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Nord-Bronzyk, Alexa

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**AN ACCOUNT OF SPONTANEITY IN THE
*ZHUANGZI***

ALEXA NORD-BRONZYK

School of Humanities

2021

An Account of Spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*

Alexa Nord-Bronzyk

School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2021

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Signature of student:

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SUMMARY

The concept of spontaneity has appeared as a perennial theme in much of the scholarly research on the *Zhuangzi*. Aspects of spontaneity appear through concepts such as *ziran* 自然, *wuwei* 無為, and *you* 遊, fictional stories, and metaphors. This thesis aims to consider the many different ways in which the text exposes any notion of spontaneity, and to develop an account that facilitates the scattered interpretations throughout the current literature.

The first chapter of this thesis will analyze some of the key passages surrounding spontaneity. In the second chapter, I will categorize the common interpretations of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*. It will then become clear that the concept of spontaneity is multifaceted and complex, making the project of creating a new and cohesive account of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* interesting and worthwhile.

In Chapter Three, I begin with a thorough analysis of *ziran* 自然, the term most often associated with spontaneity. Even though *ziran* is such an important concept in Daoism, the specific use of *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* has often been overlooked as Laozi's conception of *ziran* has dominated the literature. Focusing on Zhuangzi's *ziran* is thus an important contribution. Additionally, a large portion of Zhuangzi scholarship has analysed the concept of spontaneity through what are known as the "skill stories" in the text. With skill being such an important theme in the *Zhuangzi*, it has become a mistaken tendency to assume that spontaneity too could be thought of as a skill. I argue that *ziran* should not be thought of as a skill and a more appropriate reading would render *ziran* as an "organic happening".

In Chapter Four, I develop an account of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* in light of my analysis of *ziran* as an "organic happening". I begin with an analysis of *you* 遊 in order to demonstrate the passive and active aspects of spontaneity. Spontaneity is passive in the sense of the psychological mindset of the sage as non-deliberate and non-purposive. The sage is active in how his spontaneity manifests through responsiveness to the immediacy of situations where *shi/fei* distinctions are dissolved.

The final chapter of this thesis will place the present account of spontaneity in the arena of the competing interpretations of spontaneity in the text. Spontaneity will remain multifaceted and complex, but the key themes will be illuminated and

many of the misconceptions will be cleared away, such as reading the *Zhuangzi* as a “do nothing” text.

Chapter One

Introduction

1. Methodology and Authorship

The *Zhuangzi*, emerging from the Warring States Period (575-221 B.C.E), is known for its playful and metaphorical literary style that challenged the moral and ritualistic Confucian and Mohist views of the time. A key motivation for the author(s) of the *Zhuangzi* is to provide a critique of these views. The voice of Confucius is often used as a metaphorical and rhetorical tool behind the mocking voice of Zhuangzi himself. Many examples are direct criticisms of the Confucian doctrines of ritual, and of the Confucians and Mohists arguments over right and wrong. Some of the most important themes include the *Zhuangzi*'s rejection of the Confucian notion of *xin* or heart- mind, the non-anthropocentric and non-normative vision of *tian* or heaven, and the sense of oneness (*yi* 一) in opposition to Confucian distinctions.

At the root of many of these criticisms lie the themes of freedom, authenticity, naturalness, and spontaneity. These themes are prized in contrast to the ritualistic and political life of many of Zhuangzi's contemporaries. The focus of this thesis will be on Zhuangzi's specific notion of spontaneity. Spontaneity is usually mentioned without fail in any analysis of the text and is duly recognized as not only an important theme in Daoism as a whole, but especially in the *Zhuangzi*. By exploring the different ways in which spontaneity emerges throughout the text, we will be able to put together a picture of the specific way Zhuangzi exposes this spontaneity as a theme.

As for Zhuangzi himself, we know very little about his life. A short biography by Sima Qian (145-89 BCE) tells us that he lived in the district of Meng between the reign of King Hui of Liang or Wei (370-319) and King Xuan of Qi (319-301 BCE), making him a contemporary of Mencius (Watson vii). However, Burton Watson has pointed out evidence that Zhuangzi may have instead come from the state of Song which carries important implications considering the culture of the Song region in eastern Henan. The Song people prized the

preservation of life and endured political and social repression. If Zhuangzi did in fact come from the state of Song, Watson speculates this background “may go far to elucidate [...] and explain why, in its skepticism and mystical detachment, [the *Zhuangzi*] differs so radically from Confucianism, the basically optimistic and strongly political-minded philosophy that developed in the Zhou lineage states of Lu and Qi” (viii).

As for his personal life, it is said that Zhuangzi was an official to a lacquer garden, although we cannot say whether the garden is the name of a specific place or just the groves in general. Of more interest is the speculation that he was asked to serve as prime minister in the state of Chu which he declined in pursuit of a more private and simple life. Whether or not this is true, this passage in Chapter 17 gives insight into how the exchange may have transpired.

Zhuangzi was once fishing beside the Pu River, when two emissaries brought him a message from the King of Chu: ‘The king would like to trouble you with the control of his realm.’ Zhuangzi, holding fast to his fishing pole, without so much as a turning his head, said, ‘I have heard there is a sacred turtle in Chu, already dead for three thousand years, which the king keeps in a bamboo chest high in his shrine. Do you think this turtle would prefer to be dead and having his carcass exalted, or alive and dragging his tail through the mud?’ The emissaries said, ‘Alive and dragging his tail through the mud.’ Zhuangzi said ‘Away with you then!’ I too will drag my tail through the mud!’ (Ziporyn, “Complete” 286-87)

It is this attitude of prizing freedom and the option to live a life of spontaneity over a life entangled in the trappings of human concern that we see appear as a perennial theme throughout the text. Zhuangzi prizes a special type of naturalness over the general societal vision of success categorized by and praise and status. His vision of spontaneity may arguably be the most significant theme throughout the book. With such little information contained in Zhuangzi’s biography, his legacy lives on only through the passages within the 33-chapter text that we now attribute to his name.

Beyond knowing so little about Zhuangzi’s life, authorship is poses quite a complicated issue. As Graham put it in his article “How Much of the Chuang Tzu did Chuang Tzu Write?”

Can we take for granted the common authorship of the Inner chapters? There have been attempts to deny Chuang-tzŭ some of them, notably FU Ssŭ-nien's [傅斯年] ascription of Equalizing things 齊物論 (chapter 2) to SHEN Tao 慎到—a proposal as unsettling as it would be to credit Bacon with Hamlet while leaving the rest of the plays to Shakespeare. (283)

Although it is widely agreed upon that there is not any *one* author of the text, it is commonly accepted that the Inner Chapters (1-7) at least provide a semi-coherent philosophy probably written by Zhuangzi himself, whereas the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters are more-or-less scattered and likely written by his followers. Issues concerning authorship are thus widely debated.

Two of the most influential views on this topic come from A.C. Graham and Liu Xiaogan. Overall, they agree on major themes. Graham takes the position that the *Zhuangzi* “is a collection of writings of the fourth, third, and second centuries B.C., in which only the inner the chapters can be confidently ascribed to Chuang-Tzu himself” (“How Much” 281). Additionally, he posits the more radical view that the Inner Chapters themselves are not to be read in a coherent manner expressing any one philosophically intelligible view. The Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters he categorizes based on themes he attributes to Yangist views, primitivist views, and Syncretist views.

Liu Xiaogan focuses more on how the different parts of the text are related rather than differ. He starts his inquiry by using the Inner Chapters to provide a systematic argument demonstrating the connection among the historical contexts of the most prominent single-character terms such as *dao* 道, *de* 德, and *xing* 性, etc. He concludes that within the Inner Chapters, “there are 26 pairs (or groups), average approximately 3.7 pairs per chapter [while] among the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters, the most mutual relations only average 2.3 pairs per chapter” (“Classifying” 25-38).

Based on their varying observations, Graham and Liu's conclusions still converge in agreeing that the Inner Chapters constitute a single work most likely written by Zhuangzi himself. The Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters were most likely written by followers of Zhuangzi. Where the two disagree is that unlike Graham who posits that some of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters are non-

Daoist, Liu treats all of the passages as Daoist.¹ Within the Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous Chapters, there is a further breakdown of the major philosophical differences among the supposed authors. According to Hansen,

Graham drawing on work of the Chinese theorist, Kuan Feng and followed with some variation by Liu Xiaogan and Harold Roth, divides these influences into roughly four variously named groups:

- Zhuangzi's students or the School of Zhuangzi credited with those later writings committed most closely to the views expressed in the "inner chapters."
- Authors with egoist views associated with Yang Zhu (4th century BC). The *Mencius* presented Yang's thought as a version of an ethical egoism that rejected conventional altruistic social *dào*s.
- The third group Graham dubbed the 'primitivists'. Primitivists share Yang Zhu's antipathy to social, historical or conventional *dào*s—typically those supporting social norms extending beyond agricultural village life—in favor of more natural ways. This group shares attitudes with the text of the *Laozi* (*Dàodé Jing*) mixed with Yangist themes.
- The final group, dominated the "miscellaneous" sections, Graham called them Syncretists (eclectics) who seemingly attempted comprehensiveness by combining all points of view into a single complete *dào*. (Stanford Encyclopedia)

In any case, it is also entirely possible for any one person to have and articulate incredibly different sentiments from one time to the next. As pointed out by Ziporyn, this is especially true for a person like Zhuangzi who expresses some fairly convincing reasons for doing so (mostly skeptical or relativistic) ("Essential" ix). Further, there is no reason to think that it could also be the case that future research

¹ An excellent discussion surrounding the debate can be found in Esther Klein's article "Were there 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*" where she challenges these and other traditional positions on authorship. Based on Sima Qian's portrait of Zhuang Zhou, she reasons that "we have reason to question the importance, or even existence, of the Inner Chapters in the Western Han... [and] that pre-Han and Han references to Zhuang Zhou parallels with the *Zhuangzi* text, do not necessarily even require (or support) the existence of most inner chapters, and certainly give no evidence that they were coherent and had any kind of canonical status" (299).

and evidence will someday prove the standard view on authorship to be wrong. So, while it is important to note questions of authorship, especially in considering different philosophical motivations, it should not greatly influence analyses of thematic issues like the current thesis intends to do.²

This thesis focuses on the conception of spontaneity, and as an overarching theme, authorship should not bear heavily on what we can learn from the theme of spontaneity in the text as a whole. I am not so concerned with debating over what *Zhuangzi* himself or his followers said, but rather with what the text has presented regarding spontaneity and what lessons we may take from it. Primarily, what is Zhuangzi's notion of spontaneity and how can it help us to understand his overall philosophy? So instead of distinguishing among the Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous Chapters according to coherency and thematic resonance, I will generally regard the entirety of the text and only address authorship issues where it may be noteworthy.³ I also assume the standard view by regarding the Inner Chapters as attributed to Zhuangzi and the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters to his followers. After all, it is the version of the intellectual history I am interested in insofar as what it has to offer us philosophically instead of "who said what".

Of course, the consequence of differing authors with different motivations will inevitably engender certain contradictions. That is especially true if one's methodology is to take the entirety of the text to be read as one coherent whole. However, in general, coherency will not be of much concern in this thesis except where necessary. Considering it may be argued that many individual passages can serve as their own stand-alone story with a unique plotline, evaluating coherency among such passages will be addressed as they arise, but not as an area of focus. This is to say, different passages express different aspects of spontaneity, and the strategy will be to acutely focus on these individual aspects and then take a step back to look at the how the picture of spontaneity as a whole emerges.

In looking at the entirety of the text, I will evaluate instances revolving around spontaneity individually, and then see how they relate to each other. Regardless of

² However, there will be a section regarding how certain views on authorship may have influenced the notion of *ziran*. This is firstly because of Guo Xiang's commentary on the *Zhuangzi* and his influential views on *ziran*, as well as the scholarly consensus that he may have interpolated a passage in the text. This is secondly because of Yangist views appearing to contradict Zhuangzi's overall philosophy. This will be discussed in Chapter Three Section 3.2.2 of this thesis.

³ This is not an uncommon practice as was most recently demonstrated by Chong Kim-Chong in his book *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human*.

who is the author throughout varying passages, the whole of the text addresses perennial issues that relate and overlap (whether coherent or not), thus shedding light onto our topic of interest. For example, in Chapter One of the *Zhuangzi* we read about “the Consummate Person [who] has no fixed identity, the Spirit Man has no particular merit, the Sage has no name” (Ziporyn “Essential” 6). This passage is arguably directly referenced again in Chapter 17 with “The man of the Course has no reputation; perfect Virtuosity achieves nothing; The Great Man has no fixed identity” (Ziporyn “Essential” 71). Examples such as this allow us to explore thematic overlapping among chapters even if, at times, we may encounter contrasting premises and views.

1.1 Spontaneity as a Perennial Theme

One fundamental challenge in offering an account of spontaneity lies in the text’s various and contrasting ways of conceptualizing what it means to be spontaneous. Spontaneity as a central theme is expounded through notions like *ziran* 自然 (often translated as “nature” or “spontaneity”), *wuwei* 無為 (non-action or non-doing), *you* 遊 (wandering or playing), and *wuhua* 物化 (the transformation of all things). Spontaneity is also described through methods like a “fasting” (齋 *zhai*) of the fully-formed heart/mind (*cheng xin* 成心), and forgetting learned customs and conventions in order to find what is natural. The text seems to portray various different ways of acting spontaneously, each with important subtleties and nuances, and this being what has motivated many diverging interpretations. It has been pointed out in the current literature that spontaneity is sometimes achieved by acting with minimal agency, by following nature (*tian* 天), dissolving learned distinctions, and even by experiencing a transcendent state. As we shall see, there is plenty of literature on these ideas, but the lack of agreement leaves a platform for further clarification and fruitful inquiry. What exactly is spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*? Can we find a clear definition or is it a constellation of concepts? Is it a cultivated skill or a psychological mindset?

When writing about the *Zhuangzi* in English, issues concerning translation inevitably arise. There is a difficulty in using the word “spontaneity” as a translation for many of the Chinese terms and passages we will discuss. There is not one Chinese word that matches the English word spontaneity, but rather a cluster of

characters, themes and metaphors that give us a sense of different aspects of the concept of spontaneity.

On a broader more colloquial level, usually when we use the term spontaneity in English, we are referring to an action that is not premeditated on the part of an agent. In everyday language we might describe someone who is spontaneous as one who's behavior is random or sometimes even out of the ordinary. Or when referring to a spontaneous event, it can often mean one that happens as an unusual occurrence, something surprising, or a circumstance we might find especially exciting. For example, "we spontaneously decided to jump on a train to Italy".

In general, a spontaneous action is seen positively as an expression and manifestation of one's unbiased desires and natural impulses. This interpretation can be traced back to the term "automaton" coined by Aristotle which is usually translated as spontaneity, but rather describes an unexpected and rare incident instead of one happening with the natural order of things (Bruya "Rehabilitation" 219). On the other hand, in Chinese, different character compounds and themes surrounding spontaneity seemed to revolve more around just that, the natural order of things. But can we say the same when reading concepts surrounding spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*? As we shall see, the text does seem to align spontaneity with the natural order of things, and more specifically according to the inborn nature of the individual under the context of a non- normative vision of *tian* 天, or heaven. In what follows, an analysis of key terms and concepts surrounding spontaneity will provide a clearer picture of how to delineate an account of both what the texts presents as well as my interpretation and account as inspired by the text.

This thesis thus intends to explore the value, practice, and implications of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*. While it is commonly agreed that spontaneity is a central theme in the text, there does not seem to be a certain term nor a clear scholarly consensus on what corresponds to the contemporary notion of "spontaneity". Bruya has noted "there is perhaps no book in any philosophical tradition that speaks of spontaneous action more vividly than the *Zhuangzi*" ("Aesthetic Spontaneity" 127). But this notion becomes complicated when the single term "spontaneity" is constituted by a cluster of terms, fictional stories, and metaphors that all make up different aspects of how we can understand its place. As mentioned above, concepts like *ziran* 自然, *wuwei*, *you* 遊, and fasting the heart-mind all speak to the common

theme of spontaneity, but the endless lot of conflicting interpretations have left a major gap in the literature.

While most scholars recognize the complexity of this topic, they tend to adhere the notion of spontaneity to one certain concept or theme. Sometimes, it is not even defined at all and left as a vague concept for the reader to discern. I intend to demonstrate the way each of these ideas fit together and show that spontaneity cannot be limited to any single concept, but rather that it is the constellation of many concepts and themes that make up *Zhuangzian* spontaneity.

This will be done by first exploring the term most often translated as spontaneity, *ziran*. By exploring and offering an account of *ziran* we will better understand Zhuangzi's picture of spontaneity. This account of *ziran* is especially significant because it is a term with very little literature concerning its specific use in the *Zhuangzi*. We will come to understand *ziran* as an organic happening that will help to inform how we read the rest of the text. In particular, this reading will demonstrate how *ziran*, and so also spontaneity, is not a skill in the *Zhuangzi*. This too is an important observation considering all of the scholarly attention on the notion of skill in relation to spontaneity, and the tendency not to distinguish between the two.

Once we have established these conclusions, this account of *ziran* will reinforce the text's active vision of spontaneity through exploring other important aspects of spontaneity. For example, the concept of *you* 遊 will give us insight into both the psychological mindset of the spontaneous characters in the text, as well as how they will behave. As Zhuangzi's spontaneity becomes clearer, we will then explore how this vision fits in with some of the text's larger themes such as death and the connection between heaven and man. Finally, we will be able to compare and contrast the account of spontaneity in this thesis with the major views in the current literature.

1.2 Key Passages

Let us now first take an overview of some key passages of the *Zhuangzi* just to give a flavor for how spontaneity is discussed and conceptualized. These passages highlight some of the core themes of the text and how they relate to spontaneity. Through analyzing these themes, we will create a platform for understanding the thrust of the text, as well as the importance of spontaneity. Each section will intend to delineate an aspect of how spontaneity is presented and understood. Although spontaneity is one

concept in the text, it is multifaceted and complex. This complexity is the key motivating problem for the research of this thesis.

Because the text contains many different passages conveying different aspects of spontaneity, it is a worthwhile endeavor to compile them in such a way that exposes a greater picture of what Zhuangzi had in mind. Further, *ziran* as the foundation of interpreting spontaneity is a novel approach.⁴ There has been very little work done on how *ziran* is used in the *Zhuangzi* which creates an opening for this thesis to be an important contribution.

The first section below will address how the text often criticizes any notions of the self that promote a distinction between an internal identity and external impositions. Zhuangzi demonstrates the mistake in not only making this distinction, but all imposed human distinctions (as opposed to “natural” distinctions). The second section will explore the concept of the heart-mind (*xin* 心) and the tendency for one to let biases and preconceived beliefs inhibit responding to situations as they are. The third section will explore the concept of *zhen* in both its negative and positive roles in the *Zhuangzi*. Regarding the former is the mistake of assuming a “ruler” to our agency. Regarding the latter is the genuineness and authenticity of heaven as expressed by the sage. The fourth section will present the way of fasting of the heart-mind (心齋 *xin zhai*) to unlearn conventions and norms and return to what is natural (and thus spontaneous).

The last section will address what are known as the “skill” or “knack” stories. They describe an actor who has cultivated his craft to the highest level by attuning to heaven and achieving pure spontaneity as a result. This section will also briefly touch on the mistake of considering spontaneity to be a skill. Although this is not an issue outwardly expressed in the text, it should prove to be an important argument in the rest of this thesis. By mentioning it here, I hope to outline the significance of this view and along the way allow it to unfold appropriately and convincingly.

1.2.1 Internal Identity vs External Impositions

One theme recurring throughout the *Zhuangzi* is the common distinction between an internal and external self, or an internal identity as opposed to external impositions.

⁴ This is only the case for the *Zhuangzi*. *Ziran* is certainly the foundation for understanding spontaneity in other texts such as the *Laozi*.

The text seeks to demonstrate this common misconception and instead motivate a view of oneness both within a person and between a person and heaven. We can begin with Song Rongzi 宋榮子, a character critiqued by Zhuangzi in the very first chapter, *Xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊 (Free and Easy Wandering).

And he whose understanding is sufficient to fill some one post, whose deeds meet the needs of some one village, or whose Virtuosity pleases some one ruler, thus winning him a country to preside over, sees himself in just the same way. Even Song Rongzi would burst out laughing at such a man. If the whole world happened to praise Song Rongzi, he would not be goaded onward; if the whole world condemned him, he would not be deterred. He simply made a sharp and fixed division between the inner and the outer and clearly discerned where true honor and disgrace are to be found. He did not involve himself in anxious calculations in his dealings with the world. But nonetheless, there was still a sense in which he was not yet really firmly planted. (*Zhuangzi* 1:6, Ziporyn “Essential” 5)

This passage addresses the distinction between the internal and external (內外 *neiwai*) aspects of a person. By making this distinction, one is misled by the misconception that they have some sort of internal identity contrasted to some external impositions. Song Rongzi “simply made a sharp and fixed division” between what is internal to him and the external impositions of conventional “honor and disgrace” causing him to fall short of spontaneity. In other words, by recognizing conventions and norms rather than what is natural, he is unable to act spontaneously.

While he has at least begun to free himself from value judgments and external influence by “laughing at such a man” who would act on such distinctions, he has only reached the initial stage. His problem still seems to be the idea that there indeed exists any internal and external distinction to begin with. In even assuming this is possible, he admits how one would act ethically in search of praise and avoidance of blame, even if he would mock the man that does so.

This is unlike Liezi who Zhuangzi praises for he “did not involve himself in anxious calculations about bringing good fortune to himself”.

Now, *Liezi* rode forth upon the wind, weightlessly graceful, not heading back until fifteen days had passed. He did not involve himself in anxious calculations about bringing good fortune to himself. Although this allowed him to avoid the exertions of walking, there was still something he needed to depend on. But suppose you were to chariot upon what is true both to Heaven and to earth, riding atop the back-and-forth of the six atmospheric breaths, so that your wandering could nowhere be brought to ahalt. You would then be depending on—what? Thus I say, the Consummate Person has no fixed identity, the Spirit Man has no particular merit, the Sage has no name. (*Zhuangzi* 1:7, Ziporyn “Essential” 5-6)

And even greater than *Liezi*, the Consummate Person employs no distinctions whatsoever. His ability to do so results in liberating himself from a fixed identity, merit, and a name. The Consummate Person (至人 *zhi ren*, also sometimes translated “perfect person” or “utmost person”) is one of the ways the text describes someone who has reached the height of the *Zhuangzi*’s vision, usually marked by spontaneity. This passage gives one example of the kind of spontaneity elucidated throughout text, and here notably through the notion of *you* 遊.⁵ The Consummate person is able to allow the flow of whatever heaven and earth brings to be his guide, riding along without calculation and judgment. One who is instead guided by praise and blame has made the error of committing to values which inhibit her from simply responding to the circumstances as they are.

1.2.2 The *Cheng Xin* 成心

Chapter Two of the *Zhuangzi*, *Qiwulun* “Equalizing Assessments of Things” discusses the negative aspect of the *cheng xin* 成心, or fully-formed heart-mind. To have a *cheng xin* means that one has preset judgments and biases about the world instead of simply responding spontaneously to what may come.⁶ We can imagine Song Rongzi as still abiding by his *cheng xin*, and even *Liezi* (although better), whereas the Consummate Person does not impose anything onto the world nor depend on

⁵ See Chapter Four of this thesis for more on this topic.

⁶ This reading is common in the literature. See Chong-Kim-Chong, Karyn Lai, and Ziporyn for supporting views, and commentators such as Guo Xiang.

anything. He does not have judgments or expectations because his heart is simply like a mirror that responds unobstructed.⁷ The *cheng xin* prohibits and limits one's understanding of the transformative nature of the world. Instead of reacting with open-mindedness, one is cut off from the endless possibilities of life because they have a mind already "made-up".

The Qiwulun Chapter introduces this concept by speaking about the mutual dependence between the different organs and openings of our body in contrast to assuming there is an all-powerful controller or doer. This is usually read as a critique of the Confucian idea that the heart-mind has power over and above our affective and emotional states. Zhuangzi does not share the view that our mind could control our emotions because that would in turn signify that we can control our ethical behavior. Instead, there is interdependence among them all.

The hundred bones, the nine openings, the six internal organs are all present here as my body. Which one is most dear to me? Do you delight in all equally, or do you have some favorite among them? Or are they all mere servants and concubines? Are these servants and concubines unable to govern each other? Or do they take turns as master and servant? If there exists a genuine ruler among them, then whether we could find out the facts about him or not would neither add nor subtract from that genuineness.

If you regard what you have received as fully formed [*cheng* 成] once and for all, unable to forget it, all the time it survives is just a vigil spent waiting for its end [...]

