

Equality of all things is not uniformity. Each being is singular and different. But difference is not hierarchical; it is a round dance. The world is an orchestra without a conductor, a forest without a plan, a river without a source, each plays its note, its tone, its way of being. Seeing unity in diversity grants wisdom without domination. It echoes Laozi's line: "The Dao gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three; and Three gives birth to the ten thousand beings." Greatness lies not in elevation but in attunement, and attunement comes not by constraint, but by respect for life in all its forms.

The Pivot of the Dao As an "instrument" for passing beyond oppositions, Zhuangzi offers the pivot of the Dao. Instead of taking sides, the sage stands at a central point from which he can see how "true" and "false" positions generate and relativize one another. It is not a matter of finding another truth, but of transcending the binary opposition itself by returning to the unity of things, prior to the "split", upstream from all opposition. Our categories of thought and judgment are illusions because they al-

ways depend on a limited viewpoint. Thus the fish-in-water example: what is an ideal milieu for a fish would be death for a human. There is no "good condition" in the absolute. Or the knowledge of the wind: the wind blows through countless cracks and hollows, producing an infinity of sounds. Each opening, a tree, a rock, a door, resonates with its own voice, unique and perfect. Which is the "true" sound of the wind? None, and all. The single wind, like the Dao, manifests in many ways, and none can claim to be the sole truth. To declare an absolute, "this is; that is not", is to hear only one note and mistake it for the whole wind. Wisdom is hearing the entire symphony, accepting the multiplicity of perspectives without clinging to one, so as to perceive the Dao's harmonious unity that holds them all.

For Zhuangzi, even being and non-being are not simple opposites but complementary aspects of reality. He often reminds us that "being is born of non-being". A room is made of beams and walls, but its empty space makes it livable. A wheel is carved from solid wood, but without the hollow hub it cannot turn. A pot is shaped by clay, but the void within makes it useful. Existence emerges from what is not, as a pot emerges from clay and emptiness. Non-being is not mere nothingness, but the fertile ground of all potential. The cosmos breathes; with each breath, things arise from "noth-

ing". To affirm only being is to see only the pot and ignore the clay; to cling only to non-being is to ignore the blossoming of the manifest world. The sage abides at the pivot, where "this" and "that" cease to oppose. He knows a felled tree can rot into earth and give rise to new mushrooms. Is that tree being, or non-being, in this constant transformation? Both, and neither. It is the process itself: ceaseless becoming. Such is the axis of the Way, where all opposites find their unity. To argue about being and non-being is like a mosquito trying to carry a mountain. True understanding lies in the flow, not in fixed names.

These examples show that non-being is not absence in the sense of nothingness, but a presence of possibility, a space that gives meaning to form. Without emptiness, form is dead; without form, emptiness is formless. Clinging to the distinction "this is" versus "this is not" is to miss their interdependence. Zhuangzi dissolves this opposition by showing that usefulness, life, and transformation arise from their interaction. Being is always shaped by what is not, and what is not constantly opens the way for what is. Thus, being and non-being are not enemies, but partners in the dance of the Dao.

Laughing to Understand

Humor as Method To read Zhuangzi is to be disoriented, and also to smile, to laugh. Between absurd dialogues, implausible situations, and ironic reversals, one quickly sees that humor in his work is not a stylistic flourish: it is a method, a crucial stance. Where other philosophers teach by rigorous demonstration or solemn sermon, Zhuangzi teaches by surprise, by unseating us. But this laughter is not cheap mockery; it is therapeutic, pedagogical, liberating. It springs from the gap between the gravity with which we clutch our ideas, certainties, and stances, and the lightness with which the universe seems to play with them. For Zhuangzi, to take things too seriously is already to have strayed from the Dao.

His humor is subtle, provocative, and paradoxical. With him, nothing is ever entirely serious, yet everything can be taken seriously, differently. A venerated master becomes ridiculous; a king receives a lesson from a simpleton; a sacred turtle prefers to splash in mud rather than be venerated in a temple.

These paradoxes are not meant to shock, but to defuse our expectations, break mental automatism, open cracks in systems of thought. This humor is often indirect, implicit, almost invisible at times. It does not rely on ridicule so much as on staging the absurd, on detours and reversals of meaning. He uses the ridiculous to expose false seriousness, and strangeness to awaken thought. Zhuangzi, for instance, tells of a man afraid of his own shadow and his footprints. He runs to escape them, but the faster he runs, the more they follow, until he dies of exhaustion. The moral is that one cannot flee the inevitable, least of all oneself. To laugh at this character is to laugh at ourselves, at our illusions, our fears, our useless agitation.

Zhuangzi's humor often targets figures of authority: the pretentious sage, the domineering king, the rigid Confucian, the dogmatic moralist. He derides moralists and human pretension, those who would order the world, prescribe rules, define what is good and just, what must be done or believed. He takes them at their word, pushes them to the absurd, lets them lock themselves in their own contradictions, and laughs. Yet this laughter is not hateful; it is free and generous, meant not to destroy but to desacralize. By poking fun at human pretensions, Zhuangzi reminds us the universe needs neither our laws to function nor our categories to exist. He laughs at the vanity of wanting to classify, explain,

control everything. In one dialogue, a very serious philosopher claims one must always follow rites, for thus one honors Heaven. Zhuangzi asks whether Heaven wrote these rites itself or commissioned humans to draft them. His interlocutor bristles, but the question hangs, and laughter enters where thinking stalls.