If we follow whatever has so far taken shape, fully formed in our minds [*cheng xin* 成心], making that our teacher, who could ever be without a teacher? The mind comes to be what it is by taking possession of whatever it selects out of the process of alternation—but does that mean it has to truly understand the process? The fool takes something up from it too. But to claim that there are any such things as "right" and "wrong" before they come to be fully formed in

⁷ The metaphor of a mirror is used in Chapter Seven, "The Utmost person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Thus he can overcome all things without harm" (Ziporyn "Complete" 111).

someone's mind in this way—that is like saying you left for Yue today and arrived yesterday. (*Zhuangzi* 2:9-12, Ziporyn “Essential” 10-11) ⁸

This is a complicated passage, but the general point is that taking predetermined distinctions as a guide prevents one from acting spontaneously. By regarding “what you have received as fully formed” is to take for granted your knowledge and perception as right instead of responding to situations as they are. The passage goes on to then question what would happen if we were all to do this? It would mean even the fool thinks he is right.

The “process of alternation” expresses the human categories we use to make sense of things that assert rightness and wrongness. Some examples of these distinctions might be evidenced in Confucian concerns over ritual. One specific example could be rituals over mourning the dead where certain behaviors were seen to be correct and others incorrect.⁹ If we allow for the *cheng xin* to act as the ruler, then those who are knowledgeable as well as those who are not will act based on their knowledge. This means that whatever the “right” answer is, each will act based on her own knowledge of the “right”, although for *Zhuangzi*, there is no such thing as the “right”. Instead, we should be guided by the transformational process of circumstances as they come. So then how are we to free ourselves from such distinctions?

Part of dissolving this distinction can be expressed through understanding the importance in translating *xin* as not only heart or mind, but as the combination “heart-mind”. This translation preserves the ambiguous connection between the two organs. It is important to make this distinction because there can be times when *xin* is unambiguously taken as the physical organ and other times when it is in reference to agency (both within and outside of the *Zhuangzi*). However, because this passage along and in connection with others emphasize the interdependence between the organs, it might be better to always translate *xin* as heart-mind in the *Zhuangzi* to highlight the correlation. Forgoing one or the other leaves this important aspect missing.

⁸ For detailed discussions on the concept of the *cheng xin*, see Chong Kim-Chong “Zhuangzi’s Cheng Xin and its Implications for Virtue and Perspectives”, Chris Fraser “HEART-FASTING, FORGETTING, AND USING THE HEART LIKE A MIRROR: APPLIED EMPTINESS IN THE *ZHUANGZI*”.

⁹ See Chapter Four Section Three of this thesis for specific examples discussion on this topic.

1.2.3 *Zhen zai* 真宰 as Negative and *Zhen* 真 as Positive

While we recognize the interdependence of the heart-mind and the other organs, Zhuangzi's concern is that the *xin* as a lone concept can still be mistakenly appointed as the (*zhen zai* 真宰), or “true ruler” over agency.

Day and night they alternate before us, but no one knows whence they sprout. [...] Is it from all of this, presented ceaselessly day and night, that we come to exist? Without that there would be no me, to be sure, but then again without me there would be nothing selected out from it all. This is certainly something close to hand, and yet we do not know what makes it so. If there is some controller [*zhen zai* 真宰]¹⁰ behind it all, it is peculiarly devoid of any manifest sign. Its ability to flow and to stop makes its presence plausible, but even then it shows no definite form. That would make it a reality with no definite form. (Zhuangzi 2:7-8, Ziporyn “Essential” 10)

Zhen zai will be a crucial term in the text. The concept of *zhen zai* highlights the common perception or assumption that we can define our heart or our mind as a guiding force. Zhuangzi is questioning if there were “some controller”, we surely are not given any clear evidence of it, and it also lacks any particular form. Instead, it might be more accurate to recognize the interdependences among our sensory organs, emotions, and our mind.

This kind of interdependence can also be seen in nature, which is often referred to as heaven (天 *tian*) in the *Zhuangzi*. The cyclical nature of the world dissolves distinctions, and the spontaneity in nature dissolves objectivity in determining right and wrong. Wang Fuzhi's commentary offers this interpretation:

Heaven spontaneously takes a certain form, transformations spontaneously operate, the vital energy spontaneously proceeds, and whether we understand

¹⁰ Chong Kim-Chong leaves this passage out of his Chapter discussing *zhen* as it differs from the meaning of *zhen* in the rest of the text. He notes how the *zhen* contrasts *wei*, or what is manmade, by deeming what is natural and spontaneous, and that this sentiment is not found in the Inner Chapters (which aligns with the interpretation here) (“Critique” 30). While this is true, I still believe it is an important and crucial term and both ways it is expressed should be duly noted. Watson translates *zhenzai* as “True Master”, which may be a more literal translation, but fails to capture the ambiguity emphasized by the passage (8). Graham, like Ziporyn, retains the ambiguity with his translation “something genuinely in command” (“*Chuang-Tzu*” 51).

it or not has no effect on it. Is it not the height of foolishness to seek a determiner of right and wrong [*shifei* 是非] amid all this?" (Ziproyn, "Essential" 143).

Heaven here means what we might consider to be the natural world. Nature constantly transforms, it does not do right or wrong, and our understanding (or lack thereof) will not change anything about it. Not worrying about understanding it is surrendering to the spontaneous transformations of things.

This is also an expression of the *cheng xin* as a product of human intervention and thus human blame for imposing matters of right and wrong. Like the idea of a *zhen zai* being regarded as the doer, or our "true" guiding mechanism, we risk becoming fixated on an identity that limits our perspective.

是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。果且有彼是乎哉？
果且無彼是乎哉？

'This' is also a 'that.' 'That' is also a 'this.' 'THAT' posits a 'this' and a 'that'—a right and a wrong [*shifei* 是非]—of its own. But 'THIS' also posits a 'this and a 'that' —a right and a wrong—of its own. So is there really any 'that versus this,' any right versus wrong? Or is there really no 'that versus 'this'? (Zhuangzi 2:16, Ziporyn 12)

Zhuangzi highlights the problem with categorizing and making stark judgments. "This" and "that" are always relative to the agent. When referring to a "this", it is from the perspective of that agent, and likewise when referring to "that". In this way, this and that are mutually entailing. This sort of criticism is at least partly directed toward Confucian notions of morality. Searching for something to cling to that we can use to distinguish an "I", or a kind of inner driving force will cause us to view things as self and other, this and that, and right and wrong (*shifei* 是非), thus leading to "enormous sorrow".

Shi and *fei* in the *Zhuangzi* sometimes refer to controversial matters where what is true and what is false are not plainly obvious, like matters of beauty (for example, fish running from the beautiful lady Li). That is to say, Zhuangzi does not disregard the fact that there are differences among us, but that the Confucian's import of *li* (ritual propriety 禮) imposed norms that served as motivations for power,

reputation, and wealth which inhibited naturally occurring distinctions. Hierarchical distinctions are the target of Zhuangzi's criticisms because they can easily be challenged with a change in perspective, whereas distinctions arising spontaneously rather than artificially might not fall under this category. The problem for Zhuangzi is not necessarily the categories themselves, but rather the imposition of a hierarchy among them.

Moreover, the *cheng xin* has further implications in critiquing more than Confucian teaching and distinctions. This concept also expresses a rejection of the Confucian notion that the *xin* has cognitive power over and above the affective states that allows for one to control their ethical behavior. For the Confucians, we should be able to exercise power of mind over our emotions in order to behave morally. For Zhuangzi, the interconnectedness between the heart and mind do not allow for such control and it is neither feasible nor desirable. Chong Kim-Chong has coined this as "moral autonomy" and links it to the differing view of *tian* in the *Zhuangzi* and Confucianism.¹¹

Tian is usually referring to nature and what is natural, like referenced above about the spontaneous transformation between day and night, and just before it the fluctuation between "joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, plans and regrets, transformations and stagnations, unguarded abandonment and deliberate posturing" (Zhuangzi 2:6, Ziporyn "Essential" 10). Further, humans are not prioritized by heaven, and without a conception of a special relationship between the two, there is especially no moral decree upon them. "Morality", says Chong,

in terms of concepts like *ren* (humaneness), *yi* (rightness or righteousness), *li* (ritual propriety), and *zhi* (wisdom) constitutes a special sphere of reason for action, unlike reasons of self-interest. *Tian* demands that the individual behaves morally regardless of self-interest and he or she would be following its will in doing so. At the same time, it is assumed that the individual agent is capable of moral control. ("Critique" 26)

This is the fundamental critique of the *cheng xin*, both on the level of distinction as well as regarding one's ability to exercise moral autonomy. The *cheng xin* has

¹¹ Confucian views of *tian* here is referring to pre-Qin and Mencian views of a normative heaven shared also by Mozi. Xunzi, while disagreeing with Zhuangzi in other ways, shares a non-normative view of *tian*.

prejudices and biases limiting one's perspective, and also makes the mistake of assuming an agent can or should act against their own self-interest in the name of morality. The Confucians are making a mistake, thinks Zhuangzi, in assuming rightness in ritual before exploring the limitless possibilities.

Appearing 67 times in the *Zhuangzi*, *zhen* 真 is an important concept used in various ways. *Zhen* can be seen as a reflection of *tian* in the sense of what is true, genuine, or spontaneous, in the sense that it is opposed to human artifice.¹² It also points to Zhuangzi's notion of transformation, *wuhua* 物化, which emphasizes the way things will lack a specific identity. Within the Inner Chapters, we find the *zhen ren* 真人, or "perfect/true/genuine person" who is able to find the connection between heaven and human.

And what do we mean by a 'Genuine Human Being'[真人]? The Genuine Human Beings of old did not revolt against their inadequacies, did not aspire to completeness, did not plan their affairs in advance. In this way, they could be wrong or they could be right, but without regret and without-self satisfaction. And thus they could ascend the heights without fear, submerge into the depths without getting drenched, enter the flames without feeling hot. Such was the way their understanding was able, in its very demise, to ascent through the remotest vistas of the Course [...]

The Genuine Human Beings of old understood nothing about delighting in being alive or hating death. They emerged without delight, submerged again without resistance.

Swooping in they came and swooping out they went, that and no more. They neither forgot where they came from nor asked where they would go. Receiving it, they delighted in it. Forgetting about it, they gave it back. This is what it means not to use the mind to push away the Course, not to use the Human to try to help the Heavenly. (Zhuangzi 6:5-6, Ziporyn "Essential" 40)

¹² Note, as pointed out by Chong, that *zhen*'s use in *zhen zai* connotes a different aspect of the term than the way it is use in the rest of the text (see footnote 4). *Zhen zai* expresses the negative use of the term, whereas when it is used as a reflection of *tian* (as true, genuine, or spontaneous) it is used positively.

This passage gives us a picture of what it means to be genuine. Like the spontaneous nature of the Consummate Person who has the magical powers of evading the burns of a flame or the gust of an arctic blast, the Genuine Human Being can “ascend heights without fear, submerge into the depths without getting drenched, enter the flames without feeling hot”. At the root of their seemingly magical powers is their disregard for right and wrong. Because they have no concern for if “they could be wrong or they could be right”, they are able to avoid harm. It is their psychological mindset that frees them from normal human dangers, and what allows them to be free and spontaneous. There is a lack of concern for life and death, allowing the agent to live liberated from the worry of what has happened or what is to come. The reliance is on the fate of *Dao* 道 which does not distinguish between heaven and human.

1.2.4 Fasting the Heart-Mind (*xin zhai* 心齋)

The text also describes the method to finding spontaneity through a fasting of the heart-mind (*xin zhai* 心齋). Although the concept of *xin zhai* occurs only once in the text, it offers insight and direct connection to many other passages, making it crucial to interpreting the *Zhuangzi*’s spontaneity. In Chapter Four “In the Human World” we read of Confucius’s most esteemed disciple, Yan Hui, who set out to journey to the state of Wei in an attempt to regain order there by talking to the king. However, before he sets off he is quickly interrupted by Confucius, who is provokingly played by the indirect voice of Zhuangzi, and explains his trip will be futile if he proceeds with all of his planning and scheming. Instead, Confucius recommends Yan Hui proceed with a fasting of his heart-mind: “You must fast! Let me tell you. To have something in mind [有而為之，其易邪？] and then go out and do that thing—do you think this is a simple matter? Majestic Heaven does not accommodate those who look on this as easy”. Hui questions the meaning of this fasting,

‘My family is poor, and I have had no wine or meat for many months. Can this be considered fasting?’

Confucius said, ‘That’s the fasting you do for a religious sacrifice. It is not the fasting of the mind [*xin zhai* 心齋]’.

Yan Hui said, ‘What is the fasting of the mind?’

Confucius said, ‘If you merge all your intentions into a singularity [若一志 *ruò yīzhì*], you will come to hear with the mind rather than the ears. Further, you will come to hear with the vital energy (*qi*) rather than with the mind. For the ears are halted at what they hear. The mind is halted at whatever verifies its preconceptions. But the vital energy is emptiness [虛], a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind.’ (*Zhuangzi* 4:8, Ziporyn “Essential” 26)

The method of fasting the heart-mind is different from a physical or religious fasting, for it does not perform a dutiful purpose, and the results comprehensively affect the entire person. The heart-mind can become tangled (*you peng* 有蓬) by gathering up and storing too many preconceived notions.

It is evident straightaway in the “Xiaoyaoyou” Chapter where Zhuangzi’s assessment of Huizi’s failure to properly assume the potential of his big gourd is that: “our greatly esteemed master here still has a lot of tangled weeds clogging up his mind!” (則夫子猶有蓬之心也夫！) (*Zhuangzi* 1:13, Ziporyn “Essential” 8). For the same reason, we see later the anecdote from “The Creator of Things 造物者 *zaowuzhe*” to Ziyu 子與 to “untie oneself 自解” in order to find liberation from being bound by things (*Zhuangzi* 6:39, Ziporyn “Essential” 45). Unclogging and untangling the *cheng xin* refers to the process by which one finds fluidity and responds to situations as they are. This is why there is the suggestion to free the mind of the entanglement of preconceived notions coming from the world instead of spontaneous responses.

The connection to spontaneity here is that the fasting allows one to take ordinary views and open the mind to endless possibilities. Spontaneity is possible because one is not thinking in terms of what should or should not be. The big gourd that Huizi thought had no purpose was repurposed into a boat because Zhuangzi did not have the limited perspective of the purpose of a gourd. It was because of his mind being empty and not thinking in terms of convention that he could imagine all of the possibilities for the gourd.

1.2.5 Spontaneity As Separate from Skill

While others have chosen to focus on the *Zhuangzi*'s famous skill stories in explaining spontaneity, this thesis will analyze the difference between the two. There is an interesting connection between skill and spontaneity, which will be further explored later, but the focus of this thesis remains on spontaneity.¹³ In this section I wish to highlight the aspect of spontaneity in the skill stories and note how it is separate from skill.

Perhaps the most famous example of spontaneity is the story of Cook Ding, a butcher for King Hui of Liang. When he performed his skill with such precision, the king praised him saying "Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!" The king explained how he had become the expert of his craft,

"What I love is the Course, something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. [...] I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations, and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using the same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. (*Zhuangzi* 3:3, Ziporyn "Essential" 22)

This story, along with several others in the text, are usually referred to as "skill stories".¹⁴ They describe a character who has cultivated a skill to the point of performing it spontaneously. In this achievement he no longer has to think or deliberate on how or what to do, but is simply guided by the heavenly. This is why, as

¹³ Some of the questions that will be addressed include: What is it in the skill that will manifest as spontaneity? Does a skill become spontaneous because one has habituated it? Is it this naturalness? Or is it something like *you* can do a certain skill so well that *you* become one with this action and the distinction between agent and action/subject and object disappears? For example, when one has the skill of swimming, is one merely swimming with swimming being the skill, or does that person become one with the swimming when spontaneity is achieved? What exactly is it that *Zhuangzi* is getting at in exposing that when several agents who seem very skillful also tends to be very spontaneous?

¹⁴ See Appendix 1

we shall discuss in the literature review, many scholars liken spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* to a form of following nature, which in the text is described with the character for heaven (*tian* 天). It is by behaving like nature, or embodying the way of nature, that the Consummate Person can achieve true spontaneity.

What is important to note and will be discussed further is the idea that spontaneity is not a skill itself, in that the pursuit of the perfection of spontaneity would be self-defeating. A skill is something that can be pursued and cultivated over time. Spontaneity is unavoidably always an aspect of the skill stories in the text. However, spontaneity is not to be confused for a skill itself. Spontaneity is only an aspect of the skill. This means that the two are separate and that a skill can be spontaneous but that spontaneity is not a skill. Additionally, if one pursues spontaneity in the way one can pursue a skill, the act will in turn lose all spontaneity from the onset because spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* is non-purposive and non-deliberate.¹⁵

1.3 Conclusion

In the above I highlight a few key passages to sketch the theme of spontaneity found in the *Zhuangzi* by illuminating some of the most important ways the text expounds spontaneity. Among those we have discussed mostly how the *Zhuangzi* claims one's spontaneity can be prohibited by distinguishing between an internal and external self, how the *cheng xin* limits one's perspective and assumes "moral autonomy", and also how the idea of a *zhen zai* (some controller/true ruler) fails to exhibit the interconnectedness and interdependence of our heart, mind, and organs. We have also discussed how *zhen* is thought of positively when it reflects the spontaneous and genuine nature of *tian* that can be embodied by the sage. Lastly, we have differentiated spontaneity from skill in that spontaneity may be achieved as an aspect of a skill at its height but is not an achievable skill itself. I will discuss these points in detail in the subsequent chapters. Before proposing my own interpretation of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*, I shall first turn to some of the most common ways spontaneity has been talked about in the scholarly literature.

¹⁵ This will be discussed further during Chapters Three and Four of this thesis.

Chapter Two

Common Views on Spontaneity

The idea of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* has been widely discussed mainly because of its elusive nature in the text, along with varying possible interpretations surrounding what it means to be “natural” (as will be discussed further in Chapter Three of this thesis). Many scholars have proposed different readings, and while there are similarities among them, few agree. Thus, the project of defining, or at least connecting the differing views, is relevant, controversial, and worthwhile. As mentioned above, it has been most common to categorize under concepts such as *ziran* 自然, following nature (*tian* 天), *wuwei* 無為, and wandering or playing (*you* 遊). Each of these concepts point to different aspects of what spontaneity means in the text.

Most broadly, the current literature highlights Zhuangzi’s emphasis on allowing natural inclinations rather than planning and scheming to guide action, and also not being too fast in making distinctions or categorizing prior to an event. Regarding *ziran* specifically, it has been common to speak about *ziran* as an ideal concept, and closely connected to following nature where *ziran* describes the naturalness in nature that can be embodied by man. In achieving spontaneity deliberation disappears and distinctions appear only as they arise. In the following I will categorize the main interpretations of spontaneity in the current literature by classifying them into five different camps.

2.1 Self-Negation

The first group of scholars comprise of those that explicitly refer to a “self” in the text, and then the lack thereof said self, so I will label them as the “self-negation” camp. David Loy and David Hall have suggested that the *Zhuangzi* proposes a certain renunciation of the self, but in slightly different ways. Loy likens Zhuangzi’s self to the Buddhist notion of “no-self”. He says, “When there is no thing or self that exerts itself to do things, there is the spontaneity (*ziran*, ‘so of itself’) of actions that are experienced as no actions (*wu wei*), of transformations that are just as much non-transformations” (50). For Loy, by eradicating any sense of an “I”, one does not cling or attach to externalities that influence or inhibit behaving naturally. This lack of an

“I” allows action to be in accord with one’s natural tendencies and also based on the specific environmental circumstances one finds themselves in. David Hall in his article “Nietzsche and Chuang Tzu: Resources for the Transcendence of Culture” describes a similar line of thought whereby one finds liberation from the shackles of attachment to an unchanging identity. Freedom from the idea that one has an unchanging or essential identity unlocks the opportunity to find spontaneity in action because one can change and transform. Slingerland has advocated a similar reading in *Effortless Action*: “it is precisely by eliminating (false) self-forgetting or making it empty—that one is able to realize the true self” (187).

However, there seems to be somewhat of a gap in drawing this conclusion. Slingerland uses the metaphor of an “essential self” and a “self as container” (“Conceptions” 329). Inside of the container is the “real self” which fits the subject and can be thought of as the “essence”. Outside of the container is the “false self” which does not fit the subject of the essence of the subject. Therefore, according to this reading, it is by eradicating any sort of idea of an essential self that one achieves spontaneity. But there is something missing. Isn’t it possible that one can maintain some sort of personhood without clinging to an unchanging identity? In what follows in the coming chapters, I intend to demonstrate that there is indeed the retention of personhood in that all agency is not lost, and it is rather Zhuangzi’s focus to emphasize the negative aspects of common motivations for claiming a self (such as status or praise). (“Conceptions” 329-30)

Another issue is that while the “self-negation” reading is common, we should be wary that it may map on too closely to Buddhist teachings of “no-self” and “non-attachment”.¹⁵ There certainly exist similarities and parallels between Zhuangzi and many Buddhist teachings, and ample comparative work has evidenced this.¹⁶ Nonetheless, we should strive to be vigilant with our choice of vocabulary in order to distinguish between the two traditions and highlight the subtleties. Loy and Hall have done mostly well in this respect, but using terms like “no-self” that directly mimic Buddhist tenets are not helpful to a reader who is not wholly well-versed in the literature.

¹⁶ Some examples include: 1) Wang, Youru. *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism* (2003). 2) Ziporyn, Brook *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and its Antecedents* (2013). 3) FANG, Yong, and Yan YANG. "On Theoretical Connection between Buddhist Philosophy in the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the Taoist Thought of Zhuangzi [J]." 2004).

More broadly, the self is a very complicated and loaded term in philosophy, and should be handled with care. Since an important way of understanding spontaneity has arisen out of conceptions of the self and agency, we must address how to speak about the term itself. The self and its relation to spontaneity has often arisen in two ways: 1) losing or forgetting the self, and 2) identifying nature and the self. Since many scholars understand spontaneity in terms of the “self”, it is unavoidable that I will also have to use this philosophically loaded term in presenting their work. Nonetheless, I am not committed to any strong or essential claims about the self. Thus, I will choose to use the word “person” when not paraphrasing others in order to avoid making any strong claims about what the self is in the *Zhuangzi*. “Person” is much more neutral and does not carry so many philosophical assumptions like the term “self”. Personhood does not necessarily admit any isolated identity. The “self- negation” camp seems to deny all personhood which seems to be too strong of a claim.

Chris Joachim has correctly criticized *Zhuangzian* scholars for mapping western notions of the self onto the text. He reminds us that Daoists from the fourth century B.C. had no sense of what that self meant and so how could they reject it in favor of any alternative (46)? Further, the self-negation group not only denies any sense of an essential self, but also any personhood whatsoever. However, there seem to be several instances when Zhuangzi appears to specifically refer to some sense of a “person”. For example, in the beginning of Chapter Two “Equalizing Assessments of Things” Ziqi is famously quoted as saying, “what has happened here is simply that I have lost *me*” (Ziporyn, “Essential” 9). The concept of the *cheng xin* also seems to point to both a physical and affective state of a person which can be remedied through fasting the heart-mind. It seems that this refers to a sense of personhood, albeit one that is characterized by the ability to be in flux with the natural transformations of the world.

2.2 Minimal Agency

The second camp of scholars we might describe as having the “minimal agency and no deliberation” reading. They suggest that the *Zhuangzi* advocates a kind of *laissez-faire* attitude whereby one’s demeanor of acceptance allows her to just follow along with whatever comes her way. Victor Mair, for example, has characterized the notion of *you* 遊, or wandering/playing, this way by taking the

implied acceptance of things as frivolously carefree, and worse, lazy (“Zhuangzi and Erasmus” 316). Similarly, A. C. Graham has characterized the term as akin to how one would have described a psychedelic experience in the 1960s (“Chuang-Tzu” 8).

Schwitzgebel claims Zhuangzi’s ideal “appears instead to be something like lazing about, doing nothing, mastering nothing, and serving no purpose” (“Unskilled” 104).⁴⁷

This sort of interpretation puts forward a rudimentary reading that does not do justice to the precise nature in which the *Zhuangzi* approaches such notions of spontaneous action. We can look to the stories mentioned above for support. The figures described do not sit and do nothing, they allow circumstances and natural responsiveness to elicit action. Unlike other philosophical theories where agency is dictated by ethics or norms, the *Zhuangzi* has been thought to be amoral and visions of action are non-normative. The Consummate Person does not act based on praise or blame and accepts the endless transformation of things as they go along. The fasting of the heart-mind expresses a retreat from conditioned norms and conventions that inhibit one’s natural spontaneity. The skill stories are usually used as the most concrete evidence to support this view in that they demonstrate the strong level of cultivation reached to achieve such spontaneity.

I would like to suggest “minimal agency” in the *Zhuangzi* is much more complicated and action-entailing than these “go with the flow” readings suggest. On such view supporting this comes from Karyn Lai in her explanation of the cicada catcher story.¹⁷ She suggests there has been a recognition of Zhuangzi’s emphasis on “knowing-how” knowledge in favor of “knowing-that”, but that “we need to move beyond the conceptual framework of traditional classifications of rational/anti-rational, mind/body, and knowing-that/known-how” (“Cicada” 151).

Lai explains how the cicada story captures the kind of dynamic responsiveness Zhuangzi emphasizes throughout the text whereby one is not limited in perspective due to predetermined distinctions such as “so and not-so (*ran* 然, *buran* 不然); possible and not possible (*ke* 可, *buke* 不可); correct and permissible, and wrong and impermissible (*shi* 是, *fei* 非)” (156). Zhuangzi implies having your mind made up about what is and what is not before actuating any event only squabbles one’s ability to respond to the endless possibilities at hand. Although formulaic thinking has its place and time, it is not reliable as a sole source of action.

¹⁷ See Appendix 2.

Like Lai, I argue that the skill stories are important in refuting those who propose the “minimal agency” reading. An important part of my discussion will address skill in relation to spontaneity, and that spontaneity is not a skill. If we recall the story of Cook Ding, one might argue that we can read his mastery of butchering the ox as a progression of a habituated act and cultivation that resulted in his skill being spontaneous. The term *you* (遊) is used in to describe not only Cook Ding’s skill, but the movement of the knife itself. If we think of *you* as a skill, then it could be the case that Cook Ding cultivates the skill of “*you*”-ing in order to achieve spontaneity, but I will argue that the act of “*you*”-ing is already present, and it is Cook Ding allowing for the *you* of his action to manifest. It is important to make this distinction because the pursuit of a skill defeats the idea of spontaneity in the text.

The *Zhuangzi* is not proposing an entirely passive existence where all agency is lost, and we should be wary of readings that emphasize purely “going with the flow”, or comparing Zhuangzi’s philosophy to a psychedelic experience. While these ideas may arise throughout the text, and even indeed be permissible, it is not the thrust of Zhuangzi’s argument. While Lai has done some of the leg work, I intend to further expand on the link between skill and spontaneity, and more importantly to demonstrate the distinction.

2.3 Internal vs. External

Our next group of scholars start by distinguishing between an internal true or genuine person and an external disposable person (or multiple persons). So, the third camp will be called the “internal vs external” group, and the following scholars will either be in support of this distinction or in opposition to it. The purpose of labeling this camp as such is to demonstrate how many scholars have made sense of the notion of spontaneity by drawing this distinction.

Paul D’Ambrosio and Hans Goerg-Moeller took the Confucian distinction between sincerity and deception in role-playing and attempted to demonstrate how the *Zhuangzi* advocates another kind of role-playing that is the opposite of the Confucian version (“Going Along” 201).¹⁸ By this, the Zhuangzian sage is deemed a “genuine pretender” and while the internal person remains genuine, the sage can take on

¹⁸ While Paul D’Ambrosio’s distinguishes between an internal and external self, his conclusion is such that we could potentially still categorize him in the “minimal agency” camp (2014). I have mentioned him in the “internal vs external” group in order to highlight certain aspects of his interpretation for heuristic purposes.

multiple external persons through acting out different roles according to the circumstances. This kind of role-playing allows the agent to take on different roles and avoid any affective perturbation. Their claim is that considering the *Zhuangzi*'s focus on “forgetting (*wang* 忘)”, losing (*sang* 喪), and negating (*wu* 無) one's social self, rather than constructing or discovering an ‘authentic self’ that might ultimately only reify authority” (“Authority Without Authenticity” 398). He points out the observation made by Ames and Rosemont that the kind of essence of person that we might describe as our “inner core” or “nature” was not discussed by Pre-Qin thinkers, and instead one's identity is defined “by and through their interactions with others” (“Going Along” 198). In this way, he suggests a kind of spontaneity characterized by one who has the ability “to go along with common practices”.

Although this may sound very similar to the “minimal agency” reading, to “go along with common practices” does not necessarily mean the same thing. The distinction between internal and external highlights an important difference. Instead of suggesting one basically does nothing, the internal/external reading highlights the ability (and/or mistake) of the external person to especially *do things*. The external person does things for general human concerns, whereas the internal person is prized for being naturally spontaneous. For the minimal agency group, there may or may not be an internal and external “self” and the emphasis is on merely following along lazily with almost zero awareness. Those in the internal vs. external group might hold a similar or comparable view, but their focus is usually on the internal “true” self and the “corrupted” external self.

2.4 Internal Following Nature vs. External

One subgroup of this third group can be called the “internal following nature vs. external” camp. This takes the distinction beyond internal and external, and specifically associates the internal with “following nature”. What defines “following nature” can vary among scholars. In general, what is true and genuine versus what is external and disposable directly maps on to the realm of human in connection with the realm of heaven or nature (*tian* 天) respectively. It is by finding this connection (the internal self with *tian*) that one is able to act spontaneously, usually through embodying the natural, true and genuine way of *tian*.

Tian in the *Zhuangzi* should not be confused for a kind of deity or as anthropomorphic in nature. What is important to note for now is that *tian* elsewhere (especially in Confucian and Mohist texts) is often capitalized and usually translated as “Heaven”, but that translation becomes complicated in the *Zhuangzi* where *tian* is usually akin to nature, and even that can be misleading. Ziporyn notes that the primary meaning of *tian* as “sky” is never absent in the term and that it is “beyond human manipulation” (“Complete” 325).

In his article “Following Nature with Mengzi or *Zhuangzi*”, Franklin Perkins addresses these issues in problematizing the difference between “natural”, “supernatural”, and “what is artificial” (“Following Nature”). He notes the complication of mapping European distinctions of these terms onto their uses in Chinese. The first problem arises through translation, and without delving in too deep into that discussion here, we can simply note that being in harmony or out of harmony with *tian* was an issue for these thinkers, but not necessarily being “real” or “fake”.¹⁹ This is where the internal following nature vs external group defines itself against just the internal vs external camp in that what is internal is likened to nature. The internal can be thought of as that which is not shaped by society and not concerned with realness or fakeness. The external can be shaped by society and norms. However, realness or fakeness might only be a modern way of interpreting these texts, and a distinction that these ancient Chinese texts may not have considered.

Franklin Perkins’ view of “following nature” entails the quality of spontaneity and is predicated on his interpretation that *Zhuangzi* satirizes provincialism (“Following Nature” 336). He reads *Zhuangzi* to say that even though the sage remains human, the human perspective is transcended. This is because the sage receives sustenance from *tian*, and no longer finds use for the realm of people (*ren*). The small-mindedness of the human is only a burden to the greater possibilities at hand. This reading was also emphasized by Xunzi who criticized *Zhuangzi* for being “blinded by heaven” and “not knowing the human”. The specific areas of the human realm with which *Zhuangzi* was concerned consisted of things that corrupted the naturalness or spontaneity of the way things already are. This is to say that *Zhuangzi* does not completely disregard the human realm, but rather addresses his concerns with

¹⁹ There will be further discussion in Chapter Four of this thesis on the specific use of *tian* and the complications of understanding English translations of Chinese characters such as *tian* 天 to nature or natural, and what it means to be so.

how humans could benefit from *tian* in ways that might avoid disrupting their natural spontaneous behaviors.

Perkins thus concludes that the text pushes for a reproach against virtue and government imposition. Transcending the human perspective here then means to have less concern for government strategies and structures. In the human realm, we tend to encourage and categorize under the premise that a well-structured society will lead to a good life. Instead, we might find that this not to be the case. From the perspective of *tian*, we may not have as much control over what happens as we may think. Therefore, in order to follow *tian*, one must accept what *tian* brings, whatever that may be.

Another view on “following nature” comes from Michael Puett where instead of “losing harmony with *tian*”, one might have an over emphasis on either *yin* or *yang* rather than an ideal balance. He says, “imagine you living your life embracing this incredible spontaneity, this incredible generation, then what you are doing is encouraging this endless interplay of *yin* and *yang*, if you are doing that ... there is life” (“Zhuangzi in Relation to Confucius”). In his book *To Become a God*, Puett focuses on the “spirit-man” (神人) in the *Zhuangzi* who is “free and unbounded” and can affect the natural world by concentrating his spirit in allowing for things to be as they are effortlessly (124). He says that “to bind oneself to any one thing (including one’s human form) is to commit oneself to cycles of joy and sorrow; only by complying with this ceaseless transformative process can one avoid resentment” (127). This vague reference to spontaneity, he goes on explain, means that the sage will have an attitude of acceptance for whatever Heaven brings. It is then the mistake of man to strive to overcome heaven (128).

Eske Møllgaard also falls into this group by describing spontaneity as a transcendent state whereby one is engendered by *tian*: “In the *Zhuangzi* the experience of *tian* is the experience of the coming-into-being of things, it is not the experience of things as things among things, not even the totality of such things” (4). He thus supports Robinet in her claim that when things come into being, “we feel the force of the ‘spontaneously self-so’ (*ziran*), or the force of nature as self-emerging being” (5). He denounces the idea that the *Zhuangzi* recommends a sort of naturalism whereby humans should have the same kind of instinctive spontaneity as animals (something like the “minimal agency” camp), and instead suggests that humans have the capacity to experience a transcendental life. By using our “mechanical mind”, humans employ

unawareness of the motivations of heaven, which in turn gives them freedom from deliberation (what Møllgaard regards as the true meaning of *you* 遊 ‘wandering’). Jing Liu takes on a similar point with her claim that “*ziran* is not only objective nature as opposed to humans-as-subjects in a modern sense; but also it is not a simple aggregation of beings. What it expresses is primarily a happening” (What Is Nature” 267). Thus, when humans become separated from *tian*, that is when *ziran*, or spontaneity, is lost.

Danesh Singh also falls into this subgroup when he takes the view that the *Zhuangzi* has a normative theory that lies in the concept of *wuwei* “which suggests the cultivation of one’s person is only possible when individuals cultivate a greater attunement to the process of nature within themselves and their surroundings” (213). He argues that *Zhuangzi* endorses the view that we cannot rely on “formulas and concepts” in the pursuit of skill acquisition, and further, that any direct pursuit of spontaneity is self-defeating. Instead, individuals need to create the environment for spontaneity to happen, much like a person experiencing insomnia needing to provide the proper conditions for sleep rather than directly pursuing sleep itself. He claims we cannot look to the text for a decision-making procedure, and we can only understand how to act “in general” because sage-knowledge is merely conceptual (218). The achievement of natural spontaneity happens when we “unlearn the layers of socialization that construct their ways of thinking, perceiving, behaving and feeling” (223).

We can understand *how* to act, but not *what* to do. This means that when deciding how to act in any given situation, it is not advisable to ask what to do, but rather how to think about what to do. A similar idea is found in virtue ethics where certain virtues, such as compassion, guide a person to action, rather than tenets or commandments. However, I want to be careful about speaking about the *Zhuangzi* in terms of ethics. The lack of a decision-making procedure presents a problem if we want to place the text into the debate among contemporary ethical theorists today. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible to describe spontaneity in the text in the most detailed way possible without disrespecting its original context, imposing foreign standards, or over-reading in order to be able to discuss it within that debate. An extrapolation of this kind would be a manipulation and distortion of the original text. Further, I intend to demonstrate that we do not need to put the *Zhuangzi* into the arena of contemporary ethical theory in order to prove the value of it. In fact, it might even

be a mistake to do so. We cannot assume from the beginning that the lack of a decision-making procedure is a weakness in theory. Rather we can judge the *Zhuangzi* in its own right and outside of these standards set by contemporary ethics.

2.5 Transforming Self

In Singh's conclusion, he suggests that skill acquisition like that of Cook Ding is only established after long-term and gradual cultivation. This is much like the Confucian notion of the gradual embodiment of virtue through habituated ritual activity, an idea usually opposed to most readings of Daoist thought. In fact, Chong Kim-Chong understands the *Zhuangzi*'s critique and response to Confucian thought in *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human*. We can categorize Chong's reading in the next camp we will call the "transforming self" camp.²⁰

Contra Singh, as Chong points out, it is the standard view that *tian* in the *Zhuangzi* is non-normative and throughout varying contexts connotes "authenticity, genuineness, spontaneity, or an original state of primitive innocence" (13). As such, heaven is our connection to the internal "true person", and it is the human realm which can corrupt that person with norms, distinctions, and rituals, etc. This is not to be confused for him saying the Consummate Person would make such a distinction, but rather that the connection makes us *one with* heaven. However, the distinction between the two realms is not always completely clear, and differs between the Inner and Outer Chapters. In this way, we can think of Chong's view as a response to the internal vs external camp in that he might refute making that distinction in the first place. The mistake is made by even acknowledging that an internal and external self is possible.

We briefly discussed the concept of the heart-mind (*xin* 心) above as the organ or facet of the human that the Confucians would argue gives us the capability of moral autonomy by which we can control our moral behavior over and above naturally arising affective states. Based on the Qiwulun Chapter's explication of the *xin* as incapable of moral autonomy, Chong has concluded that for *Zhuangzi*, humans might be unaware of and lack control over the variety of drives we are ordinarily motivated by.

²⁰ It is more standard to use the phrase self-transforming rather than transforming-self. I have chosen to phrase the group in reverse emphasize the more passive version. The self does not deliberately do the transforming. Instead, transforming happens to the self as the self is transformed.

Zhuangzi is suggesting too that people may be driven by affective states that emerge spontaneously, involuntarily, and even unconsciously. This means as well that the motivations and emotions go very deep, to the extent that they may be said to constitute the “self.” The ascendancy of the motivational drives referred to in terms of the various organs and the alternations of the emotions, however, shows that there is no stability to the self, and this again means that there is no self that is independent of, and in charge of, the motivational and emotional states. (“*Cheng Xin*”, 432-33)

Spontaneity, thus, is inhibited by the *cheng xin* (成心), or fully-formed heart-mind which makes judgements prior to noticing the circumstance as they are. He thus describes the *zhenren* (真人), or genuine and spontaneous person, as closely connected to *tian* in the recognition of the oneness of things. It is the imposition of human artifice that blocks one’s connection to *tian*, or what is natural and spontaneous, or *zhen*. For this reason, he describes the problem with Song Rongzi 宋榮子 as described above as being that “he could distinguish between the internal (an ethical self) and external (praise and condemnation of the world) and hence had a conception of what would be truly disgraceful” (“*Cheng Xin*” 438). Chong’s conclusion here rejects the internal vs external reading and promotes a ceaselessly transformative reading.

David Machek also rejects that the text relies on an internal vs external duality of person, and instead describes “an existence of just one genuine self which is fundamentally unstructured but can be structured (and then de-structured and restructured) and exteriorized as appropriate in the given circumstances” (“Beyond Sincerity and Pretense”, 53). In this regard, we will add him to the “transforming-self” group. Rather than assuming we all have an unchanging internal core, he argues that the entirety of one’s person is transformed as each role is wholly internalized and embodied. The person is then characterized by the kind of playing or wandering (*you* 遊) mentioned above, and Machek takes it to be the *Zhuangzian* ideal to interacting with the world. *You* 遊, he says, is widely agreed upon as

a spontaneous responsiveness to things as they are. This activity is autotelic, i.e. serves no further goal beyond itself, it connotes leisurely, carefree relaxed attitude; it entails an appreciation and sensitivity to multiplicity of possible

courses of action and different forms of life, including the alternatives to mainstream values; and it entails a freedom from impediments (*qiong* 窮). (61)

Machek takes this kind of wandering or playing as akin to the way we dream. Since it is usually the case that we cannot exert control over our dreams, we must submit to what is out of our control. However, he refutes the “minimal agency” camp by asserting that the skill stories in the *Zhuangzi* (i.e. Cook Ding) demonstrate that the text is about “supreme control and discipline” (“Beyond Sincerity” 63).

Machek concludes that our role then is to cultivate the skill of properly using one’s heart-mind. By “properly”, he means respecting the natural constraints and movements of the world so that one can exist and interact while avoiding obstacles (64). His observations of “respecting natural constraints” and employing the skill of “using one’s heart properly” gestures towards the notion that spontaneity is a cultivated skill which will be discussed later in this thesis as an issue in the text.

Finally, another common reading falls into this category although slightly different than those mentioned above. These readings take the *Zhuangzi* as what we might now call today a sort of “self-help” book. Robert Allinson says,

The project of self-transformation appears in the *Zhuangzi* under various labels, most frequently as entering into Heaven or obtaining the Tao or the Way. The master key to the attainment of the Tao or the entrance to Heaven is the employment of the strategy of forgetting the mind. (143)

He concludes “the project of self-transformation as the central project of the *Zhuangzi*”. Similarly, Paul Kjellberg explains the view of the *Zhuangzi* to be “aporetic skepticism [...] which deploys therapeutic arguments designed to generate uncertainty, is better understood as a philosophical practice, analyzed in terms of its methods and goals, than as a position in the usual sense” (20). These readings take the *Zhuangzi* to motivate a project of therapy and transforming the self in a way slightly different than the others. The view takes the *Zhuangzi*’s arguments to be less literal and more inspirational. Reading the *Zhuangzi* thus becomes a form of therapy where equanimity is a product of transforming the self.

As we can see, all of these readings interpret and express different aspects of spontaneity in distinctive ways. Common themes include describing spontaneity

through versions of what it means to be true and genuine, and many map this onto the connection between heaven and human. Almost inevitably there is mention of the malleability and capacity for transformation of the agent as well. However, almost all interpretations of this reading give us rather ambiguous or broad suggestions defining and describing what spontaneity means. With the scope so wide, there is ample room to put the pieces together and give a more concrete picture of what spontaneity means in the *Zhuangzi*. I intend to narrow the scope by picking out the key terms and passages surrounding spontaneity that will demonstrate some of the perennial themes. This will allow us to analyze how these different themes and concepts relate to one another. From there we will come to have a picture of what Zhuangzi's spontaneity is, and how it compares to the above views.

Most importantly, each camp above explores one aspect of spontaneity, but does little to put them all together. When spontaneity as a theme in the text is analyzed, it is usually explained through the "skill stories". In contrast, this thesis offers a specific account of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* that does not rely on the skill stories. Further, this thesis will demonstrate how spontaneity is not a skill.

Chapter Three

Ziran 自然 and Spontaneity

Ziran has been recognized as a pivotal concept in Daoism encompassing different values and meanings across various texts. Often translated as naturalness or spontaneity, the term most literally means “so-of-itself” or “self-soing”. Nonetheless, its meaning as spontaneity is probably the most frequently used and accepted (either as a direct translation or as an implicit meaning). As a result, I have chosen to structure this thesis around what this fundamental concept means in the *Zhuangzi*. This chapter will offer a thorough analysis of *ziran* and its relationship to spontaneity from which the rest of this thesis will build from.

The first section will provide a systematic outline of each instance of *ziran* as it appears in chronological order in the *Zhuangzi*. This section will aim to simply explain the meaning of the text without offering any strong claims. Each passage will be explained by focusing on the philosophical meaning, variations in translations, and discussions from relevant commentaries. The second and third sections will analyze *ziran* grammatically and linguistically as it can be understood as a verb, noun, and adverb depending on the passage. In understanding *ziran* grammatically, we will also be able to draw on how its various linguistic translations effect philosophical interpretation. Stronger claims will be developed to substantiate an account of *ziran* in the text. *Ziran* will then be understood as an “organic happening”. Finally, the last section will address the issue in reading *ziran*, and more broadly spontaneity, as though it were a skill.

There are certain hallmark concepts and key terms that inevitably arise during any discussions on philosophical Daoism. Some of the most famous might include *wuwei* 無為, *dao* 道, *tian* 天, and our topic of interest here, *ziran*. These key concepts give us a picture of the overarching concerns in Daoism. However, because different Daoist philosophers hold drastically different viewpoints on the same concept, it is important to differentiate the defining characteristics among each text. The worry is that if a key term is widely discussed and made famous by one text that there can be the potential for that view to become the standard view. This standard view can then be mistakenly spilled onto philosophical interpretations of another different text where the term might indeed mean something else.

In the current thesis, one of the concerns is that because of Laozi’s strong and quite clear definitions of the term *ziran*, there might be a tendency to define *ziran* as it appears there and take for granted what it means in other texts. One reason to worry

about Laozi's view having become the standard view is because *ziran* as a technical term and philosophical concept has not attracted a lot of scholarly attention in the context of the *Zhuangzi*.

Nonetheless, *ziran* is not only an important concept in our analysis of spontaneity but should also prove to become a relevant addition to the wider scholarly debate where such an analysis is lacking. In other words, there is a lack of scholarly work on the way *ziran* is specifically used in the *Zhuangzi*. Having first appeared in the *Laozi*, most scholarly discussions have stemmed from and analyzed its meaning there. However, little work has been done to flesh out the specific use of *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi*. Therefore, this chapter intends to give an account of *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* to demonstrate its unique place and special meaning.

We should ask, is there an implicit assumption that *ziran* means the same thing across texts? Does it mean the same thing? A full analysis of these questions could require a comprehensive comparison of each text and how others have interpreted *ziran*. Unfortunately, that is an endeavor too vast for the purposes of this thesis. The vast amount of literature on *ziran* has focused on Laozi's view which can motivate an implicit assumption that *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* holds the same meaning. And further, the result could potentially mean missing important insights into Zhuangzi's *ziran*.

Here I will focus on carefully analyzing Zhuangzi's *ziran* in order to set the stage for interpreting spontaneity in the text. It is not the focus of this section to discuss a comparison between Laozi and Zhuangzi's *ziran*, but it is important to note that there are differences, and by illuminating Zhuangzi's *ziran* here, further work can later be done to do such a comparison. I will only discuss differences and potential dangers in overlapping interpretations as they arise. In any case, in only briefly mentioning and highlighting important interpretations of Laozi's *ziran*, this thesis should demonstrate that there is clear difference, and that Laozi and Zhuangzi do not use *ziran* in the same way.

Among the other fundamental concepts in Daoism, the role of *ziran* has been widely debated and its significance duly recognized. As Xu Jianliang puts it, "Daoism takes all things as the starting point of its values in moral philosophy, and *ziran* 自然 (spontaneously so) as the foundation of its philosophy with the universal commitment" (524). Jing Liu said, "it is with the understanding of *ziran* that the nature of humans and all things are illuminated," ("What is Nature" 265) and "if we can say that the highest principle is, for Plato, the Good; and the highest *jingjie* 境界 (realm) for Confucianism is *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義,

then the ideal *jingjie* 境界 for Daoism is *ziran*” (“Nature Naturing” 8). This sentiment is shared by many Daoist scholars and expresses the pivotal role that *ziran* plays in Daoist philosophy. One of the issues we will explore here is the lack of analysis of *ziran*’s specific meaning in the *Zhuangzi* despite it being such an important concept in Daoism and studied extensively in the *Laozi*.

Probably the most recognized work, as well as the most extensive, has come from Liu Xiaogan who deemed *ziran* in the *Laozi* a “supreme ideal” and “lofty concept” (“Transition and Articulation”). Liu’s work in particular reinforces mention of the above issue: while it is widely agreed that *ziran* is an important concept in Daoism as a whole, most of the scholarly work has predominantly been done in regard to its meaning in the *Laozi*. This is evidenced by the way articles surrounding *ziran* focus on *Laozi*, as well as how translators, their notes, and their commentaries on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* treat the meaning of *ziran*.²¹ It’s not entirely surprising considering the term first appeared in the *Laozi* and it plays such a vital role in the text. The strongest evidence for this appears in *Laozi* 25 that reads,

Man takes Earth as his model, Earth takes Heaven as its model, Heaven takes the Way[*dao*] as its model, and the Way takes *ziran* as its model. (“Transition and Articulation” 72)

This passage expresses a strong and clear (albeit widely debated) recognition of the philosophical significance of *ziran*’s role in the *Laozi*. This passage thus makes it easy to assume a standard view because it clearly places *ziran* as fundamental. Liu says that “this supreme value [*ziran*] is directed toward natural order and harmony as a general and fundamental ideal in human society, and this overall harmony within society must in turn be in harmony with the natural universe” (“Transition and Articulation” 75).

Karyn Lai has also paid special attention to *ziran* in the *Laozi*, and her analysis of the term, much like Liu, was motivated by an urge to direct readers and scholars away from treating the term as purely “naturalness” as we know it in Western philosophy where the connotation is to just “go with the flow”. Lai suggests

²¹ Some notable articles in defense of this position on *ziran* are cited below from Liu Xiaogan, Karyn Lai, Jing Liu, and Callahan. Each of these works either solely address *Laozi*’s *ziran*, focus more on the meaning of *Laozi*’s *ziran*, or equate the two. Translators of the *Zhuangzi* such as Graham and Ziporyn have provided ample analysis of the concept of spontaneity, but not *ziran* itself. An obvious exception is Guo Xiang’s commentary on the *Zhuangzi* which is well-known for his emphasis on *ziran*.

doing away with the translation of *ziran* as nature and to instead use “spontaneity” or “self-so-ness”, for “*ziran* as spontaneity focuses on one particular aspect of the natural world, the uncontrived movements and changes that occur within the natural environment” unlike the problematic term “nature” which leaves one wondering which aspect of nature to focus on (“*Ziran* and *Wuwuei*” 330).