Laughter as Wisdom Humor is effective because it disarms. It drops our mental defenses and scrambles our patterns of thought. Where a frontal argument would raise resistance, a subtle joke or absurd tale slips under the radar of rational control, it touches us before we notice. In Zhuangzi, laughter is thus an instrument of wisdom: the moment when one understands without knowing how, is transformed without effort. It is a pedagogy of paradox, learning through astonishment, confusion, even discomfort.

Strangeness plays a central role. It destabilizes our categories: a talking corpse, a man who loses his limbs without suffering, a sage dancing on his wife's grave, images that shock, but by breaking common sense open space for another grasp of the real. To understand does not always mean to explain; it can mean to feel otherwise, to perceive differently, to welcome the "unknown" with suppleness. Humor is that crack in the wall of logic, the breach through which the Dao can enter.

In the end, laughter for Zhuangzi is a way of freeing ourselves, not only from others, but from ourselves, from the burden of being "me". To laugh at oneself is to stop taking oneself as the world's center, as a stable identity, as a truth to defend. It is to accept being changeable, vulnerable, incomplete, sometimes ridiculous, in short, human. Zhuangzi does not invite us to laugh in order to flee, but to welcome better: to breathe, to defuse anxiety, to recover life's fluidity. Laugh, because the world is strange, even in its banality, but also because it is alive. His humor is thus a tool for pointing out the stupidity of convention, the relativity of knowledge, and for encouraging detachment. Laughter is a way to take distance from the world, the ideal Daoist posture. Humor is not an ornamental style; it is embodied wisdom. It lets us think without hardening, understand without locking in, live without stiffening. With Zhuangzi, to laugh is to think with the breath, with the body, with the instant, to be traversed by the surprise of existence without trying to master it.

The Madness-Wisdom

Another Kind of Wisdom In the eyes of the world, wisdom is respectable, noble, and serious. The wise are expected to speak gravely, dress simply, act with composure, offer sound advice, embody reason and self-mastery. Yet for Zhuangzi, the true sage seeks neither admiration nor recognition. He is often invisible, usually misunderstood, and frequently regarded as mad, not because he is, but because the world cannot comprehend one who lives outside its codes, who stands askew to convention. In Zhuangzi's view, wisdom hides rather than displays itself. It wears disguises, because genuine understanding is not the accumulation or exhibition of knowledge, but a state of being grounded in simplicity, adaptability, and humility. It is a living, practical wisdom that values the preservation of natural vitality over the fleeting and perilous glory of the human world. It does not impose itself by speech; it slips between the lines, blending into silence, absurdity, or deviance. Thus madness can become a mask, a refuge for the one who wishes to preserve his inner freedom.

To be wise, according to Zhuangzi, is neither to be erudite nor to embody a fixed moral ideal. Wisdom is a form of inner fluidity, a union with the Dao, a tranquility of the soul akin to the Greek ataraxia. The sage has ceased to resist transformation; he no longer seeks to impose a fixed form on what is, by nature, in motion. He does not judge, classify, or moralize, he adjusts, accepts, and effaces himself. To outsiders, he may appear passive, even useless. Yet he lives by another logic: that of wuwei, not inaction but effortless action. The sage does not aim to persuade. He does not enlighten crowds with speeches. He lets things follow their course, and when he acts, it springs from deep intuition, not from rule. He does not follow a universal morality, but an inner coherence, often unreadable from the outside.

He also uses a strategy of artifice, like an actor. Should one pretend to be mad to protect one's true nature? In several of Zhuangzi's tales, characters deliberately choose to appear insane or insignificant: one feigns death to avoid an imperial appointment; another uses his deformity to obtain freedom; another covers himself in mud to escape honors. Why such a strategy? Because the world values what shines, shows, and produces, but exposure is a trap. It invites envy, obligation, and the loss of peace. By feigning abnormality, these men preserve their serenity and elude social capture. They stay free. This

paradox lies at the heart of Zhuangzi's thought: true wisdom can take the guise of madness, precisely because it defies convention and refuses to please. It transgresses established norms, moral, social, and intellectual. The one who follows the Dao cannot be categorized; he remains elusive, ungraspable. What the world calls "mad" is often simply the refusal to keep playing its official game.

The Authentic Impostor At times, Zhuangzi is portrayed as a kind of comedian, an authentic impostor. His relationship to social roles is ambivalent. On one hand, he accepts them, or rather dons them, like theater masks: he plays, he mocks, he delights in subverting expectations, embracing artifice without identifying with it. On the other hand, he categorically rejects roles that confine the individual in duty or constraint, refusing official posts, ridiculing Confucian models of wisdom, and laughing at moralizing masters. For him, some roles can be played through as games, while others become prisons that stifle inner freedom. His stance is therefore not a wholesale rejection of society, but a radical discernment: to live among appearances without being possessed by them. This detachment is the ground of his true independence.

This "true" performer does not seek some inner, genuine essence, nor strive for perfect sincerity. On

the contrary, he plays knowingly with life's masks, lightly, without attachment. Authenticity does not lie in avoiding performance, but in the quality of the performance itself. It is the integrity of a seasoned actor, fully immersed in his role while knowing it is only a role. It is the spontaneity born of long practice, like Cook Ding carving an ox with effortless grace, the result of years of steady training, a form of "simulation" that has become second nature.