While these developments on Laozi’s *ziran* help us to understand more about the term itself, they do little to tell us about how *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* may differ. Even the most recent translations done by Brook Ziporyn do not include *ziran* in the glossary of essential terms. If *ziran* has such an important role in Daoism, how has analysis of Zhuangzi’s *ziran* seemed to have evaded most scholarly analysis of the term? The second question that pertains to the larger scope of this thesis is then regarding *ziran* and spontaneity. What is *ziran*’s relationship to spontaneity specifically in the *Zhuangzi*? What do translators mean when they translate *ziran* as spontaneity?

Callahan provided one of the only systematic analyses of each appearance of *ziran* in both the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* together. However, his methodology assumes *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* and *ziran* in the *Laozi* hold the same meaning. This is because his approach is more linguistic and less philosophical. This is a further addition to the worry of assuming the same meaning of *ziran* across texts. As we shall see, there is ample reason for why equating the two philosophically is problematic, and probably wrong.

For one, as most anyone is willing to admit, the two texts vary greatly philosophically. One major difference that is generally agreed upon, as was duly noted by Callahan, is Graham’s observation that while the *Laozi* was written for a ruler, the *Zhuangzi* was written for the people more generally (although Callahan argues both texts can be read for the people) (176). Despite noting this as well as several other differences between Laozi and Zhuangzi, Callahan continues to discuss the term linguistically through each appearance in each text and concludes by offering a single translation: “action-discrimination from a particular perspective”. His translation is motivated by a similar aim as Liu and Lai: to do away with naturalistic or passive interpretations/translations, and instead focus on action and creativity, and he claims this translation fits for both texts.

This leads to another problem stemming from one preliminary observation brought about by Callahan. He points out that *ziran* in both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* reflect the historical shift in Chinese philosophy when scholars became more

concerned with language and logic rather than morality. As such, he suggests that in both texts “*ziran* shows development as a linguistic term which most radically found in the Zhuang Zi’s sophisticated nominal relativist outlook” (176). His linguistic interpretation thus offers a correction to the previous metaphysical interpretation.

Regardless of the validity of Callahan’s claim on linguistic development which I will not discuss here, Callahan brings up an important issue. The issue lies in assuming a metaphysical interpretation of *ziran* that spans both texts. We can see why considering Laozi 25 above which has mostly been interpreted philosophically. Callahan’s observation recognizes that *ziran* still may have a strong tendency to be interpreted on metaphysical and ontological grounds, and it is not necessarily the case that *ziran* connotes such a position. There is no need to analyze *ziran* in terms of a metaphysical source or root, or as a technical term designating a certain philosophical concept. This is why Callahan takes the purely linguistic approach and translates *ziran* as “action-discrimination from a particular perspective” (172).

Callahan’s linguistic approach as a “corrective” to absolutist metaphysical interpretations is motivated less by the *Laozi* and more by the philosophy of Zhuangzi. He points out that Zhuangzi’s “sophisticated nominal relativist outlook” especially points out the evolution of *ziran* as a linguistic term. However, the philosophical meaning behind *ziran* is still important and worth discussing. As a term that has clearly made an impact philosophically, it deserves further philosophical analysis. While a linguistic approach still retains philosophical import, and we can agree with Callahan in corrective absolutist metaphysical interpretations, there is still room for further philosophical and conceptual work to be done. In this chapter, we will address how *ziran* is used in the *Zhuangzi* as a term that lacks a definite technical meaning, and yet retains philosophical significance in the context of the entirety of the text. This will become clearer in the following sections.

Another interpretation comes from Jing Liu who understands Zhuangzi’s *ziran* as a development of Laozi’s. She describes *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* as a “free and spontaneous way of being together with things in the world” and “co-elaborative with “free wandering” (“Nature Naturing” 8). Liu says that “ultimately any “being-in-the-world” is a manifestation of *dao*’s being in the world; and my being-in-the-world is right away together with the myriad things, and ultimately, with *dao*” (“Nature Naturing” 9). Through the upcoming analysis, we will come to mostly agree with this reading. However, this reading again does little to distinguish *ziran* between Laozi and Zhuangzi. Moreover, it is not exactly clear what this reading means. What is a way of

“being in the world”? Is this purely psychological? How would this psychological way of being manifest?

Since there is little work done on Zhuangzi’s *ziran*, and therefore little debate to engage with, one purpose of this chapter is to facilitate further discussion of how Zhuangzi’s *ziran* may have special significance. This significance is not necessarily because *ziran* is a technical term in the *Zhuangzi*, but because it speaks to the larger philosophy of the text. And further, the fact (as shall be discussed later) that *ziran* does not encompass any certain philosophically determinate place in the text is precisely what speaks to Zhuangzi’s overarching view that distinctions and hierarchies are dissolved. While it has been duly noted that *ziran* is an important concept in Daoism, the focus on Laozi opens up room for further analysis on how Zhuangzi’s *ziran* might not only tell us more about the term itself, but more about the philosophy of Zhuangzi as a whole. Additionally, as we have seen with Callahan, the narrow approach of linguistics might not do justice to the significance of the term.

The final issue that will be addressed in this chapter is the potential for confusion because *ziran* is often translated as spontaneity, and spontaneity is often discussed in reference to the so-called “skill” or “knack” stories in the *Zhuangzi*. *Ziran*, however, never appears in any such story. While the term *ziran* itself may connote notions of spontaneity, it is not the kind of spontaneity that is acquired or achieved by any of actors in the skill stories. This does not mean the *ziran* is not philosophically connected to spontaneity, but that *ziran* is not an acquirable skill nor can it be cultivated.

In light of the above observations, it seems crucial to examine *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi*. The focus of this thesis is to explore the idea of spontaneity in the text and *ziran* is crucial to that understanding. However, even though *ziran* is often translated as spontaneity, discussions about spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* encompass many different themes and concepts beyond *ziran*. It is therefore all the more interesting that while discussions surrounding spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* are far and wide, the topic of Zhuangzi’s *ziran* in particular is rarely directly addressed.

3.1 Appearances of “*Ziran*” in the *Zhuangzi*

In modern Chinese, *ziran* is almost always used to refer the natural world (that which does not include humans), and also in the sense of being natural or effortless.

Throughout most ancient texts though, *ziran* does not mean nature as such. Nature was

usually expressed with *tian* 天 (also translated as heaven) or *wan-wu* 萬物 (the ten thousand things), especially in the *Zhuangzi*. *Ziran* as a compound term can be grammatically expressed as a verb, adjective, adverb or noun in modern Chinese, but it is usually expressed as a happening in early Daoist texts.²² That is just to say that there is always an underlying verbal nature present in the term even when translated as a noun.²³ Etymologically, the *Shuowen Jiezi* tells us that the *zi* represents a nose and means self, and *ran* 然 is translated as “to be” or “as such”. Thus together, *ziran* is usually translated most literally as “so of itself” or “self-soing”.

The concept of a “self” comes with a lot of baggage in the English language as well as in most philosophical traditions, so it should be noted that the *zi* (‘self’) does not represent the individual as separate and distinct, and not in the way we think of a “self” in English today. Instead, *zi* in early China was used in reflexive binomials where the reflexivity is emphasized. For example, when referring to bringing disgrace upon oneself, or other instances of speaking about one’s relation to oneself (Shun 187). *Ziran* is then describing the self in the context of endless transformation (*ran*). This is why many translations take *ziran* as an adverb when it would still be grammatically correct as a noun.²⁴ As we shall see, translating any term as a noun, verb or adverb can have a great impact on its philosophical significance. Therefore, we should pay attention to how *ziran* is grammatically translated and how it can inform how we interpret *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy.

Ziran appeared only twice in the Inner Chapters, and just six times thereafter.²⁵ Its first appearance is in Chapter Five, “Markers of Full Virtuosity” (德

²² This is pointed out by Jing Liu (“What is Nature” 267) who also says that *ziran* is never used as a noun in early Daoist texts, but as we shall see below, it seems to clearly be used as a noun in the *Zhuangzi*. Liu Xiaogan has also argued for its use as a noun in the *Laozi*, although with the caveat that “while *ziran* is considered a noun in grammatical context, its basic meaning is still verbal in nature— being thus in and of itself or becoming thus spontaneously” (“Transition and Articulation” 74).

²³ This occurs for different reasons according to different scholars which will be discussed further below.

²⁴ For example, Ziporyn translates 常因自然: “making it your constant practice to follow along with the way each thing is of itself” where *ziran* is a noun encompassing the concept of “the way each thing is of itself” (*Zhuangzi* 5:22-24, Ziporyn “Essential” 38). More literally, it could also be translated “constantly follow *ziran*” or “constantly follow spontaneity”. If translated as an adverb though, it could be something like “constantly follow spontaneously”. James Legge translates it somewhat like this as “he always pursues his course without effort” (<https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/sealofvirtuecomplete?searchu=he%20always%20pursues%20his%20course%20without%20effort&searchmode=showall#result>).

²⁵ First during Chapter Five Markers of Full Virtuosity 德充符, second during chapter seven Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers 應帝王, third and fourth during Chapter Fourteen The Turnings of Heaven 天運, fifth during Chapter Sixteen Correcting the Nature 繕性, sixth during Chapter Seventeen Autumn Floods 秋水, seventh during Chapter Twenty-One *Tian Zifang* 田子方, and eighth during Chapter Thirty-One The Old Fisherman 漁父.

充符), when Zhuangzi and Huizi share in a conversation about the potential for man to act without *qing* 情 (more commonly understood as “emotions”, but can also mean “facts”), a question to which Zhuangzi affirms is indeed possible. When Hui Shi asks how this can be so, Zhuangzi replies,

Affirming some things as right and negating others as wrong are what I call the characteristic inclinations [*qing* 情]. What I call being free from them means not allowing likes and dislikes [*hao* 好 and *wu* 惡] to damage you internally, instead making it your constant practice [*chang yin* 常因] to follow along with the way each thing is of itself [*ziran*], going by its spontaneous affirmations, without trying to add anything to the process of generation [常因自然而不益生也]. (Zhuangzi 5:22-24, Ziporyn “Complete” 89)

This passage has attracted a lot of attention surrounding the meaning of the term *qing*, translated by Ziporyn as “characteristic inclinations”. Before we can understand the meaning of *ziran*, we must first understand the meaning *qing*. Most disagree with A.C. Graham’s interpretation that *qing* should be read in the sense of some sort of human “essence”.²⁶ The larger debate seems to be whether *qing* means human “emotions” or “facts”. Kim-Chong Chong was right, I believe, to read *qing* not only as “facts”, but as *socially constructed* characteristics (or facts) and norms, and more specifically those that carry deontic status (“Critique”, 99).²⁷

Note the word “add” at the end of Zhuangzi’s above response to Huizi. To “add” anything to the process of generation seems to beckon what Chong was getting at with socially constructed facts. This can be understood then as not just the facts of human society or human beings *qua* human beings, but those that are *added* and may

²⁶ Graham, “The Background of the Mencian theory of Human Nature,” Appendix: “The meaning of Ch’ing 情,” 61. As for those who disagree with this translation, *qing* was translated as “feelings” by Watson (75); “emotions” by Mair (“Wandering the Way” 49); “affections” by Fung Yu-lan (7).

²⁷ Chong’s main support for this comes from earlier in the passage (or what he calls “the prologue”) that reads “Since one is nourished by *tian*, what need is there for (what is made/brought about by) human beings! Having the form of human beings, (but) not the *qing* of human beings. Having the form of human beings—thus one congregates with human beings. Not having the *qing* of human beings—thus right and wrong can find no place in one’s body. Oh, the insignificant and small, thus they belong to human beings! Oh, the grand and great, only they are one with *tian*!” He also offers a full analysis of how *qing* is used in the rest of the text. It is not the focus of this section to debate this issue, so if you would like a deeper analysis you can find it in Chapter Five of his book *Zhuangzi’s Critique of the Confucians*.

be unnecessary, or even harmful. It would make sense to understand added facts as the ones created by human society, and especially those pertaining to morality considering the many examples throughout the text that problematize any assertion of right and wrong.²⁸

Huizi still isn't clear and presses Zhuangzi further on his position, "if someone does not add to the process of generation, how can he even continue to exist as a person?" Zhuangzi replies,

His Course [*Dao* 道] gives him a certain demeanor, Heaven gives him a certain physical form, and he doesn't damage himself internally [內 *nei*] with likes and dislikes. Now you, on the other hand, treat your spirit like a stranger and labor your vitality, whether reciting your disputations under the trees or nodding off across your dried-wood desk. Heaven dispatched this physical form of yours, and here you are using it to crow on about 'hardness' and 'whiteness'! (Zhuangzi 5:22-24, Ziporyn "Complete" 89-90)

Zhuangzi's position is that indeed we can be free from those socially constructed facts and norms that are added to life, especially because they may have a corrupting effect on the people (for example, ritual procedures like the mourning of one's death as addressed in Chapter 18). This is achieved by "not allowing likes and dislikes to damage you internally, instead making it your constant practice to follow along with the way each thing is of itself [*ziran*], without trying to add anything to the process of generation."

This passage emphasizes the *Dao* that connects heaven and man by explaining that what man has is endowed by heaven and *Dao*, not by man. It is not clear from this passage exactly the difference (if any) between heaven and *Dao*, but the distinction is made between what each endows; *Dao* endows man's appearance and heaven endows man's physical form. Although it is also not even clear what is the difference between appearance and physical form. What we can be sure of is that it is the mistake of Huizi to assume that what is endowed by heaven and *Dao* can be chosen by man.

Ziporyn's translation takes *ziran* here is an adverbial phrase to "follow along with the way each thing is of itself" describing how to *chang yin* 常因, or have a

²⁸ Most notably the passage on *shi/fei* which will be cited later in the coming section.

“constant practice”.²⁹ To “constant” *ziran* is qualified as a ceaseless path of following “along with the way each thing is of itself”, and more specifically “without trying to add anything to the process of generation” (*bu yisheng* 不益生). This means that while likes and dislikes (*hao* 好 and *wu* 惡) exist and vary among individuals, it is possible not to allow them to manipulate one “internally” (內 *nei*). And in so doing, one is able to constant *ziran*. It’s not clear if Ziporyn’s translation of “spontaneous affirmations” comes from *ziran*, but it would appear to be the case. “Going by its spontaneous affirmations” appears to be an effort of Ziporyn to emphasize spontaneity and give more concrete meaning the otherwise vague “way each thing is of itself”. “Affirmations” may be a reflection of “*ran*” in meaning “as such”.

The second use of *ziran* is found in Chapter Seven, “Sovereign Responses for Ruling Power” (應帝王) when Tian Gen (天根 translated by Ziporyn as “Heavenroot”) was found roaming (*you* 遊) along the sunny slopes of Mt. Yin only to encounter the “nameless man”, to whom he inquired, “how is the world to be managed?” Rather annoyed and dismissive, the nameless man replies, “Away with you, you boor! What an unpleasant question!” and continues roaming along.

But Heavenroot asked the same question again. The nameless man then said, ‘Let your mind roam in the flavorless, mingle your vital energy with the deserted silence, follow the self-so each thing, the way it already is before interference [順物自然] without allowing yourself the least bias [而無容私焉]. Then the world will be in order.’ (Zhuangzi 7:3, Ziporyn “Complete” 108)

Ziran is treated as an adverb here describing “each thing” (順物 *shun wu*) as being right in that its rightness is in the way it “already is” (*ziran*). This passage echoes the previous in suggesting man’s plague of incessantly searching for or adhering to “facts”, or likes and dislikes, and in this case biases (容私 *rong si*). The nameless man then suggests we simply do away with the question of governing, a bold remark to make towards such a persistent issue during the tumultuous political climate of

²⁹ If we were to read *ziran* as a noun here (as Chen does, “constantly adheres to the natural” (175) (Chong “Critique” 104), then it would read “constantly follow *ziran*”. Making *ziran* a noun could potentially influence reading it to connote some concrete philosophical concept, a problem which will be discussed in the next section.

the time. By instead freeing the mind (*xin* 心) and energy (*qi* 氣) “without allowing yourself the least bias” (而無容私焉), things will naturally be in order (而天下治矣).³⁰ As pointed out by Rui Zhu, in Daoism the nature of a thing is viewed as a manifestation of Dao, making it so that one can rely on their own nature just as much as Dao (55). This is why the nameless man is irritated by Tian Gen’s question. What need is there to govern it all when our internal inclinations already know what to do?

In Chapter Fourteen *ziran* is found twice.³¹ The passage tells us of the Yellow Emperor explaining to Cheng of Northgate how his musical performance connected man and heaven. The emperor’s performance moved Cheng of Northgate to the point where he proclaims, “I was in a state of total confusion—cast into chaos, speechless, unable to get ahold of myself [乃不自得]”.

The emperor said, “I should think you would! I performed it with the Human in me but attuned it to the Heavenly, advancing it with the trappings of Ritual and Responsibility, but rooting it in the Great Clarity. For perfect music—which is perfect joy—must start out by resonating with human affairs but also flowing along the guideline of the Heavenly. It must run its course through all the Five Virtues but still accord with what is unforced in things [應之以自然 *ying zhi yi ziran*]. Only then can it concordantly adjust the four seasons within it, bringing all things into its. (Ziporyn “Essential” 67-8)

The emperor is explaining to Cheng why it is no surprise that he was so moved by the performance. By attuning his human performance to the heavenly (天理 *tianli*), he was able to produce “perfect music—which is perfect joy”. He draws on human affairs like Ritual and Responsibility [禮義 *li yi*] and the Five Virtues (五德 *wu de*) while rooting his performance in the heavenly Great Clarity (太清 *taiqing*) and “what is unforced in things” (*ziran*).

³⁰ The translation of 治 *zhi* as “order” should connote spontaneous order and not be confused to parallel with 裡 *li* in the sense of any supreme normative order. *Tian* in the *Zhuangzi* is non-normative and gives no priority to the human. It is for this reason that Xunzi criticized Zhuangzi for being “blinded by heaven” and “not knowing the human”.

³¹ It has become the scholarly consensus that the first instance of *ziran* in this passage does not represent the original text and may have been interpolated by Guo Xiang. This significance of this will be dissected in the next section.

Even though *ziran* seems to be straightforwardly a noun in terms of Chinese grammar, Ziporyn's translation takes *ziran* as an adjective describing the “unforced” nature of a thing. Watson alternatively translates *ziran* as a noun, “blend with spontaneity” (110). As will be discussed further in the next section, the difficulty in treating *ziran* as a noun in the *Zhuangzi* might be the tendency to then regard it as a technical philosophical concept because that can suggest it is a guiding principle. It will start to become clearer as we go on why this might not be the best way to read the text. For now, what is important to note is how *ziran* is tied to the heavenly and represents a contrast to the human that when unified creates “great harmony”.

The emperor goes on,

The four seasons arrive one after the other, and the ten thousand things are produced accordingly—now flourishing, now declining, now peaceful, now warlike, all grouping into their own regularities. Sometimes clear, sometimes turbid, *yin* and *yang* adjust to each other, forming a harmony. The sound then flows and radiates, stirring the hibernating insects to life. I startle them up with sudden thunder and lighting, without overture or conclusion, without head or tail, now dead, now alive, now rising, now falling. Endlessly sustainable, it yet has no predictable consistency. That is what terrified you. [...] I went on to play it with tireless sounds, adjusting it to the unforced mandate of things [自然之命]. Hence, the tones, springing up in clumps, mingled and chased each other, forests of sounds that nonetheless took no identifiable form, spreading into activity but without pulling one another along—dark, obscure, ultimately noiseless. The music sprang into motion from no specifiable place rooted in the recess of oblivion. (*Zhuangzi* 14:3, Ziporyn “Essential” 67-8).

The emperor continues on with his explanation of his great performance as an event of organic happening; in terms of the changing seasons as taking place in harmony with *yin* and *yang*. As effortlessly as the seasons change and as organically as the ten thousand things flourish and decay, so too goes his performance. By adjusting it to the “unforced (*ziran*) mandate of things”, his performance cannot be named or identified, it is just simply happening. This is why, he goes on, “the sage is one who understands the uncontrived inclination of things and allows them to accomplish their own mandates” (Ziporyn “Essential” 68).

The sage's understanding here seems to be an explanation for what he meant by "the unforced mandate of things". *Ming* 命 is translated as "mandate" but can mean "fate" or "destiny", and most literally "command".³² Watson's translation is thus "the command of spontaneity" with *ziran* as a noun (111). Ziporyn also takes *ziran* as a noun with *ming* as the object of possession (自然之命) offering a fatalistic view of the ten thousand things. Therefore, the sage's understanding of "the uncontrived inclination of things" is also his understanding of "the unforced mandate of things". With heaven being non-normative in the *Zhuangzi*, *ming* describes what is understood as heavenly and fated as expressed by "the uncontrived inclination", and then what "allows them to accomplish their *own* mandates" is *ziran*. There is no force and things are accomplished "of themselves".

In Chapter Sixteen, "Repairing the Inborn Nature" (繕性), Zhuangzi reminds us of a time long ago when there was harmony among the ten thousand things. He called it "utmost unity" (至一 *zhiyi*).

These ancients, in this state of undivided obliviousness, remained in communion with everything in the world and yet found a tranquil solitude there. At that time *yin* and *yang* were in harmonious stillness, the ghosts and spirits brought no disturbances, the four seasons found their right measures, the ten thousand things remained unharmed, so no living thing met with a premature death. Although people did have some conscious understanding they had no use for it. This is what is called utmost unity. At this time no one did anything deliberately; whatever happened always happened spontaneously, not done by anyone [*ziran*] [當是時也，莫之為而常自然]. (Zhuangzi 16:2, Ziporyn "Complete" 170-71)

This passage recalls a time ancient to Zhuangzi when things happened of their own accord naturally and without purpose. Through this "undivided obliviousness" harmony was found and thus tranquility. This harmony is a reflection of the balance between *yin* and *yang* so that the ten thousand things (萬物 *wanwu*) were free from harm and lives were not cut short.

³² See Ziporyn's Glossary of Essential terms ("Essential" 215).

Grammatically in Chinese *ziran* seems to be a noun here, and is categorized by *chang* 常. This is the same *chang* we saw in the first appearance of *ziran* above (*chang yin ziran* 常因自然), and can be interpreted similarly as an adverbial phrase, even if it does seem straightforwardly a noun. Watson's translation is: "At this time, no one made a move to do anything, and there was unvarying spontaneity" (123). It is grammatically appropriate for Watson to take *ziran* here as a noun, "spontaneity", and *chang* as "unvarying". Nevertheless Ziporyn's translation might be more appropriate in treating *ziran* as an adverb, "spontaneously". This would direct more emphasis towards the specific kind of spontaneity expressed by *ziran*, that which is verbal in nature and grounded in things organically flourishing and ceaselessly becoming of themselves.

The next instance of *ziran* is a bit complicated because it does not appear to function as a compound term.³³ In Chapter 17 "Autumn Waters" (秋水), Ruo of the Northern Sea says "when you understand the sense in which Yao and Jie each considers himself right and the other wrong, you have grasped the operation of their inclinations" 知堯、桀之自然而相非，則趣操睹矣 (Ziporyn "Essential" 71). Callahan was right to point out that "the passage in question is an inimitable rational argument of Zhuang Zi's concept of relativity and perspective, arguing, among other things, against an absolute point of view of 'noble or base, small and great', and specifically in the quotation, against absolute 'right' and 'wrong' (188).

In this way, the passage emphasizes Zhuangzi's overall dismissal of lofty concepts and supreme ideals, or anything promoting a definitive postulation. Therefore, even though *ziran* is not used as a compound term here, it demonstrates an important theme in the text, one that we will return to in the next section as it speaks to the meaning of *ziran* on the whole. However, it will not be calculated as a contribution to understanding the meaning of *ziran* itself.

In the "Sir Squarescope of the Fields" (田子方 *tian zi fang*)³⁴ Chapter, *ziran* appears alongside another fundamental concept in Daoism, *wuwei*.³⁵ In a provocative

³³ This was pointed out by Callahan and he too chooses to leave it out of his analysis of *ziran*, except for a few musings in his notes (185).

³⁴ Both Watson and Legge leave this chapter title untranslated as *tian zifang*.

³⁵ Interestingly, Callahan leaves out this appearance of *ziran* entirely. I am not sure if it was a mistake or intentional as he does not address it all.

dialogue between Lao Dan and Confucius (actually the mocking voice of Zhuangzi himself), Lao Dan attempts to explain to a curious Confucius about the meaning of “letting the mind wander in the beginning of things”. After first proclaiming that the meaning cannot actually be described nor understood, Lao Dan attempts to explain nonetheless with a long monologue. He describes the nature of *yin* and *yang*, and the practice of the “Utmost Man” who are “undergoing a small change without losing the larger constant”. He goes on,

Thus joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness do not enter their breasts. Now the whole world under the sky is one thing that is shared by all beings. When they have found what they all share and see the sameness of it in all cases, they come to regard their four limbs and all the parts of their own bodies as so much dust and dirt, coming to see death and life, endings and beginnings, as but day and night. Then these things are unable to unmoor them—how much less the tiny distinctions of gain and loss, disaster and good fortune! They can toss away all these subordinate accessories as if tossing away a clump of dirt, for they know that their own bodies are worth more than the accessories. As long as the value lies in oneself, there is no loss in any change of circumstance. One may go through ten thousand transformations and still reach no end. What then is there to worry about? It is into this that one who has taken up the Course finds himself freed. (Ziporyn “Complete” 207)

The “Utmost Man” in finding what is shared among the ten thousand things is free from the everyday anxieties otherwise disrupting the human existence. “What they all share” and the “sameness” here refers the Daoist cosmological view of the world forming out of primal chaos (*hundun* 混沌) into the “One”, and eventually differentiated things. But Confucius is not satisfied with Lao Dan’s explanation and persists requesting to understand the method to such an existence. Lao Dan vehemently denies such an accusation, “Not so.”