This contrasts with the ideals of authenticity and sincerity, which assume the existence of a "true self" to be expressed. Zhuangzi dissolves this notion: the self is fluid, contextual, ever-changing, for insisting on authenticity is to cling to the illusion of permanence. Humor, parody, and irony in the Zhuangzi reveal this stance. By portraying clumsy sages, grotesque figures, and absurd debates, the text undermines every claim to solemn gravity or definitive truth. Pretending is not deceiving, but a provisional engagement, a way of playing roles without becoming trapped in them. Thus, the "true simulacrum" is a mode of freedom: it allows one to adapt, to move between perspectives, to survive without rigidity, to remain within paradox. It is not hypocrisy, but a lucid acceptance of life's masks.

Examples of Madness-Wisdom After Zhuangzi, similar figures appear throughout later Chinese culture,

especially within Daoist-inspired traditions. One such example is Liu Ling (刘伶), one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, a group of third-century intellectuals, poets, and musicians who rebelled against official corruption and the rigid morality of Confucian orthodoxy by adopting a deliberately eccentric way of life. Liu Ling was famous for his boundless love of drink. He was said to wander with a servant carrying a jug of wine and a spade, declaring, "I drink wherever my heart desires, and if I die, bury me where I fall." His "madness" was a radical proclamation of natural freedom against the hypocrisy of social decorum. Ji Gong (济公), the "Mad Monk", was a Buddhist monk said to have attained enlightenment while living as a wandering drunkard, dirty, eccentric, and irreverent. He broke every Buddhist precept: eating meat, drinking wine, mocking rules, and living like a heretic or a vagabond. His madness taught that the essence of Buddhism lies not in rigid obedience to appearances and rules, but in compassion and inner wisdom. He embodied the principle that "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form". Li Bai (李白), known as "the Banished Immortal", the greatest poet of the Tang dynasty, was equally renowned for his love of wine and his unrestrained, rebellious spirit. He spent his life drinking, wandering, and defying authority. Legend has it that he drowned while trying, in his drunkenness, to embrace the moon's reflection in the wa-

ter. His behavior was unpredictable and antisocial, but his "drunkenness" was the source of his poetic genius. It freed him from worldly constraints, allowing him to grasp the sublime beauty of nature and the present moment. His poetry is a celebration of the mind's absolute freedom. He was "mad" in the eyes of the imperial court, yet that madness was the very condition of his artistic and existential wisdom.

This wisdom-madness also appears in other traditions. By way of comparison, we can recall other figures who embodied it: Diogenes the Cynic, who lived in a barrel, insulted the powerful, and mocked social conventions. He refused honors, despised wealth, and lived through provocation. But behind this apparent madness lay a radical philosophy: to live according to nature, without compromise. Socrates, accused of corrupting the youth and denying the city's gods, questioned, disturbed, and destabilized; he gave no answers but dismantled false certainties. His irony, persistence, and refusal to flee death made him a marginal figure at the heart of the city. Christ, in the Gospels, is likewise portrayed as a madman. He reverses values: the first shall be last, the poor are blessed, love your enemies, abandon your possessions, exalt weakness, accept suffering and public humiliation. He defies the established order, speaks in parables, associates with outcasts, a subversive wisdom that challenges the very foundations of power and the common vi-

sion of success. We might also recall the multicultural tradition of the "court jester", who was not merely an entertainer but embodied a paradoxical form of wisdom and provocation. Protected by his role as an eccentric, he could say what no one else dared to utter. His mockery, exaggerations, and wordplay served to expose uncomfortable truths, to highlight the contradictions of power and the weaknesses of the mighty. Beneath the mask of ridicule, he performed a critical function: reminding the king of his fragility, mocking pride, and revealing the relativity of certainties. His apparent madness was a strategy, a space of freedom through which truth could slip where official solemnity closed the doors.

This madness may well be the only true wisdom, for to be wise in the eyes of the world is often to have betrayed something deeper within oneself. The one who follows the Dao does not seek to be understood; he lives in harmony with the invisible and speaks a language the world has never learned. Perhaps one should not flee from strangeness, but dwell within it, for wisdom begins where the need to conform and to be recognized ends.

Nature as a Mirror

Observation When man escapes the turmoil of his thoughts, when he ceases to want to name, control, predict, or possess, then he can begin to observe, not to know, but to be. In this inner silence, nature reveals itself not as an object to be studied, but as a living mirror of what we are, of what we have forgotten to be. For Zhuangzi, true wisdom is found neither in books nor in speeches, but in the breath of the wind, the flight of a bird, the ripple of a river, not because these things are mysterious or sacred, but because they seek nothing; they simply are. They do not debate, oppose, or justify; they simply follow the Dao, and we too must learn to be in resonance with them.

Observation of nature or of human beings, in Zhuangzi, has nothing "scientific" about it. It is contemplative, existential, intuitive. It is less about grasping the laws of the world than about sensing how it moves, without effort, pride, or strain. Modern man believes he masters nature and reality by dissecting, naming, and taming them. Zhuangzi, on

the contrary, invites us to let ourselves be taught by them. Like Cook Ding, who carves an ox without ever forcing, because he has learned to follow the invisible joints; he no longer thinks, he dances with the shape of reality. This gesture is not magical or mysterious, but the fruit of desireless attention, of living, fluid knowledge, and steady practice. Cook Ding does not dominate matter; he attunes to it. And this lesson applies to all our actions: loving, speaking, walking, deciding. One must act like the river that follows the slope, not the one it chooses, but the one that is, embracing the joints of the real.

Dwelling in Transformation Zhuangzi takes up the fundamental teaching of Laozi's Dao De Jing: "The Dao that can be named is not the eternal Dao." The Dao is not a thing, not a god, not a law; it is a movement, a rhythm, an original dynamic. It is the fundamental flow that brings all things to life and to death, without intention, plan, or moral value. It is what makes things what they are, act as they act. Yet to name the Dao is already to move away from it, for the intellect seeks to grasp, define, and enclose. But the Dao eludes capture; it is like water, the more one tries to seize it, the more it slips through one's fingers. Zhuangzi does not seek to explain the Dao formally; he shows it through stories, paradoxes, and images. One of his

characters dreams he becomes a plant, an animal, another person, thus we change form as we change thought. Why cling to a fixed form, he asks, when the whole world is transformation?

We find something similar in Wittgenstein: a refusal of theoretical definition in favor of showing. His watchword is "Don't think, look!" He does not claim to offer an exhaustive theory of language; instead, he presents "language games" as concrete examples. It is not an abstract explanation, but a way of showing how things work, of making one see rather than saying. Thus, truth is not found in a formal system but in lived evidence. Zhuangzi does this through dream and metamorphosis, while Wittgenstein does it through the grammar of language and attention to usage. In both cases, the method is closer to showing than to explaining.

To live in harmony with the Dao is not to obey a higher order, nor to follow rules. It is to stop resisting what is, to learn to unfold according to the curve of the world, to align oneself with the spontaneous movement of the universe. For Zhuangzi, one must become ziran, that is, live spontaneously, without calculation or artifice, following the natural movement of life, one's own inherent nature. The Chinese word ziran (自然) means "natural", but literally "that which is so of itself". This does not mean living in the wilderness or rejecting civilization, but ceasing to impose on the world our rigidity, our

fears, our fixed ideas. To be supple, like a reed in the wind, like a cloud that changes shape without protest. In this view, nature is not a backdrop, it is the reflection of the Dao at work. To observe it is to observe oneself; to honor it is to honor oneself.

In the Western tradition, nature was long regarded as inferior to humankind, a realm to exploit, discipline, and correct, for man was to become, in Descartes' words, "master and possessor of nature". Zhuangzi offers another path, one of integration and respect. Yet he does not say, "protect nature, for it is useful", but rather, "you are nature; you cannot live without it, for you are part of it. To reject the living world is to reject yourself." Zhuangzi does not propose an "ecological" morality but a way of being, a sensitivity, a manner of dwelling in the world that is non-predatory. He calls for cosmic humility, to recognize that we are neither masters, nor the center, nor the summit.

Nevertheless, one might raise an objection concerning the apparent contradiction between constant transformation and the concept of ziran, which implies that beings have their own inherent nature. How can one reconcile perpetual flux with the idea of "that which is so of itself"? To grasp this, one must understand that in Zhuangzi, the question of identity shifts. At first glance, everything changes; nothing endures. The man who dreams he is a butterfly wakes and no longer knows who he is; life

turns into death, the useful into the useless, yesterday into tomorrow. The idea of a stable self, of an immutable substratum, is merely a fantasy born of our craving for permanence. For Zhuangzi, one's "own nature" is not a fixed essence but a way of attuning oneself to the Dao. Each being has its own way, rhythm, and configuration: the bird needs to fly, the fish to swim, the crooked tree to grow according to its twisted form. To respect their nature is to respect their movement, not to freeze them into an identity. Thus, to speak of a "nature of one's own" does not mean that there exists within each being a permanent core; it means that every being has an orientation, a style, a manner of transforming. Identity is not a substance but a dynamic; what we call the "self" is only the temporary shape our relation to the Dao takes. The error, for Zhuangzi, is to believe in a fixed identity; wisdom lies in recognizing that we each have our own way of changing. Faithfulness to oneself, in his view, is not attachment to an essence, but the ability to follow one's own transformation.

The Silent Master One might think Zhuangzi glorifies nature, since it is constantly the setting of his images and parables, but that would be a misreading. In his thought, nature is not idealized as a harmonious sanctuary or a perfect model to im-

itate. It is at once birth and decay, beauty and deformity, usefulness and uselessness. The twisted tree that no carpenter wants to cut down survives because of its flaw, but it is not admirable in itself. The fish, the bird, the insect, or the plant serve as teachers not because they are examples to follow, but because they reveal that everything is transformation. Zhuangzi does not deify or glorify nature; he takes it as a mirror of the Dao, a world in ceaseless transformation, where death is as natural as life, and every form is destined to dissolve. His wisdom is not to protect nature from humanity, but to remind humanity that it is part of this flow. It would therefore be misleading to see him as an "ecologist before his time". His aim is not to defend nature as an absolute value, but to unsettle our fixed categories and attachments, and to invite us to embrace the instability of reality. Where our age often projects an ecological ideal onto the ancients, Zhuangzi teaches instead the art of non-attachment, to neither nature nor culture.

This vision can be illuminated by a distinction later developed in Western philosophy between Natura naturans, Nature naturing, the active process of creation, and Natura naturata, Nature natured, the finished product. What interests Zhuangzi is not Natura naturata: the fixed landscape, the defined species, the individualized entity to be preserved, but Natura naturans: the creative and destructive

breath, the qi, the infinite process of metamorphosis that unravels forms as it brings them forth. The twisted tree, the butterfly, or the monstrous fish have value not as species to protect, but as fleeting manifestations of this ceaseless transformative power. Thus, to live in harmony with the Dao is to stop fighting against life, to renounce the urge to control it, and to learn to accompany it. This does not mean accepting everything passively, but discerning what can be changed from what must be embraced. Nature, in this sense, is not a fixed model, but a silent teacher. It teaches us the patience of cycles, the flexibility of change, the wisdom of non-action. It reminds us that every attempt to freeze being is futile, and that the only true constancy is transformation. And perhaps, by ceasing to direct our life as a project, we may finally inhabit it as a river inhabits its bed, following the path that cannot be named.