The murmuring of water is not something it does deliberately, but is just that very stuff being the way it is [無為而才自然矣]. So it is with the intrinsic virtuosities of the Utmost Person—he engages in no cultivation, and yet all things are unable to separate themselves from him. It is like heaven being high

of itself, earth being thick of itself, the sun and moon being bright of themselves—what cultivation need they practice? (Ziporyn “Complete” 207)

Ziporyn takes *ziran* here is translated as an adjective (“being the way it is). Heaven is high, the earth is thick, and the sun and moon are bright “of themselves”. That is, these characteristics are non-deliberate [*wuwei* 無為] and require no cultivation. The *ziran* characteristics of a thing are nothing more than what that thing is. Watson’s translation retains the same meaning but takes *cai* 才 as “talent” and *ziran* as “natural”, making murmuring the natural talent of water (170).

The final appearance of *ziran* comes in “The Old Fisherman” Chapter when a strange old fisherman discusses, among other things, what it means to be genuine. The fisherman tells Confucius,

The genuine is whatever is most unmixed and unfaked [...] For ritual is simply what is conventionally done, whereas the genuine [*zhen* 真] is what one receives from Heaven, which is so of itself and cannot be deliberately altered [禮者，世俗之所為也；真者，所以受於天也，自然不可易也].

Thus the sage models himself on Heaven, values the genuine in himself, and does not conform to the conventions of the age. The fool does just the reverse: he is unable to model himself on Heaven but instead worries about what other people think. He doesn’t understand the value of the genuine in himself but instead thinks the payment he receives from others is what really pays, letting himself be changed to conform to convention. (Zhuangzi 31, Ziporyn “Complete” 296)

Ziporyn translates *ziran* here most literally as “so of itself”, an adjective describing *zhen*. This, says the fisherman, is bestowed by heaven. Conversely, what is not genuine is ritual which is performed out of convention. Sometimes this convention is also performed by the “fool” in an effort to gain praise, which is referred to above as the “payment” from other people. What is genuine is *ziran*, a thing being just what it is, and that which cannot be deliberately altered (*ziran buke yi* 自然不可易). This again emphasizes the contrast between heaven and human, where rites represent the imposition of the human onto the heavenly.

Watson’s translation is slightly different from the above: “rites are something created

by the vulgar men of the world; the Truth [*zhen* 真] is that which is received from Heaven. By nature it is the way it is [*ziran*] and cannot be changed” (禮者，世俗之所為也；真者，所以受於天也，自然不可易也) (Watson 276). Like Ziporyn, Watson treated *ziran* as an adjective as describing the “nature” of the Truth (*zhen*). The nature (*ziran*) of the Truth (what Ziporyn calls genuine), which is received from heaven, in both instances is recognized in that it “cannot be changed”. This means that what it received from heaven is genuine and this genuineness cannot be altered.

3.1.1 *Ziran* as “Unvarying” and “Right”

Watson’s translation of *chang ziran* 常自然 as “unvarying spontaneity” from Chapter Sixteen and Ziporyn’s of *shun wu ziran* 順物自然 “the rightness of the way each thing already is”³⁶ from Chapter Seven point to two important aspects of *ziran*. This section will expand on what it means to speak of *ziran* as “unvarying” as well as in terms of “rightness”.

“Unvarying” is Watsons translation of *chang* 常. In highlighting the “unvarying” nature of spontaneity, Watson underscores the other aspect of the verbal nature of *ziran*. Spontaneity that is unvarying means that it is an ongoing process of naturalness that does not become affected by external factors. It is unvarying in being a constant flow of harmony. That is why this passage speaks of the ancients who “remained in communion with everything in the world” (Ziporyn “Complete” 170). This characteristic of “unvarying” expresses how *ziran* cannot be intermittent. That is to say, real manifested *ziran* is not at one moment so, and the next moment not so. It is ever transformative and remains always self-so and self generating. It is the constant event of changing and happening organically that makes it unvarying.

As for Ziporyn’s idea of rightness, he offers an explanation through an analysis of Guo Xiang’s commentary.

To be conscious of anything indicates a problem, a lack of fit, a lack of self-rightness/self-so. Hence the sign of anything's self-rightness is precisely the lack of reflexive consciousness of it, the type of cognition Guo identifies with traces. The true identity of every entity lies in its spontaneous becoming-what-it-is, which is not

³⁶ This is from his original translation “The Essential Writings”.

accomplished by trace-cognition. In fact, its self for Guo is not some particular content, but rather its comfort or fitness to itself, its self-rightness, in any content it happens to come to possess, and this fitness spells at the same time its self-forgetting. Hence, its actuality or identity is not anything known, any trace-cognition, but rather precisely that lack of any sense of its own identity, its forgetting of itself in its self-rightness, its darkness. (“Self-So” 516)

For Ziporyn, to highlight the aspect of rightness means to express that things being what they are indicates “fitness”. In being “self-so”, any one thing is at its most comfortable and optimum way of being. This rightness is a reflection of the meaning of *ran* in being “as such” or “like this”. This way of being cannot be accomplished by any conscious deliberate activity, and this method is the exact indication of not being self-so.

We must also be careful with this sense of rightness. Rightness in this way does not contain normative content. By the very definition of rightness being that something is right rather than wrong, it is easy to assume this distinction, but it does not appear this is what Ziporyn is suggesting. This rightness does not assume a right and a wrong and is instead gesturing towards the sufficiency of something being just what it is in that it cannot be otherwise. In this way, it is “right” in the sense of being “fine” or “sufficient”. There is no need to qualify or distinguish it from anything else. By simply acknowledging a thing or event as it is, devoid of deeming its value, there is recognition without imposition.

Ziporyn explains Guo Xiang’s commentary as such,

Guo’s staunchly anti-metaphysical, anti-foundationalist, and anti-theistic interpretation of Zhuangzi rejects any notion of the Course [Dao] as creator or source of beings, and with it any ontological hierarchy between Heaven and Man or between the Course and things. Instead, he stresses the concept of spontaneity, or “self-so,” (*ziran*, 自然) reading Zhuangzi’s Course as *literally* nonbeing, so that claims of the Course’s creation of things are to be understood as meaning that nothing interferes with the self-so self-creation, and also intrinsic rightness, of each individual thing. ‘Self-so’ is the antonym of deliberate activity and of the purposive knowledge that goes with it. (Ziporyn “Essential” 222–23)

It seems that Guo is pointing to the appropriate idea. According to this view, rightness negates any sense of hierarchy. It promotes an egalitarian view of the world and values.³⁷ Although rightness is the choice word here, I believe “sufficiency” better captures what Ziporyn is getting at. Rightness as sufficiency indicates that a thing that is “self-so” is in its fittest way of being.

Like this sense of rightness, fitness does not mean better or worse than any one other thing. This sense of rightness and fitness dissolves hierarchy by means of only viewing things as they are. The literal meaning of self-so is just this, the spontaneous organic happening of all things. Because things are spontaneously self-generating and this generation is non-purposive, the possibility for hierarchy only comes if it is imposed. That is to say, things that spontaneously happen or become without any intention beyond that becoming are non-normative. If one makes a judgment about that becoming then there is a hierarchy being imposed, but it is not organic, and it is not *ziran*. Generation here simply means the constant flourishing of the world around us that occurs naturally across all realms. It is the growth and decay of all things as they happen endlessly and without intervention.

Ziran as an adverb or adverbial phrase we can remember as fundamentally expressing the ceaseless transformations of the ten thousand things. Even when reading translations of *ziran* as a noun, the verbal nature of the term should always be noted. The reflexivity of *ziran* also helps to reinforce the aspect of it that is ongoing, self-transformative and self-generating. The things that are born and flourish of themselves without deliberation or purpose represent the kind of Zhuangzi’s self-soness.

3.2 The Verbal Nature of *Ziran*

To summarize the above analysis of each passage of *ziran*, we can look to the chart below.

³⁷ An obvious follow up question to the above exploration would be whether this aspect of *ziran* as an expression of this self-so-ness is also what we “should” do. I am leaving this question out of the discussion because it touches on ethics and that will be avoided for the purposes of this paper. For a well thought out discussion regarding this topic see Misha Tadd “*Ziran*: Authenticity or Authority” section will discuss what implications translating *ziran* as a noun would have, and what we can infer from the above translations when it was treated as a noun. This will lead us to also discuss difficulties with authorship and how potentially incoherent views among (what is considered) Zhuangzian thought and the philosophies of other authors of the text would mean in our discussion of *ziran*.

Passage	Example Translations	Possible Readings
Chapter Five 常因自然	Ziporyn: “follow along with the way each thing is of itself, going by its spontaneous affirmations”; Watson: “let things be the way they are”	Chinese: Adverb English: Adverbial phrase
Chapter Seven 順物自然	Ziporyn: “the rightness of the way each thing already is”; Watson: “things the way they are”	Chinese: Adverb English: Adverbial phrase
Chapter Fourteen 應之以自然	Ziporyn: “what is unforced in things, their spontaneous self-affirmations”; Watson: “spontaneity”	Chinese: Noun English: Adverbial phrase (Ziporyn) and noun (Watson)
Chapter Fourteen 自然之命	Ziporyn: “self-so mandates”	Chinese: Noun English: Adjective
Chapter Sixteen 莫之為而常自然	Ziporyn: “spontaneously, not done by anyone”; Watson & Legge: “spontaneity”	Chinese: Noun English: Adverb (Ziporyn) and noun (Watson and Legge)
Chapter Seventeen 知堯、桀之自然而相非， 則趣操睹矣	* <i>Ziran</i> not a compound term	* <i>Ziran</i> not a compound term
Chapter Twenty-One 無為而才自然矣	Ziporyn: “being the way it is”;	Chinese: Adjective English: Adverbial phrase and adjective

	Watson: “natural”	
Chapter Thirty-One 自然不可易也	Ziporyn: “so-of-itself”; Watson: “by nature it is the way it is”	Chinese: Adverb English: Adverbial Phrase

Even when *ziran* can be read as noun in Chinese, it was most often translated as an adverbial phrase. Why is this so? The verbal nature of *ziran* emphasizes something important by expressing something essential to the term that is present even when it is translated as a noun. Liu Xiaogan explains, “philosophically speaking, naturalness in the Taoist context primarily means ‘so on its own’ just as the term consists of the subject *tzu* [self] and the adverbial suffix *jan* [such]” (“Naturalness (*TZU-JAN*)”, 432). In a later paper, Liu elaborates on the significance of the verbal nature of *ziran*.

What I wish to emphasize is that while *ziran* is considered a noun in grammatical context, its basic meaning is still verbal in nature—being thus in and of itself or becoming thus spontaneously. It might be translated into English as “naturalness” to stress its grammatical function as a noun-designated concept, one whose meaning comes from the underlying verb. [...] The literal or basic meaning of *ziran*, which is composed of the adverbial *zi* (“self”) and the adjectival *ran* (“thus” or “such”), is “be thus in and of itself,” a verb that, when serving as the label for a philosophical concept, can be treated as a noun. (“Transition”, 74)

In order to elaborate on the verbal nature of *ziran*, we can first note the strong sense of reflexivity linguistically present in the term. Reflexivity traditionally can be thought of as reflecting your thinking back at yourself, although we shall discover how the reflexivity of *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* has special nuances that veer from this traditional definition.

3.2.1 The Reflexivity of *Ziran*

Although Jan Fook’s work is not on the philosophy of *Zhuangzi*, we can agree with how he understands the difference between reflexivity and reflective thinking in terms of position and process. This distinction will help to set the stage for why we must make a similar one in the context of the *Zhuangzi*.

At the heart of this differentiation is the thinking that a position of reflexivity, of an ability to locate yourself in the picture, is complemented by a process of reflectivity. Reflectivity, developed from the ideas of Argyris and Schon (1976), is the process in which you are able to reflect upon the ways your own assumptions and actions influence a situation, and thus change your practice as a direct result of this reflective process. (11)

The sense of reflexivity in the term *ziran* then must be distinguished from reflectivity. Reflective thinking is an active, deliberate conscious effort to calculate, understand, and manipulate one's position and influence over a situation. The reflexivity in *ziran* would not follow this sense of reflective thinking as it diverges from the original meaning which is a responsiveness that is simply allowed rather than deliberately caused.

In order to make the note of reflexivity stronger, many translators choose to render *ziran* as “so of itself” where the “of” is an expression of this sense of reflexivity. We can understand more about the significance of this “of” through Bryan Bruya's analysis of Daoist spontaneity which categorizes the meanings of *zi* 自 in three ways: 1) “as the coverb ‘from’ as in *zi gu ji jin* 自古及今 (from the past up to the present) (*Laozi* 21); 2) the reflexive pronominal adverb, indicating the self as agent (and sometimes simultaneously object)—‘to do oneself’ or ‘to do for, or to, oneself,’ as in *zi wei* 自謂 (to refer to oneself) (*Laozi* 39); and 3) the meaning most germane to the phrase in question, *ziran* 自然 (*Laozi* 17)” (“Rehabilitation”, 208). In the first way, Bruya points out that *zi* goes beyond being a preposition by connoting an active force so as to take on “temporal, spatial, and abstract metaphorical meanings” (this usage occurring nine times in the *Zhuangzi*) (208). The second meaning is usually expressed in a positive way as in “knowing” or “understanding” oneself. Then, and most significantly, Bruya describes the third meaning as carrying a “strong sense of reflexivity”, as in 自正 *zi zheng*, to correct oneself (*Laozi* 57), and makes an observation similar to Jing Liu's: “the ‘self’ no longer makes sense as a direct object and is more appropriately interpreted as adverbial”.

It is for this reason that the “of” in “so-of-itself” illuminates something especially important. A thing that is “so-of-itself” is not self-caused in the sense of an agent causing an effect. Instead, any external cause as presupposed in efficient causality is eliminated. In efficient causality there are distinct objects causing and forcing whereas Daoist causation happens when things are drawn out, attracted, and allowed. Bruya also emphasizes that the

“of” eliminates the agent/object dichotomy in that things “all arise of their own accord”, changes are elicited and allowed rather than caused, and the self “is never divorced from a wider, interactive context” (“Rehabilitation” 213). Therefore, reflective thinking would be a manifestation of this divorce. Reflective thinking requires one to remove one’s thinking from oneself and create observations in order to reevaluate best practice in action. Reflexive thinking, on the other hand, is allowed and manifested “of” itself. It is elicited and drawn out from what is already there and created organically without external impositions.

Unlike Jing Liu’s linguistic and etymological explanation, Bruya’s analysis is more philosophically motivated. He states that “when saying that the universe moves *of* itself, the possibility of an external cause is simply removed, and no claim is made as to paths of causation or intentionality. The “of,” then, indicates a kind of self-causation, without any presuppositions regarding self, causation, or their relationship” (“Rehabilitation” 209). He justifies this reading by drawing from a phrase regarding the pipings of heaven in Zhuangzi 2: “each is allowed to arise from itself” *shi qi zi ji* 使其自己. The entire passage he interprets to suggest that “there is self-causation in the workings of nature such that no external force is needed—all things arise and function of their own accord”. Therefore, reading the *zi* as an adverbial resonates with the transformative nature of the self which is evident in the rest of Zhuangzi’s philosophy.

While Bruya and Jing Liu both recognize *ziran*’s verbal nature, Liu’s justification comes from the origins of *ran* whereas Bruya’s argument derives his from the meaning of *zi*. Bruya relies on the reflexivity of *zi* as an adverbial to make sense of *ziran* being an ongoing process. Liu’s justification comes from *ran* having traditionally been concerning the burning of fire. Bruya categorizes *ziran* as an adverbial and Liu takes it as a gerund. Adverbials function similar to adverbs by describing how, when, where, or how much something has occurred (i.e. intensely, immediately etc.). The difference between an adverb and an adverbial is that an adverbial can be more than a single word and come in the form of a phrase or a clause. A gerund is a verb ending in “ing” and grammatically functions as a noun (i.e., running). While an adverbial and a gerund both express the verbal nature of a word, the difference between the two is important. Because a gerund is a noun, it might be more accurate to translate *ziran* as an adverbial phrase. We can see this has been done in many of the above translations, such as Ziporyn’s “the way each thing is of itself” and “what is unforced in things”. If we did take *ziran* as a gerund, it would mean the possibility to be “*ziran*-ing” which would provoke a more concrete definition of the term rather than allowing it to express different aspects throughout different passages.

The term *ran* accentuates the reflexivity of *zi* by meaning “like this” or “as such” suggesting a thing being simply what it is. Ziporyn notes, “there are two senses of the Chinese word *ran*, like the English word ‘so,’ it can signify either that some thing is thus and thus, or that some proposition is true or correct. *Ran* can thus be taken to mean both ‘being as it is’ and ‘being right’” (“Self-So”, 516). Therefore, with *zi* etymologically representing a nose, we can think of the indexical reference of one (a self) pointing back at oneself by placing their finger right on his/her nose, and *ran* indicating the sufficient nature of such an indexical reference: “I am as such” or “I am like this”. In this way, *zi* can also be thought of as meaning “original”, and this originality is always in terms of the ongoing process of “*ran*”: “I am as such-ing”. This emphasizes both the reflexivity and the verbal nature of *ziran*.

Zhuangzi’s metaphor of the Utmost person’s mind being like a mirror can help to illuminate more about what is meant by this sense of reflexivity.

In this way, embody the endlessness and roam where there is no sign, fully living through whatever is received from Heaven without thinking anything has been gained, thus remaining a vacuity, nothing more. The Utmost person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Thus he can overcome all things without harm” (Ziporyn “Complete” 111).

In other words, this kind of reflexivity is purely responsive rather than contemplative. The mind of the Utmost person sees and reacts like a mirror by reflecting back only what is really there. It expresses a thing without deeming its value or labeling it, and certainly not changing it. Reflective thinking might motivate changing one’s thinking based on external reasons, whereas reflexive thinking will only allow for changes that happen non-deliberately and organically. Things simply unfold and happen.

This is why we need to be careful with explanations of reflexivity like Callahan’s: “reflexive actions are those that issue forth from the perspective and come back to the perspective, allowing it to make decisions in a circular process of self-creation” (174). As we have noted above, Zhuangzi’s *ziran* distinguishes between conscious thinking or deliberate reflection and simply allowing thinking or actions to happen. Unlike certain traditional notions of reflexivity which might include contemplating the self, trying to find the self, or searching for one’s identity, Zhuangzi’s *ziran* allows the self to continually self generate without calculative intention or cultivation. This may be present in other Chinese philosophical traditions such as Confucianism as was pointed out by Shun Kwong-Loi,

These linguistic observations [about “*zi*” as a reflexive binomial] show that the Chinese have a conception of the way one relates to oneself. Furthermore, in Confucian texts, the characters [*zi* and *ji* 己] just mentioned are often used to talk about one’s examining oneself and cultivating oneself on the basis of such self-examination. This shows that Confucian thinkers also work with a conception of one’s being related to oneself in a self-reflective manner, with the capacity to reflect on, examine, and bring about changes in oneself. So, they have a conception of self in the sense of a conception of how one relates to oneself in this self-reflective manner. (187)

Shun goes on to link this Confucian concept of self-reflection with the *xin* or heart/mind. For the Confucian, the *xin* serves as a guide to self-cultivation. It is important to differentiate this Confucian view of the *xin* with the *Zhuangzi*’s view of the *xin*. Recall from our discussion surrounding the *cheng xin* in Chapter One of this thesis where we made the important distinction between the Confucian notion of *xin* that has power over and above our affective states, whereas *xin* in the *Zhuangzi* is interdependent among “the hundred bones, the nine openings, the six internal organs”. This view of the *xin* informs how we can understand the specific reflexivity of *Zhuangzi*’s *ziran* in that it is not a deliberate self-reflection with the aim of self-cultivation.

Thus, Callahan’s “circular process of self-creation” must be reevaluated. As long as *Zhuangzi*’s notion of *xin* is a prerequisite, it would seem the thrust of Callahan’s philosophical idea behind this terminology is sound. A “circular process of self-creation” is an expression of responsiveness to constantly transforming situations which dissolves any goal-oriented self-reflection. However, there is room for improvement in his choice of words. First, “self-creation” implies a specific “self” as *causing* something. Although a “circular process” expresses the aspect of reflexivity that is ceaselessly responding to circumstances and transforming along with them, a more appropriate expression might be to say it is like an “organic happening”. “Organic happening” removes the difficulty in imagining *Zhuangzi*’s specific reflexivity as deliberate or purposeful. Instead of imagining a self that is creating in the sense of efficient causality, an organic happening simply describes an event that arises *of* itself. The of “organic happening” will be further elaborated on in section 3.4 of this chapter.

3.3 *Ziran* as a Noun

Treating *ziran* as a noun or not is philosophically significant. Understanding *ziran* as a noun helps us uncover more of its meaning in yet another way when we consider how and if we should treat the term as a special philosophical or technical concept in the *Zhuangzi*. This section will discuss what implications translating *ziran* as a noun would have, and what we can infer from the above translations when it was treated as a noun. This will lead us to also discuss difficulties with authorship and how potentially incoherent views among (what is considered) Zhuangzian thought and the philosophies of other authors of the text would mean for our discussion of *ziran*.

3.3.1 Implications of *Ziran* as a Noun

Liu Xiaogan has pointed out how translating words as nouns can signify that the term is a “philosophical concept” (“Naturalness” 424). In his analysis of the *Laozi*, he says, “in general, usage of words as nouns can be seen as a sign that a term is becoming a philosophical concept” and argues that *ziran* is indeed a noun with important philosophical implications. This has led Liu to translate *ziran* as “humanistic naturalness” and to categorize it as a lofty concept and supreme ideal in the *Laozi*. Nonetheless, he notes that “while *ziran* is considered a noun in the grammatical context, its basic meaning is still verbal in nature—being thus in and of itself or becoming thus spontaneously” (“Transition and Articulation”, 74). This is in accord with our above analysis regarding the importance of noting the verbal nature of *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* as well. However, without directly making a comparison between Laozi’s *ziran* and Zhuangzi’s *ziran*, we can still use Liu’s observations to help differentiate meaning of *ziran*, and from there better propose an account of *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi*.

In analyzing *ziran* as a noun, we can see how Liu’s observation would be correct.

Consider translating *ziran* in Chapter Fourteen: 應之以自然. Watson translated *ziran* here as “spontaneity” and Ziporyn’s translation is “what is unforced in things” (應之以自然). Grammatically it seems straightforward that *ziran* is a noun as an object of *ying* 應. If we take Watson’s translation as spontaneity, there could be a tendency to assume it holds a special meaning. Spontaneity as a noun seems to require a certain philosophically backed definition with proper explanation. Although Ziporyn also reads *ziran* as a noun, his translation is phrasal as “what is unforced in things”.

Because this translation is not a single word noun, it leaves more room for interpretation and lacks the urgency of definition.

Ziran could technically be taken as a noun four more times:

1. Again, in Chapter 14, “the unforced mandate of things” 自然之命.
2. In Chapter 16, “no one did anything deliberately; whatever happened always happened spontaneously” 莫之為而常自然.
3. In Chapter 17, “when you understand the sense in which Yao and Jie each considers himself right and the other wrong, you have grasped the operation of their inclinations” 知堯、桀之自然而相非，則趣操睹矣。
4. In Chapter 31, “the genuine [*zhen* 真] is what one receives from Heaven, which is so of itself and cannot be deliberately altered” 自然不可易也.

Even though Chinese *ziran* could be translated as a noun, it is not grammatically necessary, and we cannot conclusively say if that that is how Zhuangzi himself meant the term *ziran* to be read. What is important for the purposes of this thesis is to take the above instances and determine how translating them as a noun or not would affect philosophical implications. Despite Liu’s observation that translating words as nouns might give them philosophical significance, it is certainly possible for nouns to have dynamic meanings (e.g. love). So then the issue here will be to decide if translating *ziran* as a noun or not is appropriate in terms of philosophical significance.

Each of the above translations come from Ziporyn.³⁸ His careful and consistent translation of *ziran* as an adverbial phrase suggests he might recognize that *ziran* does not represent a philosophical concept in itself, and the reason stems from the overall philosophical stance of the *Zhuangzi*. The text consistently points to and raises philosophical issues without prescribing what to do or how to be, what is good or what is bad, and in many cases suggests doing away with such questions.

One of the more important and overarching themes in the text is to do away with distinctions. Zhuangzi describes a oneness among distinctions which was briefly mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis.

³⁸ In Section One of this chapter we discussed alternative translations like those from Watson and Legge, but Ziporyn’s translations seem to resonate with the account of *ziran* in the current analysis most cohesively.

‘This’ is also a ‘that.’ ‘That’ is also a ‘this.’ ‘THAT’ posits a ‘this’ and a ‘that’—a right and a wrong [*shifei* 是非]—of its own. But ‘THIS’ also posits a ‘this and a ‘that’—a right and a wrong—of its own. So is there really any ‘that versus this,’ any right versus wrong? Or is there really no ‘that versus ’this’? (Zhuangzi 2:16, Ziporyn “Essential” 12)

Zhuangzi would certainly mock the idea of placing any concept as something to deliberately and categorically follow, much less treat as lofty and supreme.³⁹ Therefore, translating *ziran* as an adverb and adjective, or converting it into a descriptive adverbial phrase omits the confusion of interpreting it in that way. It allows the reader to understand *ziran* in terms of how it is functioning in the entire phrase and passage, rather than provoking the need for a fixed definition. It also relieves a tendency to give the term a sense of value or deontic status. *Ziran* avoids getting labeled as something good or bad, and this then opens up the possibility to achieve “spontaneity” organically and not as something that one should strive for.

Ruling out treating *ziran* as a noun with a specific philosophical import does not mean there is not anything that we can learn from it. It also does not mean that *ziran* tells us nothing about Zhuangzi’s philosophy. Beyond what has already been pointed out, namely that value-based hierarchical terms were not advocated by Zhuangzi, the occurrences of *ziran* also speak to larger themes in the text such as ceaseless transformation and understanding the sufficient nature of self and things. Nonetheless, in accordance with the rest of the text, these are only themes. They are not to be thought of as tenets or concepts to follow. A theme is something that occurs and recurs. The difference between a theme and a tenet is a form of normativity or moral obligation. This is why it becomes important to distinguish Laozi’s *ziran* as a “lofty concept” from Zhuangzi’s more subtle and tenuous *ziran*.

The only way for a thing or individual to be *ziran*, to obtain spontaneity, is not to think about it at all. A prerequisite for a tenet or concept to be followed is a deliberate conscious effort. Because this prerequisite is not present in Zhuangzi’s *ziran*, we can understand the bigger part of his overall philosophy which seems to

³⁹ Recall that this is how Liu has explained *ziran* in the *Laozi* and so we must be careful not to map on the same defining characteristics onto the *Zhuangzi*.

suggest a special sense of being organic. This will be elaborated on in the Section 4 of this chapter.

3.3.2 The Influence of Authorship on *Ziran*

As with many other concepts in the text, another aspect of understanding *ziran* becomes a particularly difficult task because of the complicated and controversial interpretations on authorship. I agree with Tao Jiang that,

Authorship is more than a matter of whether or not someone is the actual author of a text. Rather, the assumption of a single author makes possible a particular interpretative strategy. That is, when we approach a text, the implicit or explicit assumption of its being composed by a single author sets the boundary of interpretative strategies, in terms of its textual unity and coherence, grounded in the unity of authorial intent and agency, however nebulous they turn out to be. (“The Problem of Authorship” 44)

As discussed above, it is generally agreed upon that there is no one author, not to mention, conflicting views postulated throughout the text. While it is not the aim of this thesis to analyze who wrote what, it must still be considered because *ziran* occurs across different chapters that are believed to have been written by various authors with varying views. It is not important to decide the validity of these claims, but we can adopt the standard view and see how it might affect the current account of *ziran*. That is to say, if there are conflicting fundamental philosophies expressed across the text, it is important to consider if we can observe whether or not it affects how we read *ziran*.

As mentioned in the methodology, scholarly consensus would have it that the Inner Chapters were written by Zhuangzi himself while the outer chapters were written by his followers. According to how Graham categorizes the themes, philosophies, and potential authors of each chapter, four out of eight instances of *ziran* occur in the Inner Chapters, and other chapters believed to have been written by Zhuangzi and/or in line with his original views. The other four fall into schools of thought seeming to diverge somewhat from original Zhuangzian thought. Again, the focus of this thesis is not on authorship, not to make sense of logical textual and linguistic analysis of the text. And, since Graham and Xiaogan have done

most of the work and arrive at similar conclusions, I will choose to work with Graham's categorization only in that it is slightly less detailed and easier to regurgitate for this paper.⁴⁰

Graham's categorizations reasonably claim the Inner Chapters (1-7) as representative of Zhuangzi himself, and he says about chapters 8-22 that "none can be plausibly ascribed to Zhuangzi" and along with noting common themes, he labels some as Primitivist and others as Syncretist (28). He goes as far as to say that Chapter 16 is unrelated to the entirety of the book. He maintains that Chapters 17-22 have enough in common thematically with the Inner Chapters to be labeled as part of the "School of Zhuangzi" (28). That is to say, when comparing these chapters with the Inner Chapters there should not be strikingly incoherent ideas. Chapters 32-33 he categorizes as the Miscellaneous Chapters. He labels Chapters 23- 27 and 32 the "ragbag" chapters, Chapters 28-31 as "Yangist miscellany", and 33 as Syncretist (28). In short, chapters 1-7 and 17-22 are said to either represent Zhuangzi himself or authors that arguably represent a consistent and coherent line of thought that we can attribute to Zhuangzian thought. The rest include either incoherent ideas or unrelated passages that do not seem to fit with the rest of the text. So, what does this mean for our analysis of *ziran*?

According to what we have discovered thus far, this means that *ziran* was only found outside of what is considered Zhuangzian thought in three instances: the first in Chapter 14, the second in Chapter 16, and the third Chapter 31. Chapter 14 has been labeled among the "Syncretist" chapters which are said to represent a synthesis of views stemming from the I-*Ching* and *Laozi* attempting a single comprehensive *dao*. Chapter 16, as mentioned above, is apparently isolated from any other chapter. And lastly, Chapter 31 is a part of the Yangist chapters, or the "individualists", who have also been labeled as hedonists in their form of an ethical egoism by means of pursuing personal pleasure. Of course, the biases of any author will inherently infect the philosophical import of a text and any technical terms within, so we must first consider if these instances of *ziran* differ from the rest, and what they tell us about the meaning of *ziran* in the text. Does *ziran* in these passages appear to represent a different line of thought than the rest of the text? Should we consider them in our analysis of what *ziran* means in the text on the whole?⁴¹

⁴⁰ Graham's way of categorizing the chapters is straight forward and similar to most scholarly consensus, but for an in-depth analysis see Klein's article cited below. You can find Graham's chapter categories here: A. C. Graham. "How much of *Chuang-Tzu* did Chuang Tzu write?", *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religions* 47, no.35 (1980), pp.459-501.

⁴¹ I will aim for a methodology in this section that is similar to Chong Kim-Chong in this book *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human*. He offers a systematic analysis of key

3.3.3 Guo Xiang's Interpolation

Beginning with *ziran*'s two instances in Chapter 14 we can recall Ziporyn's translation as "what is unforced in things" (應之以自然), and "the unforced mandate of things" (自然之命) we can note two concerns. The first being that it is in a Syncretist chapter, and the other (as was briefly mentioned in the note above) that it has been speculated that this passage does not represent the original text and may have been interpolated by Guo Xiang.⁴² Regarding the former, we can note these chapters are said to be motivated by a synthesis of views of Confucianism, Legalism, and Mohism. Regarding the latter, this is also said to be a motivation of Guo Xiang, and further, it is still useful to extrapolate the meaning of *ziran* in the text by distinguishing between the views of Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang insofar as it gives us a platform for comparison. With relatively little work done to date on translation and analysis of Guo Xiang's commentary, one thing we do know is that his overarching aim was to create a synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism by giving an account of how Zhuangzi's work demonstrates this synthesis. In this passage, these motivations become evident in how the contrast between human and heaven is paralleled to the Five Virtues and *ziran* respectively. As was pointed out by Livia Knaul, Guo Xiang

[...] imposed his own concepts, mainly the connection of man with the universe through his inner nature aligned with cosmic share and his fate

terms and themes throughout the entirety of text. When analyzing a theme or term that seems incoherent among chapters, Chong points out the inconsistency and notes the relevant conclusions. For example, as his main focus is on the theme of Zhuangzi as a critique to Confucianism, he notes how these critiques vary among the Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous Chapters, and that the Inner Chapters contain more subtle critiques (13). However, he does not view them as totally different and uses arguments in the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters to appeal to arguments in the Inner Chapters. Another thematic observation he notes is that the Inner Chapters do not talk about human nature or assume a human essence. Then, when discussing key terms, Chong uses this knowledge in recognizing comparisons among contrasting views. For example, during his discussion of *zhen* 真 in the Robber Zhi Chapter he notes Graham's categorization of this chapter as Yangist and considers how this might effect interpretation (169-70). Adopting this sort of methodology makes sense for the current analysis of *ziran* considering it occurs in chapters outside of what is considered Zhuangzian thought. It is important to flesh out how these authors philosophical backgrounds show through in *ziran* as a concept, and analyze what it means for the current account.

⁴² Callahan reiterates Chen's original observation (Chen, Zhuang Zi, p. 368): "Chen quotes from four other commentators who state that these characters are a commentary from Guo Xiang on the basis that there are editions as important as the *Dao Zang* which do not include this passage. This passage also in many important ways mirrors the passage that precedes it in the text (Graham, Chuang-tzu Notes, p. 44; Graham also leaves out these characters on the basis of Chen's annotation) (Callahan 188).

corresponding to cosmic principle. His radically utilitarian view admitted the inclusion of Confucian ideals of society; he thereby took a definite political position, something which Chuang-tzu more or less avoided. (444)

Therefore, if this passage came from Guo and we agree with Knaul's analysis, then we should be careful not to also impose Guo's interpretation onto the other appearances of *ziran*. So, if it was not Zhuangzi who promoted the idea of one's inborn nature to be akin to the heavenly, or Dao, then what was Zhuangzi's idea?

To be fair, just because Zhuangzi did not promote this idea directly, he also never denied it. It is possible that Guo only pulled out an idea from the *Zhuangzi* that was already present, but just not explicit. However, I agree with Knaul's analysis that while Guo on the whole did well to extrapolate the original meaning of the text, this is one area where his biases became clear. His primary motivation to reconcile ritual and responsibility (notable Confucian virtues) with spontaneity (*ziran*), does not seem to be represented anywhere else in the text, even if his efforts aim to synthesize the two are novel. Since this was also the aim of the Syncretist chapters, we should be careful when defining *ziran* so as not to impose their or Guo's biases.

Further, one of Knaul's chief conclusions was that a major difference between Guo and Zhuangzi lies in their methodology. Whereas Guo laid out a systematic mapping of "universe, society, and man, he ultimately is assertive and definite where Zhuangzi might have preferred to remain questioning, vague, and merely pointing" (444). That is, Zhuangzi's developments are not prescriptive, and they certainly do not leave the reader with a plan of action. In fact, with much of the text being about the freedom of the mind and the ceaseless transformation of things, so free and transformative that even a small fish can turn into a giant bird spanning "who knows how many thousands of miles"⁴³, that some readers may walk away wondering what kind of mysticism they just read. This literary style of writing combined with the magical theme of transformation that persists throughout the text also speaks to the use of *ziran* in the rest of the text.

3.3.4 Yangist Influence: Is *Ziran* About Preserving Life or Maximizing Desires?

⁴³ Ziporyn "Essential" 3

Since Chapter 16 is said to be unrelated to the rest of the text, and because we cannot assume any biases of a certain philosophical school or author, it will not be of our concern in this section. Instead, we will move on to Chapter 31. As mentioned above, Chapter 31 is considered to be Yangist. Graham notes,

Su Shih (AD 1036-1101) already saw that they [Chapters 28-31] are not the work of Chuang-tzu, and a modern scholar, Kuan Feng, has pointed out that they are not even Taoist, and that most (in my opinion, all) come from another school, that of Yang Chu. They probably date from a little before and after 200 BC. (“Disputers” 28)

If we consider this chapter as Yangist, how might that effect the interpretation of *ziran*?

Graham describes the Yangist philosophy as expressing values like “keeping one’s life/nature intact”, caring for health and the body so as not to cut life short, “protecting one’s genuineness (*zhen* 真)”; and “not involving the body in ties for the sake of material possessions” (“How much”, 309). Recalling *ziran* in Chapter 31 as translated by Ziporyn: the genuine [*zhen* 真] is what one receives from Heaven, which is so of itself and cannot be deliberately altered” (自然不可易也). This seems to line up quite nicely with the Yangist vision of preserving life and protecting genuineness. Genuineness is what comes from Heaven, and what comes from heaven is *ziran*. Because of this it cannot be changed by any human imposition. So the next question is whether this is a divergence from the rest of the text and instances of *ziran*? In other words, do Yangist philosophies align with the rest of the text, and in particular to *ziran*?

We can certainly attribute some of this line of thought to the rest of the text: genuineness is derived from heaven by virtue of it being natural and spontaneous, and in so doing things will remain unharmed thus preserving life. This is a theme mentioned many times throughout this thesis already. For instance, in Chapter 16 when Zhuangzi recalls “when living creatures were free from premature death” (Zhuangzi 16:2, Watson 123). However, it is not clear in other (what are considered to be) Yangist chapters if the emphasis on preserving the body in this way is emphasized or praised. Chong-Kim Chong has pointed out that might also be the case in the Chapter 29 Robber Zhi (盜跖 *dao zhi*).

Confucius had a friend named Liuxia Ji, who had a younger brother known as Robber Zhi. This Robber Zhi had been rampaging through the known world with a private militia of nine thousand men, invading and pillaging the territories of the feudal lords, absconding with other men's livestock as well as their wives and daughters, making empty shells of their homes with only the doors left swinging on their hinges, greedy for gain to the point of forgetting all claims of kinship, completely neglecting his parents and brothers and offering no sacrifices to his ancestors. (Zhuangzi 29, Ziporyn "Complete" 277)

Horried, Confucius retorts with disapproval towards Liuxia Jia and begs him to attempt changing his brother's ways. Liuxia Jia is too afraid and Confucius decides to take matters into his own hands and go see Robber Zhi himself. Robber Zhi reacts to Confucius's arrival with rage saying Confucius is the biggest criminal of them all.

You make up phrases and invent terms, absurdly singing your panegyrics [...] eating food though you plow no field, decked in garments though you weave no cloth [...] monopolizing the production of judgments of right and wrong so as to confuse the world's rulers and to prevent the world's scholars from ever returning to their root [*ben* 本]. (Zhuangzi 29, Ziporyn "Complete" 278)

In the eyes of Robber Zhi, Confucius's way of life commits more crimes than his own. This assumes that Zhuangzi views the disruption of naturalness by making distinctions and telling people how to think is the ultimate crime. Because the scholars of the world are not able to return to what is natural to them, and their ideas influence the common man, the ten thousand things can be harmed as a result. Harmony is thus stifled, and spontaneity is lost.

The Chapter goes on to continue critiquing the teachings of Confucius for its blasphemous nature. The notable critique for the current discussion was also recognized by Chong where it is said that "Confucius's teachings do not allow one to keep *zhen* intact," and that "life is short and one should maximize desires, including the desires of the senses".

Further, the teachings of Confucius are ridiculed by an admission to indulging in desires.

Desire and aversion, avoidance and pursuit are definitely there in us without being taught. This is the inborn nature of human beings. Although the whole world may condemn me for it, who can deny it? [...] But to torture their bodies and deny themselves all pleasures like that, restricting their sustenance just to what would maintain their lives, they must have been trying to maintain their reputations. For they must have been always sick and uncomfortable, even if they still didn't outright drop dead. (Zhuangzi 29, Ziporyn "Complete" 286-7)

To admit to desires is one thing, but to *admittedly indulge* in desires is another. Moreover, to disagree with doing the latter would all seem contrary to Yangist teachings of prudence. As Chong also points out, the excessive lifestyle of Robber Zhi, who plays the protagonist in this chapter, just by virtue of his hedonistic behavior, would also seem to oppose Yangist teachings ("Critique" 170).

If we can agree with Chong that Robber Zhi does not represent Yangist teachings, and that in other chapters along with this one, to not maximize desires is ridiculed, how can we understand what it would mean to be *ziran*? In other words, is being "so-of-itself" indicative of allowing for desires or is it to take care of the body and preserve life? Preserving life is a perennial theme in Daoism, but the view to indulge desires insofar as desires are natural has the potential to be incoherent with this view.

However, this is a mistake in logical order. In other words, the logical order that would prove these views incoherent would go as follows: indulging desires would potentially cause premature death because certain desires do not serve longevity. Zhuangzi might argue that a person's natural desires (those unmotivated by external factors and human concerns) would not have such an effect. And further, if they did, then so be it. An individual, robber or saint, lived out their life in the way that was appropriate for them.

The idea that natural desires would cause one a premature death would seem unlikely to Zhuangzi. For him, natural and spontaneous desires are all there is. If one acts on other/external desires, then premature death is actually premature by his definition. But if one acts on their natural desires their death could not be premature. This means that one who is a drunk might die early due to their unhealthy habits, but if these habits were not because of anything other than their spontaneous way of being then it actually was not premature at all. Alternatively, if one is a drunk because they

are afraid of owning up to responsibilities or because they're in the market for social approval, then their actions might not be seen as spontaneous, or *ziran*. However, because we cannot know from where perspectives sprout, we cannot definitively say what a *ziran* and spontaneous response would be.

This “mistake” could be a result in how one views the achievement of spontaneity. The order of operations would be such that the agent who is *ziran* by default preserves life because their death would by definition be natural in the sense of it being spontaneous. The preservation of life is just a consequence of *ziran* in that being spontaneous results in harmony. When there is harmony there is preservation of life. This is in line with Ziporyn who reads another passage in the Robber Zhi Chapter like this:

I follow Lu Shuzhi in reading this [embrace his Heavenly] to mean that Man Bou'de takes ‘embracing the Heavenly’ to be a value-free position that would imply either no guidance at all or the indulgence of one's own desires, in contrast to Zizhang's belief that the Heavenly as found within one's own heart would provide moral guidance. (“Complete” 287)

That is to say, embracing the heavenly, or what is genuine is not assuming any moral compass. One who is able to be as spontaneous as the natural world does not do so for any certain end. It is an amoral endeavor. By indulging desires, one is not untapping a unique heavenly decree. The *Zhuangzi* in many other instances boasts a complete lack of concern for life or death, a topic which will be further discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

For now what is important to note is that Yangists' influences of preserving life might not represent the entirety of the text. *Ziran* in this passage as being received from heaven does not mean that one's desires are a result of Heaven. I would even go as far as to say that *Zhuangzi* has no care for preserving life, and would only praise it when it was the result of spontaneity. Spontaneity is at the root of most of *Zhuangzi*'s achieving characters, and whether that means an early death or long life is of no concern to him.

3.4 *Ziran* as an Organic Happening

Until now, there have been a few discussions gesturing towards *ziran* as an “organic happening”. By expanding on what organic happening means, this section will set the foundation for understanding *ziran* and how that informs our discussion of spontaneity. The aim of this section is not to offer an alternative translation of *ziran* that should replace the translations thus far. Instead, it is to offer a way to expand on the meaning of *ziran* and extrapolate its overarching philosophical significance in the text. The current translations of *ziran* as adverbial phrases (even when it can be read as a noun or adjective) are appropriate in capturing the thrust of *ziran* among the varying passages as a responsive process. Each translation contributes to illuminating *ziran*’s special and unique philosophical import in the context of the passage, as well as align grammatically. However, with each translation varying somewhat, is there at least a common theme? What does *ziran* tell us about Zhuangzi’s overall philosophy?

We can understand *ziran* as an organic happening by expanding on what it means to be “organic” and what it means to be “happening”. To be organic means to occur naturally and to grow from what is already there, and consuming organic food has become increasingly attractive. Food that is organic means that it was derived and grown from the living earth without the use of chemicals or artificial methods. It is prized for providing proper nutrients by means of growing naturally from the ground and remaining unaltered by human intervention. “Organic” takes the meaning of natural into a more dynamic and living vision. To be organic implies an ongoing process whereas to be natural can simply mean a state. There is a harmonious relationship that is implied in that what is organic fosters wholesome flourishing among all things.

The process of organic food growing happens as a ceaseless cyclical event. Foundationally, the premise of organic food growing is that it occurs without any external human impositions. Even though food grown on organic farms can be cultivated by humans, these farmers forgo the use of synthetic hormones, antibiotics, and fertilizers as they are seen as unnatural and thus harmful. Essentially, organic means what would happen without external impositions being forced upon things. The food on organic farms is thought to grow in the same way it would beyond farms and out in nature. What is organic cannot be done by anyone. Organic food is deemed “organic” by virtue of its natural way of sprouting from the earth without human interference. Like the above translations of *ziran*, anything organic is just “what it is” as well as what it *already* was.

To be organically “happening” then expresses the ongoing process of what “already is”. The idea of *ziran* as an ongoing event has been touched upon in the last section regarding its

verbal nature. Philosophically then, ongoing reminds us that *ziran* is *always already happening* (i.e. “the rightness of the way each thing *already* is”). Zhuangzi explains,

The Course has no end or beginning, while creatures are born and die, coming to no reliable completion. Now empty, now full, things do not remain positioned in any one fixed form. The years cannot be held on to, time cannot be stopped; waxing and waning, filling and emptying, each end is succeeded by a new beginning. This is a way of describing the method of their rightness [*yi* 義], doing just what they set out to do in the greatest sense, conveying the mutual coherence of all things [*li* 理]. The becoming of things is like a galloping horse, transforming with each movement, altering at each movement. What should you do? What should you not do? No matter what, you will be spontaneously transforming! (Ziporyn, “Complete” 177-178)

Despite the natural cycle of life and death for each creature, their individual existences become blurred in the context of the larger cycle of the ten thousand things. This blurriness is expressed with the metaphor of a galloping horse. With each thing being a part of Dao, coming and going in and out of existence, it is difficult to point out identifiable things with specific characteristics. Coming from the view of things spontaneously emerging in and out of these cycles, the matters we seem to get excited or upset about seem smaller and less significant.

Things that constitute *ziran* are part of the ceaseless transformation of all things which have no starting or ending point. Things just are what they are, *ziran*, always happening and becoming of themselves. It is when external and unnatural, and therefore non-organic factors impinge on these spontaneous transformations that *ziran* is lost. It is tempting to assume a linear causal model of existence with a beginning and an ending. If we can rid ourselves of this assumption and employ a processional model where things are just happening spontaneously, then many human concerns that trouble or harm us can be resolved.

Similarly, organic foods sprout spontaneously from the ground and grow without the interference of man. Events characterized as *ziran* are likewise non-deliberate, without pursuit and without seeking purpose. This purposelessness does not mean that they serve no purpose, but rather that their purpose is spontaneously becoming in response to the environment they are in. The simple role that each thing plays in the ecosystem it occupies serves as its “purpose”. The sun feeds the plant, who feeds the rabbit, who feeds the fox and so on. These naturally occurring events translate into the human world as well.

Zhuangzi wishes to point out the tendency of man to obscure the organically happening events by imposing categories, values, and biases. Imagine if one were to film the process of a flower sprouting and growing from the ground in contrast to taking snapshots of each moment of growth. There is something missing in the snapshots. The general process and happening of the flower is obscured by categorizing each moment and attaching meaning to each moment. The film will instead capture the ongoing spontaneity of the flower. Zhuangzi suggests it is the mistake of man to assume superior knowledge regarding the naturally occurring events of the world, in particular dictating appropriate norms. The nameless man's response to the question of how the world is to be managed is to "let your mind roam in the flavorless, mingle your vital energy with the deserted silence, follow the self-so each thing, the way it already is before interference without allowing yourself the least bias (Zhuangzi 7:3, Ziporyn "Complete" 108). In this way, there is solace in the recognition that the pursuit of these assertions are constantly changing, constantly happening, and understanding them should not be of any concern. This solace is usually expressed by the stillness of the sage.

Graham reminds us, "when the sage is still, it is not that he is still because he says 'it is good to be still'; he is still because none among the myriad things is sufficient to disturb his heart ("Disputers" 192). The sage need not bother with questioning whether stillness is good or bad, his stillness is merely a consequence of not entertaining the pursuit of *shi/fei*. The stillness of Liezi who acted as a mirror "not doing, not being" achieved the ability to overcome all things without being harmed (Ziporyn "Complete" 111). This mirroring is purely organic in that it is a response to the circumstances he is in and not based on preconceptions. Likewise, a flower sprouts in nature in direct response to the soil surrounding it and the sun feeding it, and equally to the floods and droughts. In whichever way the flower thrives and however the flower dies is *ziran*. It is this mirroring that allows the sage to "avoid harm" in the sense of basking in the freedom of not having to assign value to things. Likewise, whether the flower survives or dies is not good or bad. Good may cause joy, bad may cause sorrow, but the sage is still.