Language as Play

Zhuangzi is not a philosopher of language in the academic sense, yet he is unmistakably a thinker of the word. He writes with brilliance, wit, and precision; he plays with words like a poet, wields them like a strategist, and shapes them like a craftsman. Yet he never stops warning us: words do not tell the truth, they circle around it, sometimes obscure it, or evoke it without ever containing or exhausting it. They are useful, engaging, even delightful, but they are not to be believed, not to be clung to, not to be glorified. For him, language is both a tool and a trap, a necessary vehicle, yet a dangerous one. One must use it without becoming enslaved by it, pass through it without becoming entangled. He does not despise language; he knows its charms, its resources, its ambiguities. But he criticizes its dogmatic, rigid, authoritarian, and closed use. He mocks the masters of speech who believe themselves to be keepers of meaning, those who claim to define, establish, or legislate. Thus his work is filled with fictional dialogues, wordplay, reversals

of meaning, and absurd stories that undermine language's claim to faithfully represent reality.

He draws a luminous distinction between "goblet words" and "borrowed words". The former are like bamboo cups that can hold any drink without retaining its taste, able to be filled and emptied in turn. They are flexible, open, and receptive words: the words of the sage. Malleable, available, provisional, they serve to speak without confining, to point without fixing. The latter are rigid, frozen, conventional, words imposed from outside, borrowed from common usage, from established opinion, from morality, or from science. These are dead words, heavy with certainty, saturated with self-evidence, unable to dance with the flow of reality. Zhuangzi also mentions a third category: "expert words", those wielded by logicians, scholars, and moralists, like Huizi, his favorite opponent in the absurd debates he stages. Huizi delights in cutting, distinguishing, categorizing; he believes that the precision of language leads to truth. Zhuangzi, on the contrary, shows that such endless distinctions, however "precise", lead only to absurdity. For him, this is an excess of language that clouds meaning instead of clarifying it: the more one defines, the more one confines; the more one names, the more one complicates; the more one speaks, the further one drifts away. Truth lies not in naming, but in direct expe-

rience, in the immediacy of what words can evoke and make us feel, but never contain.

And yet, Zhuangzi speaks, tells stories, and writes. He plays with words precisely to free them from their pretension to truth, turning them into juggler's balls, crafting revealing illusions. He does not renounce language; he uses it with caution and mischievous grace. His writing is poetic, image-rich, full of paradoxes and surprises; he turns language into an art of drifting, a tool of joyful deconstruction. Far from the rigid tone of the master who teaches, he adopts that of the storyteller, the dreamer, the mad sage, inviting thought through strangeness, shock, suggestion, and humor. His language does not instruct; it awakens. It transmits no doctrine but provokes a disturbance. He uses anecdotes, parables, and fables to short-circuit habitual thinking. He cultivates ambiguity as a method, paradox as an opening. Where others seek to convince, he seeks to unsettle; where others wish to assert, he wishes to unseat.

Zhuangzi is also a philosopher of silence. The Dao, he says following Laozi, cannot be named, for true language would be one that does not speak. Yet since humans are condemned to speak, one must do so without illusion, knowing that every word is an approximation, a detour, a simulacrum. One must speak without believing, think without clinging, name without possessing. This critical stance

toward language brings him close to certain modern thinkers, Wittgenstein, for instance, who said, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." But Zhuangzi still chooses to speak, knowing it is a game, a theater, a dream. He turns language into a field of exploration rather than a system of control. His aim is to pass through words to see beyond them, not to mistake labels for things, for in the end, all language is metaphor.

This view aligns with his conception of reality as flux, transformation, and movement. Words, by their nature, immobilize; they carve out and solidify a reality that is constantly shifting. To say "this is" or "this is not" is already to err. On one hand, because such statements freeze reality into rigid oppositions, whereas for Zhuangzi, reality is fluid, multiple, ever-changing. By affirming a fixed truth, one betrays the flow of the Dao, which cannot be confined within static categories. On the other hand, because every statement is bound to a particular viewpoint: the same object may be called "large" or "small", "useful" or "useless", depending on the context or comparison. For him, every affirmation is relative to perspective, for to say "this is" is to forget that another gaze, another circumstance, or another moment could just as legitimately say the opposite. Finally, attachment to the oppositions of "is" and "is not" leads to endless, sterile quarrels, the kind he mocks in his friend Huizi, obsessed

with conceptual distinctions and with being "right". Such disputes lead nowhere, for they rest on arbitrary divisions of reality. Above all, the Dao, the ultimate principle, lies beyond "yes" and "no", embracing both sides of every opposition. To insist on a final distinction between "being" and "non-being" is to block access to a broader wisdom, one that welcomes transformation and paradox. Thus, in criticizing the logic of "this is / this is not", Zhuangzi is not rejecting language itself, but the rigid and dogmatic use of language that imagines it can grasp absolute truth. His path is that of a supple, imagistic speech, one that moves with the flow rather than trying to contain it.

In sum, Zhuangzi invites us to a wisdom of language: to use it without losing ourselves in it, to handle it without being trapped by it, to place it in the service of openness rather than closure. Language is like a boat, useful for crossing the river, but to be left behind once the far shore is reached. And if we still read him today, it is not to learn a new vocabulary or adopt a new terminology, but to be set in motion by words that keep slipping away, words that offer no answers but open passages, words that do not tell us what the Dao is, but help us draw near to it without naming it.

Zhuangzi seeks to convert no one. He has no dogma, no method, no temple. What he offers is a breach, a breath, a way to recover emptiness

within excess, laughter within seriousness, movement within fixation, mystery within knowledge. In our world saturated with discourse, he does not give us truth but space; he teaches us not to mistake the map for the territory, the image for the thing, success for life. He does not say, "Choose between tradition and modernity", but "Be fluid like water, unclassifiable like the wind, multiple like dreams." He does not seek to soothe our anxieties, but to dissolve them in a smile. And perhaps, after reading him long enough, we understand that the goal is not to be wise, but simply to learn how to float, weightless, within the great river of existence.

Conclusion

To journey with Zhuangzi is to accept losing more certainties than gaining them. His writings offer neither doctrine nor morality, no system of thought to apply. They open spaces of freedom, urging us to loosen our grip on what we think we know, to release our attachments, and to experience the light-

ness of doubt, the impulse of dream, the suppleness of paradox. Zhuangzi is not a master who imposes, but a companion who unsettles, a mirror that distorts in order to reveal, a poet who plays with words so that we may cease to be enslaved by their power.

The aim of his philosophy is not, in his view, to solve the mystery of the world, but to dwell within it differently. It teaches us to embrace the movement of things, to recognize that life is never fixed but always in transformation. The butterfly, the fish, the cook, and the useless tree are not naïve fables; they embody another way of living, more supple, more lucid, more joyful, and at the same time more demanding. They remind us that truth is not a "block" but a circulation of perspectives. Against the obsession with efficiency, Zhuangzi values the useless; against the rigidity of dogma, he responds with laughter; against the fear of death, he offers an understanding of the cycle. His thought is an invitation to simplicity, but a simplicity that is earned, paradoxical, and rigorous, for one must first shed one's attachments to taste the fluidity of the world.

Zhuangzi is not merely an ancient Chinese philosopher; he is a timeless antidote to our modern illusions. In a world saturated with certainties, productivity, and dogmatic discourse, he reminds us of the fertility of emptiness, the humor of doubt, and the beauty of the useless. To read Zhuangzi is to learn

to breathe differently, to let oneself be carried by the wind of things without trying to hold it still. It is to understand that freedom lies not in control, but in dancing with the unstable. Thus, Zhuangzi's ultimate lesson might be summed up as this: do not seek to fix life, but to move in harmony with it, for to live is to transform, and to think is to learn to laugh at oneself.

Criticism of Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi occupies a highly controversial place in Chinese intellectual history. Although he has inspired generation after generation of souls yearning for authenticity, freedom, and transcendence, his thought, like the divine dragon hidden in the clouds, its head glimpsed but never its tail, remains both mesmerizing and elusive, and has drawn numerous doubts and criticisms. Zhuangzi is at once a prophet of spiritual liberation and a challenger of social order, his philosophy enlightens the mind, yet at the same time exposes many practical, moral and existential dilemmas. His distinctive stance on philosophy, politics, and ethics, his peculiar ideas have provoked endless debates and criticisms from the pre-Qin era to the present.

Below are the main areas where historical critiques of Zhuangzi have concentrated.

1. Bizarre Zhuangzi's allegories are filled with fantastic images: fish that can fly, philosophers who dream of becoming butterflies, travelers conversing with skeletons. To ordinary eyes, these episodes verge on madness, detached from the logic and common sense of the real world. Critics argue that such a mode of thinking, however poetic, offers no stable basis for social conduct; if a state were governed by the kind of mystical reasoning found in "Butcher Ding Carving an Ox", order would collapse into chaos. Zhuangzi's ideal of a "land of nothing whatsoever", a metaphorical space of radical openness, non-attachment, and freedom from fixed distinctions, tends to deny the reality of the concrete world, and this thoroughgoing relativism easily slides into nihilism. When people indulge in fantasies of the Great Peng soaring ninety thousand miles, they may forget the ground beneath their feet and the responsibilities close at hand. Such extravagance not only weakens the practical value of philosophy but may also encourage an escape from the complexities and sufferings of the real world, sinking into complacent and phantasmatic illusion. His exaggerated fables and mysterious metaphors intended to break conceptual constraints, yet Zhu Xi criticized these "strange and clever words" as inspiring but "of no benefit to public instruction". Neo-Confucian thinkers emphasized rational investigation and practical application, whereas Zhuangzi's

focus on inner freedom and linguistic deconstruction left the impression of being airy and impractical, offering no concrete methods for governing ourselves and the world.

2. Abstruse Zhuangzi's language abounds in metaphors, paradoxes, and irony. Concepts such as "sitting in forgetfulness", "fasting of the mind", and "equalizing things" appear lofty yet remain obscure, when numerous critics note that true wisdom should be clear and intelligible, not deliberately abstruse. Zhuangzi's "Dao" is declared unspeakable yet constantly spoken of, falling into a self-contradictory linguistic trap. Ordinary readers can hardly draw definite guidance from his texts and are prone to misreadings or endless metaphysical talk. This depth makes Zhuangist learning a spiritual game for a small circle of literati rather than a universal wisdom, and when philosophy detaches from the understanding of the many, it loses its power to enlighten and educate. His thought is like a beautiful labyrinth, magnificent to behold yet easy to lose oneself in, risking becoming an exercise in intellectual display rather than a guide for the soul.