This does not mean that the sage does not feel, but rather that his feelings are purely appropriate to the situation. When he is sad, he may cry, but emotions will not affect him deeply or for very long. When Zhuangzi's wife died, he naturally mourned but was quickly reminded that her death is simply part of the transformation of the ten thousand things. Zhuangzi also describes the drunken man who falls from a cart,

He may be hurt but he will not be killed. His bones and joints are no different from those of other men, but the degree of harm done by the fall differs radically, for the

imponderable spirit in him forms one intact whole. Having been unaware that he was riding, he is now unaware that he is falling. The frights and shocks of life and death have no way to enter his breast, so he is unflinching no matter how things may clash with him. Finding wholeness in liquor he reaches such a state – imagine then someone who finds his wholeness in the Heavenly. The sage submerges himself in the Heavenly, and that is why nothing can harm him. (Ziporyn “Complete” 189)

This is actually quite interesting as it resonates with a recent scientific paper on the effects of alcohol on mortality rates of the injured. “Alcohol increases the risk of injuring oneself and others. However, following an injury there appears to be a benefit to alcohol in mediating the body's response to a traumatic injury and reducing mortality” (Freidman 391). Surely Zhuangzi was not privy to the physiological response of a drunken man falling off a cart, but his philosophical intuition about the benefits of “stillness” were enough to suggest such a controversial, yet impressively accurate idea. Whereas the sober person might go into a whirlwind of panic engineered by the societal conception of death as bad, the drunken man responds organically and thus potentially avoids harm.

Nevertheless, Zhuangzi is not exactly praising drunkenness. The drunken man offers a metaphor to the more praiseworthy sage who “submerges himself in the Heavenly”. In his state of unawareness, the sage’s ability to perceive and view the world is unobscured by biases as he only responds to what is and what already was. His actions flow seamlessly according to the circumstances. These reactions are in perfect harmony with his environment because they ensue in response to things as they present themselves to him and only *as* they present themselves. Similarly, the drunken man’s otherwise natural human propensity to avoid death is alleviated and he can thus avoid certain “sober” physiological responses to injury and death.

One might question if alcohol should be considered a disruption to what is *ziran* because it is an intoxicant. However, the focus of Zhuangzi’s point on the drunken man is not his intoxication. He is demonstrating how the drunken man might otherwise have socially constructed norms in place that might inhibit his *ziran*. The alcohol, in this particular case, breaks down these conventions and allows *ziran* to manifest. Likewise, recall the Genuine-Humans (真人) from Chapter Six who offers a further elaboration on the sage as they “understood nothing about delighting in life or abhorring death”. Their existence is described as “whooshing” in and out without resistance. This is because they could receive whatever Dao (life) threw at them and enjoy it, yet only to forget it and return it back to the heavenly. They embody stillness as “their faces are tranquil, their foreheads are broad and plain”, and their

emotions simply transform along with the seasons. Instead of imposing her beliefs about what it means or if it is good or bad, the Genuine-Human receives it *as it is* and then forgets about it so as not to use it as a way to inform the next thing she receives. (Ziporyn “Complete” 93).

To do so would be “adding to the process of generation” and a failure to constant *ziran*. That does not mean that the sage does not feel joy or sorrow, but that her emotional responses are immediate, appropriate, and never stored. They are appropriate because they are immediate and not based on a *cheng xin*. Then they are forgotten and not stored so that her mind is fasted. If they were stored, they may show up later as biases or firmly held beliefs that inhibit her spontaneity.

To be non-deliberate in this way is not to be completely complacent with whatever Dao brings, but rather to always allow responses to be *ziran*. This is difficult to identify because *ziran* might not be thought of as a technical term in the *Zhuangzi* in contrast the Laozi where it has been deemed a “supreme ideal” and “lofty concept”. *Ziran* is not an ideal to be followed. In fact, the whole point is that we do not uphold values as right and wrong so it would be entirely paradoxical to conceptualize *ziran* in this way. Part of *ziran* is not placing it or any philosophical concept in the *Zhuangzi* in such a hierarchy. Doing so would mean to identify a *shi/fei* and store a fixed concept. It describes what something is in the sense that a thing can only be what it is, which is of course unique to a thing or event at any given moment. This is spontaneity in its purest form. In that sense, we cannot fully have the power to describe *ziran*, or rather what is *ziran* to a thing or event. The one thing that is clear is that responsiveness can be in line with *ziran* and responsiveness can be out of line with *ziran*.

Still, Zhuangzi does not seem to deny deliberation wholly. Deliberation that flows from a *ziran* mindset highlights the negative aspects of deliberation (when it is not *ziran*). The characters in the text explicitly have some things to say about how they think and what they feel (i.e. not giving up a simple life in exchange for one of power in the courts). Zhuangzi would allow for deliberation that is following from a *ziran* mindset and not motivated by anything other than what is organically true to them.

For example, when the stakes are high such as choosing a college, a decision that follows from *ziran* would probably not consider the fame or reputation of the school because these factors are usually motivated by praise and blame which Zhuangzi explicitly denounces. That was the problem for Song Rongzi who “made a sharp and fixed division between the inner and the outer and clearly discerned where true honor and disgrace are to be found”. Saying what it *would* follow from is not so clear as it would depend wholly on the person’s specific desires and particular immediate circumstances. If the prospective student had an ill family member, maybe the *ziran* choice would be to choose a school closer to home, for

example. The catch is that even if one chose a school for fame, it could equally be from a *ziran* mindset. This is something we cannot know, nor should care to judge. Not worrying about how the world is to be managed will allow for the world to be managed.

At the same time, we shouldn't deduce that *ziran* just means anything goes or that one should use whatever they want as a guiding principle to operate with. Zhuangzi invokes many different (at times) incoherent or contradictory views. He's been labeled a skeptic, mystic, relativist, nihilist, and more. Each of his arguments for these different views equally make sense and different times and according to the issue he is tackling. It's not a problem for Zhuangzi to have different views because he is not making any normative advice. He never asserts that he knows anything, just that in any one present moment things appear as they do from his perspective. He does not define the origins of this perspective because they are simply unknowable.

Zhuangzi's contention is the human tendency to become bogged down with concern for reputation, pride, status, sorrow, joy, and fame etc. These concerns might cause one to lose the otherwise enjoyment of a situation and/or hinder one's ability to perform optimally. Understanding the constant emerging and organic happening of things dissolves fixation on a sense of an "I" that might limit our perspective and hinder our ability to engage with the world as it is. Understanding this oneness allows us to respond to situations as they present themselves to us rather than imprinting our preconceived biases onto the situations.

3.5 *Ziran* Is Not a Skill

This section will elaborate on our discussion surrounding *ziran* and its relation to skill. In the *Zhuangzi*, to constant *ziran* does not mean to try and search for some inner core or way of being that qualifies one's identity. It is not a motivation for soul-searching and finding one's "true self" or the "true nature" of a thing. The example of the time at which we were born can act as a point of reference. We don't remember it, we were not cognizing it happening, and we attached no meaning to it. Likewise, manifesting *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* is just as simple. In order for it to happen it must wholly non-deliberate is precisely why it cannot be a skill.

Then why has the idea of spontaneity often been explained and explored by and through the so-called "skill" or "knack" stories?⁴⁴ These stories revolve around actors

⁴⁴ Some examples of accounts of spontaneity that revolve around the skill stories include Graham's entire section on spontaneity (1989, 6), Watson's entire introduction on topics of spontaneity (2013), and Bruya's analysis of Daoist spontaneity (2010).

who obtain excellence and effortlessness in their skill, usually expressed through a connection to the heavenly.

When we translate *ziran* as spontaneity, there arises the difficulty of conceptualizing it in terms of the spontaneity of the actors in the skill stories. Of course, this poses more of a danger for the reader who is not familiar with the Chinese language. Nonetheless, anyone reading secondary literature on Zhuangzi's notion of spontaneity will almost certainly come across mention of the term *ziran* as a part of the explanation. It is important to recognize that not many people speak about *ziran* as it is specifically conceptualized in the *Zhuangzi*, but spontaneity is almost always addressed in any exploration of the text.

Therefore, it is important to note that not only was *ziran* not present in any of the "skill" or "knack" stories, *ziran* also does not represent a skill. While it does not seem anyone has explicitly referred to *ziran* as a skill *per se*, it appears to be implied (or at least can be confused as such). For example, Lai states "the practice of *ziran-wuwei* requires deep wisdom coupled with particular skills" ("*Ziran* and *Wuwei*" 335). Xu Jianliang says, "we should follow the instinct of *ziran* to take actions" (531). As in Chapter One of this thesis.

David Machek asserted that the skill stories in the *Zhuangzi* (i.e. Cook Ding) demonstrate that the text is about "supreme control and discipline" ("Beyond Sincerity" 63). Perkins even claimed that "many of Zhuangzi's examples of *ziran* use skills acquired through practice, like butchering or catching cicadas" ("Following" 329). However, as we can see from our analysis above, *ziran* is not mentioned in any of these passages. This may be another result of the standard definitions of *ziran* having come from the *Laozi* where *ziran* might be more prescriptively action-entailing.

But it is not just the fault of confusion within translation, it is also a product of the verbal nature of *ziran* as discussed above. When we read "to constant *ziran*" from the *Zhuangzi* itself, it is at the very least subliminally action-entailing and could be thought of as a skill to be acquired and cultivated. The problem is when one ventures on the pursuit of *ziran* rather than allowing *ziran* to happen that the entire premise of spontaneity is lost. Danesh Singh, among others, argues that Zhuangzi endorses the view that we cannot rely on "formulas and concepts" in the pursuit of skill acquisition, and further, that any direct pursuit of spontaneity is itself self-defeating. Instead, individuals need to create the environment for spontaneity to happen, much like a

person experiencing insomnia needs to create the proper conditions for sleep rather than directly pursue sleep itself.

Singh claims that we cannot look to the text for a decision-making procedure, and we can only understand how to act “in general” because sage-knowledge is merely conceptual (218). We can understand *how* to act, but not *what* to do. The achievement of natural spontaneity happens when we “unlearn the layers of socialization that construct their ways of thinking, perceiving, behaving and feeling” (223). Singh concludes that skill acquisition like that of Cook Ding is only established after long-term and gradual cultivation.

This is essentially what differentiates the acquisition of a skill from the achievement of *ziran*: cultivation. While a skill is something that needs attunement, *ziran* is just what is already there. As *ziran* is what cannot be changed (*bu ke yi* 自然不可易), it is not a skill that one can work on. One cannot deliberate on how to be *ziran*, find *ziran*, and certainly not cultivate *ziran*. It is as unknowable as Dao as it is a constantly shifting perspective. Ziporyn explains how this idea was also recognized in Guo’s commentary: “to be conscious of anything indicates a problem, a lack of fit, a lack of self-rightness/self-so. Hence the sign of anything’s self-rightness is precisely the lack of reflexive consciousness of it” (“Self-So” 518). Some, like Møllgaard have explained the encounter of such spontaneity as a transcendence which can only happen unintentionally, as something like a “second birth” (17). This resonates with the above reference to our first birth being an unconscious event as well.

A.C. Graham’s *Disputers of the Tao* devotes an entire section to explaining spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*. Graham has extensive work on the idea of spontaneity in the text and this is one of very few thorough explanations of spontaneity (labeled as spontaneity) in the text, although it is not systematic. The aptly titled “Spontaneity” section also relies heavily on the skill stories to explain spontaneous action. Immediately in the first paragraph he mentions the “people who really know what they are doing” in the text consisting of the “carpenters, swimmers, boatmen, cicada-catchers” (189). As a product of their avoidance of planning, calculating, and categorizing, they can naturally respond to the entirety of a situation, such as Cook Ding. Perkins urges a focus on Cook Ding “as an exemplar of skill in general”.⁴⁵ It is examples like this that confuse the reader into thinking of spontaneity as an achievable skill, or to be thought of in terms of a craft.

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Brian Bruya has also offered extensive work on the idea of aesthetic spontaneity in Daoism. He says,

Spontaneous action in a Daoist sense is neither impulsive nor is it isolated, nor is it necessarily routine. It arises in response to situations and can be unprecedented— meaning that novel circumstances do not result in scripted responses. (“Dissertation”131)

In Bruya’s doctoral dissertation there is a section titled “Spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*”. The beginning offers his own account of spontaneity in a broader Daoist context and in section 3.2.2 he focuses more heavily on the *Zhuangzi* itself. In this section he too relies greatly on the skill stories for an explanation of spontaneity. “Effortlessness is apparent in the fluency of responsiveness. Craftsmen are repeatedly described in the *Zhuangzi* as completing difficult or complex tasks with great ease” (127). His analysis breaks down spontaneity into two categories, wholeness and fluency. The former is an ebb and flow of collection and shedding: a collection of awareness (one’s surroundings), and a shedding of obstacles to that endeavor. Fluency he defines as ease in the sense of effortlessness and responsiveness. His justification almost exclusively relies on the skill stories as the elucidation of spontaneity (with the exception of the happy fish passage). The skill stories he mentions include Cook Ding, the maker of bell stands, the carpenter, and the cicada catcher.

Skill, by definition, is “an ability to do an activity or job well, especially because you have practiced it” (Cambridge Dictionary). If we think of spontaneity in this way, it retracts from the thrust of the text about the unknowability of the way of the sage, and in terms of skill, especially the inability for it to be learned and passed on.

For the Course has its realness and reliability, but without any deliberate deeds [*wuwei*] and without any definite form, actual and true but only through non-doing and formlessness. Though it can be passed along to others, it cannot be received and possessed by them, and conversely, though it can be got, it cannot be shown. A spontaneous rooting of itself wherever it is, it has firmly maintained itself since ancient times, since even before heaven and earth were

there; it is how both the ghosts of the dead and the Lord-on-High become as imponderably spirit-like as they are, how both heaven and earth come to be what they are. (Ziporyn “Complete” 95)

If a skill is something that can be known, practiced, and achieved, spontaneity understood as an organic happening can certainly not be one. Although it can be obtained, the “non-doing” and “formless” nature make it such that one can never strive for it. Instead, it must just happen effortlessly. So, while one can be spontaneous in their skill, one cannot be skillfully spontaneous. That is to say spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* is not and could never be a skill.

This does not mean skill is not an important theme within the text. Skill is a key topic in the text deserving of attention. As noted in Karyn Lai and Wai Wai Chiu’s *Skill and Mastery*, “there are but a few philosophical text that put skill at the centre of their investigation and reflection, and Zhuangzi is one of them” (ix), and that “in being performance oriented, they [the articles in the anthology] open up avenues for exploring ideassuch as spontaneity, attentiveness, habit, and practice” (xvi). Among the many skills of the craftsmen in the text, spontaneity is almost always an aspect of their expertise. Spontaneity is an attribute to what makes their skills admirable. Spontaneity in this sense is the effortlessness and unconscious confidence in simply attuning to the act at hand. Chiu even goes as far as to deem spontaneity and flexibility as “prerequisites for an ideal life” (ix), and that “skill is that which lends art to ability” (5).

Eric Schwitzgebel takes a view opposed to most in the current literature that Zhuangzi actually “does not especially value spontaneous, skillful responsiveness”, and that “he criticizes skill more than he praises it” (101). His argument only takes into account the stories in the Inner Chapters, and he admits that the Outer Chapters may pose a challenge to his view. However, because it is the general consensus that the Inner Chapters were written by Zhuangzi himself, or at least contain a coherent view that represents the thought of Zhuangzi, he argues it is important to recognize the opposition to skill in the Inner Chapters. Because this thesis takes into account the entirety of the text, we would have to acknowledge the importance of skill on the whole. However, Schwitzgebel’s interpretation might align with the view here.

In a systematic survey of each “skill” story in the Inner Chapters, he demonstrates the emphasis on other themes rather than the theme of skill in the intended sense. This is slightly different than the stronger view that spontaneity itself

is not a skill. Regarding the cicada, the dove, the quail, the giant bird, and Liezi, Schwitzgebel argues that their shared skill of flight does not highlight an urgency to attain spontaneity in their skill. Instead, Zhuangzi is highlighting “their lack of perspective”, and in particular for Liezi, his dependency on things. In focusing on merit and a good name, Liezi is chasing a futile endeavor rather than relying on the wind to take him wherever he may go (102). As the list of the skill stories continues, Schwitzgebel does well to demonstrate the emphasis of similar themes as these being the focus of the passage rather than the celebration of skill. Whether or not this is true, it still highlights an important aspect of the present argument. Much of the skillfulness described in the *Zhuangzi* is about the psychological mindset of the actors, and a major aspect of their skillfulness is spontaneity. Schwitzgebel concludes that Zhuangzi’s ideal “appears instead to be something like lazing about, doing nothing, mastering nothing, and serving no purpose” (“Unskilled” 104).⁴⁶

Graham, on the other hand, reminds us that the Daoist spontaneity is not “‘thoughtless’ in the sense of ‘heedless’, on the contrary it demands intense concentration on the situation” (“Disputers” 189). I agree with what Graham is getting at, but I do not think that concentration is the correct word. It might be more accurate to say that his responses (can be) deeply aware. It does not mean that skill and concentration are not part of the Zhuangzian sage’s demeanor, but that spontaneity is not categorized by concentration. By concentration, it might be that Graham is referring to the acute responsiveness that the spontaneous actor can employ.

In any case, it would seem that Zhuangzi does, at least at some level, value skill. But the attainment of skill is not necessarily what he admires most. What he most prizes seems to be the effortless and purposeless freedom in the skill, or rather its spontaneity. It is not exciting that Cook Ding can butcher seamlessly, it is exciting that he can do it without a method or procedure. Zhuangzi is impressed with the spontaneity of his skill, not necessarily the skill itself. The spontaneity within the skill cannot be pursued the way a skill itself can be pursued.

One way to interpret these stories is through the interpretation that they are metaphors. From the view of James D. Sellmann,

Although it may be easy to interpret these performance narratives instrumentally, I propose that they are used as metaphors to show the

⁴⁶ This is another important view which I will refute in Chapter Five Section 5.2.

reader a way to act freely in an effortless (*wuwei* 無爲), natural, and spontaneous (*ziran* 自然) flow experience. Attaining freedom of action in the flow experience could be a pragmatic outcome itself, but that would be a different kind of “practical goal” from a skill per se. (113)

While Sellmann is right to point out that the thrust of Zhuangzi’s arguments are not to be on skill itself, we will need to be careful not to mistake of spontaneity as something to achieve. Instead, it would seem that spontaneity is what happens when one is able to be still, to respond without biases, and adapt to situations as freely as the world transforms.

Chapter Four

An Account of Spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi*

This chapter will give an account of what it means to be spontaneous in the *Zhuangzi* by developing on our discussion of *ziran* in relation to other terms and themes throughout the text. *Ziran* will in turn serve as the foundation of the current account of spontaneity, not as any guiding principle but as a way to understand the larger picture of Zhuangzi's sense of spontaneity. The meaning of Zhuangzi's *ziran* as an "organic happening" sheds light onto many aspects of spontaneity and informs how we can explore spontaneity as a theme. Through an analysis of *you* 遊, we will understand the active and passive aspects of spontaneity. We will then look at the connection between *tian* 天 and spontaneity in terms of nature and naturalness. Spontaneity will then be analyzed according to Zhuangzi's views on death, especially concerning ritual and time. Finally, we will be able to understand spontaneity in three categories: 1) ontological spontaneity, 2) spontaneous behavior, and 3) the conditions for spontaneity to occur.

This will set up the stage for the following chapter which will situate the current account of spontaneity within the wider scholarly debate where there is an overbearing use of the term spontaneity without adequate explanation of what it means. It seems that spontaneity in the text as a perennial theme is taken for granted. The aim will be to facilitate the current literature that lacks sufficient justification and analysis on what it means to be spontaneous in the *Zhuangzi*. Spontaneity is usually mentioned without fail in any discussion of Zhuangzi, but what exactly does it mean?

One frequently appearing issue when discussing spontaneity in the text suggests that the lack of any action theory is a problem. This leads to many interpretations affirming the text is purely passive, especially ethically and politically. As Dorothy Kwek, explains

It has often been said that the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 advocates political abstention, and that its putative skepticism prevents it from contributing in any meaningful way to political thinking: at best the *Zhuangzi* espouses a sort of anarchism, at worst it is

“the night in which all cows are black,” a stance that one scholar has charged is ultimately immoral. (411)

A large motivation for views like these has relied on an emphasis that the *Zhuangzi* rejects propositional knowledge. That is, the text promotes a sense of “knowing how” rather than “knowing that”.⁴⁷ Although we may agree that Zhuangzi rejects propositional knowledge, the problem is when the conclusion becomes that the text promotes pure passivity.

Another reason for these claims stems from Zhuangzi’s at one moment skepticism, at another relativism, and at another mysticism, among many other varying philosophical expressions among the chapters. However, I would agree with Ziporyn that Zhuangzi indeed can be read in a multitude of ways but that this is not a problem. In fact, it can be thought of as advantageous because

this way of reading allows us to have a book that makes many different points and expresses many points of view, not merely in the throwaway hurdy-gurdy manner of the random scrapbook reading, nor as a way of showing diversity for diversity’s sake, but each given some intricacy of expression and argument and contextual expansion. The radical political critics get their say, as do the conservative accommodationists [...] the radical skeptics and the radical mystics, the fatalists and the existentialists, the fire-breathing rebels and the pious harmonizers all get their say, unblurred and untruncated. (“Complete” 12)

Due to all of these different voices at play, some interpretations of the text dismiss its value, strength, and philosophical rigor. However, incompatibility among passages and different views of Zhuangzi as a philosopher do not necessarily affirm this conclusion. Weighing out all these different voices is not necessary to suppose that they each have something important to say. We can admit to all of them at

⁴⁷ Some examples include Ivanhoe “Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Dao”, Roth “Bimodal Mystical Experience in the ‘Qiwulun’” and Shun “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections”.

different moments throughout the text and still clear away the misconception that this is a disadvantage, and worse, that it promotes laziness or complete fatalist acceptance such that one “does nothing”.

By exploring Zhuangzi’s spontaneity in both its active and passive aspects, the connection between the psychological mindset and the active behavior of the sage offers a rebuttal to these claims. The notion of *you* provides one clear example of how this connection works by expressing how spontaneous actions arise from a *ziran* mindset.

4.1 *You* 遊 Demonstrating Active and Passive Spontaneity

Like *ziran*, *you* 遊 (often translated as wandering, rambling, or playing) occupies an essential role in the *Zhuangzi* and to understanding spontaneity. Unlike *ziran*, *you* has been given much more attention in the context of the *Zhuangzi*. This is partly for its sheer frequency throughout the text, and also because it appears in some of the most interesting and philosophically rich passages. Its relation to spontaneity will prove to demonstrate how action will ensue from a *ziran* mindset. What will one’s actions in the world look like if living out the kind of spontaneity expressed by Zhuangzi? The inner state of one who is “*you*-ing” is intimately linked to the way we have read *ziran* in the purposeless and non-deliberate way of being. Ultimately, we will better understand the link between the psychological mindset of one who acts from *ziran* and one who is “*you*-ing” which will help to illuminate both the passive and active aspects of spontaneity. This will become most clear through an analysis of *youxin* 遊心.

Appearing straight away in Chapter One of the *Zhuangzi*, *you* appears an impressive 94 times thereafter. It is often used in the literal sense of traveling. For example, in Chapter Fourteen “The Turnings of Heaven” 天運: “Confucius was travelling in the west in Wei” 孔子西遊於衛 (Ziporyn “Complete” 160). However, its function in the *Zhuangzi* encompasses a deeper meaning. Wu Kuang Ming offers a helpful explanation of the origins of *you*:

You originally meant both the unrestrained flow of a banner in the wind and a fish swimming in water in playfulness. It is a self-satisfying movement that

fulfills itself. And this meaning is also at the basis of both *xiao* and *yao*. It is the movement of self-variation as in casual play or a game, most congenial to imagination [...] Thus imaginative freedom is often regarded as synonymous with playful creativity. (85)

You emphasizes of the unrestrained psychological state of one who is traveling, wandering, or playing that is done for no external reasons such that it “fulfills itself”. A comprehensive analysis of each specific use is a project too vast for our purposes here, but we can note that the character for *you* is frequently coupled with other characters: 1) 而遊 *eryou*, 2) 以遊 *yiyou*, 3) 遊乎 *youhu*, and 4) 遊於 *youyu*.

The final and most important combination is *youxin* 遊心 which appears five times throughout the text. Among each combination, *youxin* proves significant by providing insight into our discussion of spontaneity in expressing the ability to allow the “mind to wander”. It describes the joy of allowing the *xin* to *you*, or the heart-mind to play freely. This understanding will help to develop our conception of the *cheng xin* (fully-formed heart-mind) by viewing *youxin* as a remedy to a fully-formed mind. *Youxin* will also serve to demonstrate the connection between the psychological mindset of the sage who can *you*, and in turn how she will behave.

4.1.1 Mitigating the *Cheng Xin* 成心: Psychological Spontaneity

The first instance of *you* exploits the inner and outer (內外 *neiwai*) aspects of a person.⁴⁸ By addressing the distinction between the internal and external aspects of a person, one is misled by the misconception that they have some sort of internal identity contrasted to some external impositions, which as we shall see will impinge on one’s ability to *you*. This was the plague of Song Rongzi who “simply made a sharp and fixed division between the inner and outer and clearly discerned where true honor and disgrace are to be found” (Ziporyn “Essential” 5).