3. Unrealistic Zhuangzi advocates wuwei (non-action) and following the natural course of things, rejecting human planning and technical refinement,

yet in "real" society people must plan, strive, and compete in order to survive and develop.

He is celebrated as a master of "free and unfettered wandering", a thinker who dissolves fixed identities and rigid distinctions in order to let thought, like life itself, flow with spontaneity and grace. However, this very distance and fluidity can be seen as a weakness by critics who argue that his refusal of fixed positions risks collapsing into relativism or inaction, offering little guidance for concrete ethical or political engagement. Indeed, his philosophy provides no definite moral norms or action plans, it does not face reality as is commonly thought of. In the face of famine, war, or disease, Zhuangzi's call to "accept the times and dwell in accord" can appear disconnected, cold and indifferent. A doctor who, invoking the unity of life and death, would refuse to save a patient is clearly derelict in duty. Zhuangzi dismisses formal knowledge, technical skills and the pursuit of gain, yet modern society depends on technological and institutional progress. Xunzi criticized him for "being blinded by Heaven and ignorant of human concerns", meaning that he obeyed cosmic order but neglected human responsibilities. His philosophy may soothe the individual soul but cannot construct systems of education, law, or economy, it thus serves more as the consolation of a recluse than as the blueprint of a builder. The Qing-dynasty School of Practical Learning valued statecraft and

economic governance, criticizing Zhuangzi for "being close to spirits and distant from human affairs", making his thought unfit for guiding economic or administrative practice. Dai Zhen reproached him for "valuing uselessness", which seemed disconnected from an age requiring technology, positive law, and pragmatic solutions. Even today, Zhuangzi's philosophy is questioned for its ability to provide actionable guidance in modern economic competition and public administration.

4. Irresponsible Zhuangzi praises the turtle that drags its tail in the mud, preferring humble survival to high office. His sages often retreat to mountains and forests, ignoring worldly affairs, he treats politics as a dangerous game of "raising tigers". This echoes the "hidden sages" of Chinese tradition, who choose to withdraw from public life, often to avoid serving a corrupt power or out of loyalty to their ideals, living apart from the world, in the mountains or the countryside, in order to cultivate the Way (Dao) within themselves. Such an attitude is criticized as a total renunciation of social duty, when the usual confucianist doctrine stresses moral self-cultivation, family order, statecraft, and world governance, In times of social crisis or public suffering, if everyone sought only the carefree wandering of "free and easy roaming", society would lack citizens willing to

bear responsibility. Zhuangzi rejects traditional values such as benevolence, justice, and rituals, without proposing a defined alternative civic ethic. His freedom is individual and inward, not collective and participatory. In turbulent eras this escapism seems perilous, fostering indifference and cynicism, turning intellectuals into "legless birds", forever flying but never landing. For Confucians, who valued social order and moral engagement, Zhuangzi's refusal to act signified an abdication of duty: he neither participated in state governance nor contributed to the construction of social ethics. Such ideas might offer spiritual refuge but can also lead to self-enclosure and a lack of courage to confront concrete social problems. Zhuangzi's spirit of "no ruler and no subject" naturally conflicted with the centralized politics of imperial China. Thus, after Dong Zhongshu's "Suppression of the Hundred Schools" in the Western Han, Zhuangist teachings were regarded as heterodox and harmful to imperial power. Han Fei also criticized his philosophy for weakening legal order and making governance difficult. Although Zhuangzi had no explicit revolutionary agenda, his satire of power and skepticism toward institutions carried a latent danger in the eyes of successive rulers.

Some people will object that Zhuangzi's attitude amounts to a form of comfortable withdrawal. According to them, faced with the chaos of the world,

Zhuangzi merely disengages, retreats into paradox and fable, observing the absurd with detached elegance, a posture, they will say, which lacks a sense of responsibility. In contrast for example with Camus, who confronts the absurd by persisting in action and resistance despite the impossibility of victory, these critics value an ethic of heroism, exposed, risky, and assertive, as for them, courage lies in engagement, not withdrawal. But this critique rests on a cultural and moral presupposition that is not Zhuangzi's: the ideal of civic heroism, of fighting against the absurd, of visible duty to act. He does not share this logic, and his withdrawal is not flight but conscious disidentification, a refusal to feed the illusion that humans must or can impose meaning on the world. His way of acting is subtle, non-heroic, aligned with the flow of things rather than set against it. It is therefore not a renunciation but another form of engagement, silent, flexible, and free from the will to dominate. Where Camus erects man as a courageous Sisyphus, Zhuangzi chooses to leave the mountain and let the rock roll on its own. This is no less demanding, it is simply another conception of courage and responsibility. It is responsibility understood as "rightness of attitude" rather than domination of circumstances. For him, being responsible means acting in harmony with the Dao, without nourishing the illusion of total control; it is

an inner, non-heroic responsibility: the resolve not to add disorder to disorder.

5. Utopian Zhuangzi harbors fundamental suspicion toward monarchy and structures of power, towards any social institution. Through the mouth of the bandit Robber Zhi he mocks the sages for "bewitching the people with profit", claiming that benevolence and righteousness are tools of control. While such criticism has an enlightening edge, it is also seen as subversive of order. Rulers require stability and obedience, whereas Zhuangzi proclaims, "If the sages do not die, great thieves will not cease", undermining the very legitimacy of authority. According to Zhuangzi, the so-called sages, far from being wise and harmless philosophers, are the ones who invent the ideas that bind people to social roles and alienating moral duties. His shocking declaration reveals his belief that these sages are accomplices of power, since by crafting values, rituals, and duties, they justify the state, and thereby perpetuate its violence. In traditional society, this was viewed as dangerous heresy, potentially inciting rebellion or separatism. Even today, a total denial of political authority risks drifting into anarchy, and Zhuangzi's vision of a "world of highest virtue" without government or law, relying on spontaneous harmony, seems nearly impossible in a densely pop-

ulated world of conflicting interests. His political philosophy is more a utopian fantasy than a workable plan of governance. Although this egalitarian outlook carries a liberating dimension, in a feudal context it was seen as a threat to moral norms and as potentially destabilizing to the established social order.

6. Indifferentism Zhuangzi teaches the "equalization of things" (Qi Wu Lun), the sameness of life and death, and the indistinguishability of right and wrong, of true and false, thereby eroding the value system on which society operates. When all things are equal, when good and evil are not absolute, it weakens the legitimacy and stability of value judgments. Later critics argued that if all distinctions of right and wrong can be reversed, the ethical foundation of society is undermined. Chinese marxist scholars in particular have highlighted that such extreme relativism can lead to political indifference and moral nihilism, depriving people of the motivation to transform reality and leaving them "free" only in thought without achieving genuine liberation. Established communities depend on clear distinctions of good and evil, noble and base, wise and foolish to maintain order, yet Zhuangzi declares, "That too is one right and wrong, and this too is one right and wrong." If such relativism were widely

accepted, moral nihilism would follow. When filial and unfilial sons, loyal and treacherous ministers are all treated as equally "one with the Dao", social norms lose their binding force. People might invoke "following nature" as a reason to flout laws or shirk obligations, as Zhuangzi denies the value of knowledge, skill, and merit, precisely the engines of social progress. His thought resembles a spiritual demolition charge: it can indeed break attachments, but it may also destroy the very foundations of civilization, plunging society into confusion and stagnation.

7. Mysticism Zhuangzi's thought is disconcerting, as it escapes rigid classifications, especially that of "mysticism", so often attached to his work either in praise or in critique. At first glance, certain elements seem to support this label: practices of withdrawal, inner transformation, dissolution of the self, experiences of unity with the Dao. His metaphors of fasting the heart, sitting in forgetfulness, and abandoning distinctions seem to map out a path of detachment comparable to mystical traditions of both East and West. But this resemblance is misleading, since Zhuangzi is not a master of divine union, but an ironist of wisdom.

In classical mysticism, one seeks union with an ultimate reality, a sacred source, a God. With Zhuangzi, there is no such thing, the Dao is neither

a person, nor an absolute truth, nor a transcendent realm. It is not an object of worship, but the name given to the unspeakable movement of things, one must not unite with the Dao, but simply cease resisting it. Awakening is not a revelation, but a release, the sage does not access transcendence, he dissolves into immanence. Certainly, Zhuangzi describes altered states of perception, expanded awareness, and inner peace, but these are not ecstasies, divine transports, or mystical fusions, they are mere forms of lightness, humour, and non-resistance.

His "True Man" sleeps without dreams, accepts death as transformation, seeks nothing, preaches nothing, he teaches no faith, no dogma, he dances with the world, like the butcher with his knife. One might therefore speak of an atheistic mysticism, or better yet, a deconstructive mysticism, a spiritual path that denies all spiritual fixations. He does not elevate us toward an absolute, he unburdens us of the absolute. His words do not lead to a truth to be believed, but to an availability to receive, be it the moment, the metamorphosis, the unexpected. He mocks sages, ridicules grand discourses, laughs at metaphysical attachments, he teaches us to die to ourselves without solemnity, to live without clinging, to think without a skeleton.

Zhuangzi could be described as a mystic, if we accept a minimal definition: the dissolution of the self, the experience of unity, inner transformation.

However, he is not a mystic if we mean by that a sacred, structured, transcendent, or revealed experience. It is not a doctrine of salvation, but an invitation to disappear into movement, to live in the joyful indistinctness of forms. In this sense, Zhuangzi is not a mystic, but the demystifier of all mystics. Where others seek to dissolve into totality, he accepts fragmentation without suffering. Where others build paths toward salvation, he reminds us we were never lost. His way is not ascension, but dissolution, not a regained unity, but relinquished attachment. Zhuangzi is thus neither religious nor anti-religious, he stands elsewhere, in that boundless space where one breathes, without constraint, which, of course, leaves room for all interpretations.

In sum, the critiques of Zhuangzi do not wholly negate the value of his thought, rather, they reveal the limits and risks of blindly applying his philosophy to lived reality, although such a rigidity would be contrary to the attitude of openness and availability he promotes. His extravagance, obscurity, impracticality, withdrawal, anti-authority stance, and challenge to order make it difficult for Zhuangism to serve as a mainstream ideology of governance. Yet these very "flaws" are also what make his thinking profound, reminding us to reflect on the costs of civilization, the boundaries of freedom, and the essence of existence. In today's highly institutionalized and utilitarian world, Zhuangzi's voice may sound jar-

ring, but it remains a bracing medicine. We need not accept his teachings wholesale, but we can draw from them a vigilance against alienated life and a longing for spiritual freedom. True wisdom may lie not in fully embracing or rejecting Zhuangzi, but in establishing a tension between worldly responsibility and the transcendence of the soul. Precisely through the debates about his legacy, the power of Zhuangzi's ideas stands out: he reminds us that no era's institutions or values should be treated as untouchable iron laws, and that the freedom of the human spirit always deserves nurturing, protection and reflection.