And then there is Liezi who is one step closer for he “did not involve himself in anxious calculations about bringing good fortune to himself”. But even Liezi was still

⁴⁸ Refer to Chapter One Section 1.2.2 for the full introduction and explanation of this topic.

unable to *you* for there was still something which he depended on, even though it was only the wind. It is only the Consummate Person (至人 *zhi ren*, “perfect person” or “utmost person”), spirit man (*shenren* 神人) and sage (*shengren* 聖人) who can achieve such a state:

But suppose you were to chariot upon what is true both to Heaven and to earth, riding atop the back-and-forth of the six atmospheric breaths, so that your wandering [*you* 遊] could nowhere be brought to ahalt. You would then be depending on—what? Thus I say, the Consummate Person has no fixed identity, the Spirit Man has no particular merit, the Sage has no name. (*Zhuangzi* 1:7, Ziporyn “Essential” 5-6)

The concept of *you* is introduced here as a psychological state of being as well as the physical act of “wandering”. It is by not needing to depend on anything and being free from anxious calculations that allows the sage to wander. A mind that is distracted by such things would be caused by a *cheng xin* where biases and preconceived notions of what is good and bad might hinder one’s ability to wander in the state of *you*.

Another description of the Utmost person is found in Chapter Two, “Equalizing Assessments of Things” 齊物論, when Gnawgap (Wang Ni) proclaims,

The Utmost Person is miraculous, beyond understanding!

The lakes may burst into flames around him, but this can’t make him feel it is too hot. The rivers may freeze over, but this can’t make him feel it is too cold. Ferocious thunder may crumble the mountains, the winds may shake the seas, but this cannot make him feel startled. Such a person chariots on the clouds and winds, piggybacks on the sun and moon, and wanders [*you* 遊] beyond the four seas. Even death and life can do nothing to change him—much less the transitions between benefit and harm! (*Zhuangzi* 2:39, Ziporyn “Essential” 18)

Similar to the first description of the Utmost Person experiencing this sense of psychological freedom, this passage highlights a more mystical aspect of one who wanders. The utmost person avoids the everyday human concerns about life and death, much less benefit and harm. In their unwavering equanimity, they appear to have magical powers by evading the burns of a flame or the gust of an arctic blast.

Again, Zhuangzi points to the deep psychological stillness of the sage as being what allows her to achieve such magic. This psychological mindset is what facilitates the actions that allow the sage to avoid harm both physically and mentally. One who is in the state of *you* can endure these environmental threats by not reacting from a *cheng xin*. By not reacting based on anything other than pure spontaneous responsiveness, she achieves stillness and avoids harm. Nonetheless, these “magical powers” would appear to be metaphorical rather than literal.

But how does one attain such equanimity and freedom from concerns? One suggestion is fasting the heart-mind (*xin zhai* 心齋), and more specifically, a fasting of the *cheng xin*. We may remember from our discussion in Chapter One of this thesis when we read about Confucius’s most esteemed disciple, Yan Hui. Yan Hui set out on journey to the state of Wei in an attempt to regain order there by talking to the king. However, before he sets off, he is quickly interrupted by Confucius, who is provokingly played by the indirect the voice of Zhuangzi, and explains his trip will be futile if he proceeds with all of his planning and scheming. Instead, Confucius recommends Yan Hui proceed with a fasting of his heart-mind: “You must fast! Let me tell you. To have something in mind [有而為之，其易邪？] and then go out and do that thing—do you think this is an easy matter? The bright radiance of Heaven does not suit those who look on this as easy” (*Zhuangzi* 4:8, Ziporyn “Complete” 75).

Hui continues to question the meaning of this fasting, and once Hui begins to catch on, Confucius continues:

This way you can go roam around [*you* 遊] in his cage without feeling the pull of reputation, the pull of all the names. When you’re in there with him your squawkings will just emerge, but when you’re not they will stop. With neither doorways nor protective walls, all dwellings will be as one to you. You will be

of one household with all but will find temporary lodgings in whatever you cannot avoid – and then you will be close to getting somewhere. (Zhuangzi 4:8-9, Ziporyn “Complete” 77)

After fasting the mind Hui is relieved of the tendency towards biases and calculations (a *cheng xin*) in assuming the task at hand. Whereas a physical or religious fasting is the performance of a purposeful duty, the fasting of the heart-mind lacks any sense of purpose or deliberateness. Zhuangzi suggests that doing away with worrying about what to do, and instead responding with an empty mind to the situation at hand. In this way, the mind can then act like a mirror, responding but never storing. Storing would be how the *cheng xin* behaves, whereas a fasted mind can play freely.

Once one has fasted, responses “will find temporary lodgings in whatever” cannot be avoided which can only totally appropriate because they are not based on anything other than exactly what is happening at that time and without imposing external factors such as praise and blame. This allows for spontaneity in the sense of not relying on anything beyond what is happening. Fasting in this way gives the mind the psychological platform to *you: you xin*.

4.1.2 *You Xin* as Psychological and Active Wandering

As we have seen, the tendency of a *cheng xin* is a problem for Zhuangzi and at the root of what might immobilize one’s capacity to *you*. Instead, by fasting the heart mind, one allows the mind to roam freely (*you xin*). By allowing the mind to roam freely, one can achieve the spontaneity of the sage that allows her to avoid harm.

The combination of *you xin* is found five times throughout the text. It first appears in Chapter Four “In the Human World” (the same chapter that the above concept of *xin zhai* is found) during an exchange between Zigao of Shegong and Confucius. Zigao had been appointed an envoy to Qi and asks Confucius (again, the mocking voice of Zhuangzi) for advice. Among his various suggestions, Confucius concludes that Zigao should “let yourself be carried along by things so that the mind wanders freely” (且夫乘物以遊心 Zhuangzi 4:15, Ziporyn “Complete” 78). *You xin* appears again in Chapter Seven (during the same passage where *ziran* is mentioned)

when Tian Gen encounters the nameless man who says “Let your mind roam in the flavorless” (汝遊心於淡).

In Chapter 25, “Ze-yang” 則陽, Tian Mou, the Marquis of Qi, violated his treaty with Ying, the ruler of Wei. The king immediately seeks revenge and wants to send out an assassin. He then receives advice from the minister of war, Gongsun Yan, not to take this “commoner” action and instead allow him to employ all the troops and attack the entire state of Qi so as to only break the spine of Tian Mou. Jizi instead recommends Ying to seek a peaceful response in order to maintain the state’s streak of seven years without warfare. Then Huazi, playing devil’s advocate, mocks both responses saying,

The one who so artfully tries to convince you to attack Qi is just a troublemaker. The one who so artfully tells you not to attack is also just a troublemaker. And I, who tell you that both the proponent of attack and the proponent of non-attack are men who can only bring disorder, I am also just a troublemaker. (Ziporyn “Complete” 249)

The ruler, then rightfully perplexed, wonders what is to be done. Enter Dai Jinren who, after a snide remark about the futile nature of claiming territory, recommends “letting your mind roam in the limitless” (知遊心於無窮) (Ziporyn “Complete” 250). The ruler is completely astonished and thinks Jinren to be so great he cannot even be compared to the sages.

Here we also interestingly see *zhi* 知 and *xin* 心 as things that can *you*. *Zhi* as a noun usually describes knowledge and understanding, or the mind as the intellectual organ, and as a verb can mean to know or comprehend. Ziporyn describes *zhi* as

not a store of information but rather a *skill* in making ‘correct’ distinctions concerning the character, behavior, and value of things encountered and the successful know-how issuing from this recognition [...] Sometimes the *Zhuangzi* uses this positively charged term ironically, critiquing wisdom or “cleverness” in this sense. In its other pronunciation, the word means the faculty of cognition in general: what recognizes and understands on the basis of its

knowledge [...] But the term also means consciousness in the sense of sentience or awareness as such. (“Complete” 327).

For Zhuangzi there are positive and negative aspects to the term that vary throughout the text depending on how it is used. The “true” *zhi* is about responding and the capacity to distinguish between *shi* 是 and *fei* 非 in a natural and unbiased way. He also uses the term to critique wisdom when it is too “clever”. *Xin*, as previously discussed, is often translated as “heart-mind”, and describes both the organ and the connection between the intellect and the emotions, especially pointing to the inability to separate the two. When Jinren recommends letting your mind roam in the limitless, the use of both *zhi* and *xin* then seems significant, especially in the sense of allowing the *xin* and *zhi* to *you*.

Both *xin* and *zhi* have overlap in meaning about the faculty of the mind, and their positive and negative aspects vary throughout the text. The use of both surrounding *you* seems to emphasize that the way to *you* is qualified by both the mind and the heart, and so of knowledge and emotions. To allow the *zhi* and the *xin* to roam in this way unlocks inhibitions motivated by preconceived notions of what we think we know or should do (*cheng xin*).

The final example of *you xin* exposes something special about the ability to *you*. The famous story during Chapter Seventeen “Autumn Waters” about the happiness of fish illuminates the connection of the psychological mindset of one who can *you*, and how that will translate into action.

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling [*you* 遊] along the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, ‘The minnows swim about so freely [*you* 遊], following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish.’
Huizi said, ‘You are not a fish, so whence do you know the happiness of fish?’
Zhuangzi said, ‘You are not I, so whence do you know I don’t know the happiness of fish?’

Huizi said, ‘I am not you, to be sure, so I don’t know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact.’

Zhuangzi said, ‘Let’s go back to the starting point. You said, ‘Whence do you know the happiness of fish?’ Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know it, I must have known it from here, up above the Hao River.’ (Ziporyn “Essential” 76)

You is used here to qualify both the “strolling” action of Zhuangzi and Huizi, as well as the ability of the fish to “swim about so freely”. Again, this passage can be read in reference to the *cheng xin*. He is explaining to Huizi that by assuming he knows that Zhuangzi does *not* know the joy of a fish, he is already presupposing that this piece of knowledge (knowing the joy of *x*) can be known in the first place. His preconceived notion (one built and stuck in his *cheng xin*) that he can know that Zhuangzi does *not* know, thus affirms that he is assuming that one *can* know the joy of other things, which is exactly what he is simultaneously trying to refute. Further, Zhuangzi is equating the *you*-ing of the fish along with the *you*-ing of he and Huizi in that it is because he knows the joy of *you* (in himself) that he knows the joy of the fish.

We gather from the exchange between Huizi and Zhuangzi that there is still an important caveat. The fish seem to have no awareness of their ability to *you*, whereas Huizi and Zhuangzi need to realize it. In this sense, the fish probably never have to worry about falling in and out of *you* in the way that humans might. We can all *you* in however *you*-ing looks to us, but humans are burdened by the danger of awareness. The psychological awareness then inhibits the physical ability to *you*. That is, knowing you are *you*-ing while you are in the act probably means you are not *you*-ing at all. This brings us back to the “non-deliberate” and “unaware” aspects of *ziran*.

Non-deliberateness and unawareness do not signify that you do not know what’s going on around you. Surely the fish bob and weave in and out of oncoming traffic as they swim about. They are acutely aware of dangers and potential threats. But it is their *you*-ing that allows them to avoid it. Their *you*-ing comes about organically.

They do not learn how to *you*. Their *you*-ing is a response to their constantly transforming environment. Imagine the stunning harmony of a school of fish as they swim seamlessly flowing through the water in unison. This is the connection of the psychological to the physical, the passive to the active.

Moeller has described the *you*-ing done in this story as such,

Perhaps the happy fish story illustrates this intellectual but also social and physical engagement in a simultaneously playful and challenging, foolish and witty, and humorous and ironic form of communication that does not lead to any end or conclusion but is enjoyable and meaningful as such.

(“Rambling Without Destination” 256)

This open-ended roaming links the mental aspect of *you*-ing with how it is manifested in one’s physical behavior. In this way, the notion of *you* gives us a way to conceptualize spontaneity in action.

Moeller and Graham Parkes have also pointed out the significance of Zhuangzi using animals to exploit the meaning of *you*, and in particular animals apart from mammals (Moeller “Rambling Without Destination” 250). In using the example of fish, an animal quite far removed from the human species, the translation of “roaming” by A.C. Graham seems highly appropriate. “Roaming” more accurately describes the motion of fish unlike terms such as “traveling” or “journeying” that we might more often use to describe the motion of humans. By using the word roaming, the idea of an end goal or destination is illusive and unimportant. As humans, we often fail to achieve such a roaming as much of our actions are based on where we are going. “Thus”, says Moeller, “while lacking any utilitarian focus on final outcomes or “net results,” it is both a pragmatically efficient and aesthetically pleasurable form of existence” (251).

Moeller concludes that it is our previous “rambling” (*you*-ing) that makes up how we end up rambling at any given time. Put another way, our current rambling is contingent on our past experiences in communication with the current ones. So while it may be carefree, it is simultaneously informed by what we have done up this point. In the context of Zhuangzi and Hui Shi’s discussion of the fish, he explains

[...] their biographical rambling through life, their “carefree” rambling together on that day along the river Hao that day, and their previous intellectual ramblings, which enabled them to talk in the way they do. And this, and not any “actual” happiness of the fish, is what allows them to construct such a thing as the happiness of fish to begin with. That philosophers can make up topics such as the “happiness of fish” is a result of their ramblings, and these very ramblings constitute, so to speak, the happiness of philosophers. This is from *whence* they can observe it. (“Rambling Without Destination” 258-259).

Moeller’s description highlights the simple communicative process of *you*-ing. His analysis of the fish story focuses on an aspect of *you* that occurs in “mundane” speech and does not claim any transcendental state. “*You*-ing” as roaming involves the motion of the agent just as much as the non-deliberateness of their motion. The combination of *you* 遊 and *xin* 心 thus becomes even more telling about the connection between mind and body in the achievement of spontaneity.

Both instances provide a piece of advice for one who has not yet attained spontaneity, or in this case the ability to *you*. These prescriptions contribute to our discussion that *you* is a psychological state as the condition of the *xin* (as in whether or not it is “fully-formed”) can either promote or inhibit one’s potential to *you*. If one’s heart-mind is made up and bogged down by distinctions, then the joy of roaming freely and employing spontaneity is lost. This is the connection between the passive and active aspects of spontaneity.

4.1.3 *You* and Spontaneity

The ability to *you* demonstrates how the psychological mindset of the sage facilitates spontaneity in action. A mind that is still responds to things as they happen, and this is the mark of spontaneity. The passive aspect is the allowing, and the active aspect is the response. Cook Ding and other “skill story” characters who perform spontaneously no longer think or deliberate. The cultivation of Cook Ding’s skill should not be understood as his pursuit of the attainment of the skill of butchering. Instead, the

reason he can butcher so effortlessly is because he does not have a pre-meditated procedure already in place (*cheng xin*).

The present account of *you* builds on our interpretation of *ziran* by understanding spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* as an organic happening. The physical act of wandering helps to develop the more active aspect of spontaneity. As we have seen, at the root of the ability to *you* is a certain stillness of the mind. Spontaneity is marked by the psychological mindset established by *ziran*. For a thing to be just what it is allows actions to follow with freedom and ease. Spontaneity in this way is categorized by non-deliberateness, but not utter unawareness. The sage has the distinctive ability to wander and enjoy the freedom that follows.

This is different from interpretations of the text that read it as purely passive. Instead of imagining the sage to have no agency, agency is reimagined as organic responsiveness. This responsiveness is based only on the immediate circumstances and evolves along with the changing circumstances. Allowing the mind to “wander far and unfettered” is available to all things human and non-human.

This might remind us of our above discussion about Machek’s description of “an existence of just one genuine self which is fundamentally unstructured but can be structured (and then de-structured and restructured) and exteriorized as appropriate in the given circumstances” (“Beyond Sincerity” 53). Rather than assuming we all have an unchanging internal core, he argues that the entirety of one’s person is transformed as each role is wholly internalized and embodied. The person is then characterized by the kind of playing or wandering (*you* 遊), and Machek takes it to be the Zhuangzian ideal to interacting with the world. *You*, he says, is widely agreed upon as

a spontaneous responsiveness to things as they are. This activity is autotelic, i.e. serves no further goal beyond itself, it connotes leisurely, carefree relaxed attitude; it entails an appreciation and sensitivity to multiplicity of possible courses of action and different forms of life, including the alternatives to mainstream values; and it entails a freedom from impediments (*qiong* 窮). (“Beyond Sincerity” 61)

Machek takes this kind of wandering or playing as akin to the way we dream. Since it is usually the case that we cannot exert control over our dreams, we must submit to what is out of our control. If we take Machek's reading of *you* in the *Zhuangzi* it seems to advocate a kind of wandering in and out of different circumstances without identifying with an essential self, and most importantly, this is done through a dissolving of perceived distinctions.

To wander in the *Zhuangzi* is to do away with planning and scheming and instead rely on spontaneity through a constant openness to the transformation of the whole person. Like a traveler to a new country, one who "wanders" and "roams" rather than "travels" and "journeys" simply observes her surroundings without a destination in mind, and without imposing judgments and distinctions. The wandering traveler has no objective in sightseeing other than purely absorbing the sights. The places visited might be slightly changed by the traveler's simply having been there, but it is not the traveler's intentions or agenda that made the change.

For Zhuangzi, predetermined distinctions inhibit spontaneity. Spontaneity is a constant manifestation of what is already there, an organic happening. The *cheng xin* prohibits one from responding to the circumstances as they arise. If we allow for the *cheng xin* to act as the ruler, then those who are knowledgeable as well as those who are not will act based on their knowledge. This means that whatever the "right" answer is, each will act based on her own knowledge of the "right", dissolving any objective notion of what is right from the start.

Still, we may wonder if fasting the mind is the only way to achieve spontaneity? How does it happen and to whom? As the fasting the mind passage occurs only once in the text and there are myriad examples of spontaneity occurring without it, it is surely not Zhuangzi's only move. It is just one. Most importantly, it cannot be pursued directly. If one were to pursue a fasting of the mind in order to achieve a goal, it would defeat the purpose of fasting in the same way pursuing the achievement of spontaneity would be self-defeating. The purpose of fasting the mind is to relinquish the goal-oriented mindset, and so pursuing it directly would be paradoxical.

Most of the sages in the *Zhuangzi* seem to have the ability to act spontaneously already. If we are right to assume *ziran* as an organic happening where spontaneity is

already occurring and remains occurring, and the linear progression of efficient causality is dissolved, then similarly will the ability to be spontaneous will simply just happen. It is the Daoist vision of causality being allowed and elicited rather than forced that maintains spontaneity in mind and action.

4.2 Spontaneity and *Tian* 天

The relationship between spontaneity and nature has reappeared throughout much of this thesis. It is a difficult and complicated topic for many reasons. First, how do we define nature? Is it that which is separate from man? Does the Daoist concept of nature differ from the way we speak about nature today? Which Chinese character(s) represent the English word nature? All of these questions have been widely debated in the context of the *Zhuangzi* as well as in Daoism as a whole. The concern of the present analysis is to understand the relationship to of nature and naturalness to spontaneity. We briefly touched on the difference between “organic” and “natural” in the last chapter, but this section will elaborate on specific issues in translation and the philosophical implications that follow.

The aim will be to understand what the term nature means in the *Zhuangzi*, and what the text says about the connection between the human realm and the realm of nature. More specifically, because it has been suggested that *Zhuangzi* describes the sage as someone who embodies the way of nature, what exactly does that mean? Further, as others have related one’s inborn nature as akin to nature (the internal), how does one then act naturally? An then, we might wonder how or why a convergence with nature should indicate a good life?

These questions have been framed in many ways. It has become increasingly popular to explore Daoist notions of nature and what is natural in terms of ecology, often resulting in the prescription to take Daoist tenets as a form of environmentalism.⁴⁹ This has been quickly revoked by many scholars who claim that

⁴⁹ See Eric Nelson’s “The Human and the Inhuman: Ethics and Religion in the *Zhuangzi*”, Callicott and Ames *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, and Paul D’Ambrosio’s “Rethinking Environmental Issues in a Daoist Context: Why Daoism Is and Is Not Environmentalism”

the Daoist concept of nature did not separate nature and man, and so the idea that Daoism promotes environmentalism has no grounds. That is, if nature is not distinct from man then it cannot expose rules or norms that man can objectify and intend to follow, ethically or otherwise. Leaving questions of environmentalism aside, the understanding of how human beings conceive of, relate to, and interact with nature (both in terms of the natural world as well as *tian*) is a perennial theme in the *Zhuangzi*. We have already discussed many passages revolving around the connection between the heavenly realm and the human realm, but what do these passages mean in terms of spontaneity?

The word nature itself is complicated enough in the English language, let alone its counterparts in Chinese. Perkins nicely problematizes the difference between natural vs supernatural, and natural vs artificial as follows,

If we take the natural as all things operating according to physical or natural laws, everything we ever encounter becomes ‘natural’. With no supernatural other, ‘nature’ comes to just mean ‘everything’. The distinction between natural and artificial raises even more problems, as some human actions seem essentially the same as some animal actions [...] A further problem with both distinctions is that if taken seriously, they make nonsense of ‘acting naturally.’ In the first case, all human actions are natural... On the second distinction, all human actions are artificial, making acting ‘naturally’ impossible by definition. (“Following Nature” 329).

Nonetheless, Perkins rightly concludes that these difficulties should not be imposed on the way we understand ancient Chinese notions of nature, but still need to be addressed and cleared up in discussions on translation. When we translate a Chinese character to mean natural, we must explain what we mean by natural because there can be important philosophical implications lost in translation. For example, natural can mean one thing in the *Zhuangzi* and something else in the *Laozi*.

We can thus begin by exploring what the word nature means in early Chinese philosophy. Many different characters have been translated as nature, most notably *ziran* 自然 and *tian* 天. Then under the umbrella phrase of “heaven and earth” in

reference to “everything” are *tiandi* 天地, *tianxia* 天下, and *wanwu* 万物. As discussed above, it is problematic to translate *ziran* as nature, especially in the *Zhuangzi*. In Legge’s translation alone, there are 133 mentions of the word nature, most of which he attributes to the heavenly (*tian*). Instead, as pointed out by Wang Bo and Wang Yan, this is *ziranjie* which is clearly nature (in the same sense as *tian*) is different from just *ziran* itself. They conclude that Zhuangzi’s proposition to following nature is in reference to the *benxing* 本性, or natural tendencies of the agent.

However, we might agree that since the *benxing* was never mentioned in the Inner Chapters, that this interpretation might have been influenced by Guo Xiang’s commentary where the term refers to “loneness” (or lack of a fixed idea about *shi/fei*) (D’Ambrosio “Imagination” 32).

Then the question becomes not about “what is nature”, but about “what is natural”. If naturalness is conceived of in the sage as being able to follow one’s own natural tendencies, how do we identify what is natural? It is important when reading about following nature in the *Zhuangzi* that we do not mistake this for the sage looking to the natural world as separate from humanity in the sense of using natural patterns as a model. Any sort of modeling would veer away from the entirety of Zhuangzi’s philosophy which guides one to model nothing and instead simply respond. This is why we identified the difference between natural and organic during the previous chapter of this thesis as being a dynamic and lived version of the more static state of naturalness.

If the key to sagehood were to follow one’s natural tendencies, it would mean making these tendencies identifiable and discrete. Instead, what is spontaneous is processional and always happening. *Ziran* as an organic happening is a divergence from natural tendencies. It might be natural for one to be meddlesome, but we might not call it organic. Conceiving of spontaneity in terms of natural tendencies poses the danger of identifying with a self where defining *xing* 性 (nature) becomes a goal oriented endeavor. Instead, the transformational experience of an organic happening relinquishes this sort of identification.

Further, following one’s natural inclinations would seem quite difficult considering from a young age at one point or another we are told how to think or what

to believe. How can we know that what appears as natural is not just a product of upbringing imprinting and instilling values? For this reason, Guo Xiang did not blame the sages for leaving an example. He blamed the people for following their example. For this reason, Guo explains “the self-so is the walking, the six classics are the traces” (“Self-So” 513). Spontaneity is not the way of the sage in the sense of “he knows it and I can learn from him”. Spontaneity is the organic generation of one’s ability to allow for it rather than model it.

But if heaven should not be a “model” then why do we get explanations like in Chapter 31 “The Old Fisherman” that “the sage models himself on Heaven” and the fool “is unable to model himself on Heaven but instead worries about what other people think” (故聖人法天貴真，不拘於俗。愚者反此，不能法天而恤於人) (Ziporyn “Complete” 296).

There are two difficulties with this translation. The first is the confusion in translation of the word Heaven (*tian*) from Chinese to English, and the other is in Ziporyn’s choice in the word “model”. Regarding the latter, it would seem Ziporyn was attuning to the grammatical necessities of the text, but would also agree that to “model” heaven does not fall in line with Zhuangzi’s overall philosophy.

Regarding the former, as pointed out by Perkins, it can be easy to confuse this kind of relation to heaven in terms of the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial. Just because Zhuangzi’s stories usually take place in “nature” (along rivers and in the forest etc.), does not necessarily mean that what is natural has to be tied to nature as such. We should also not be quick to assume that the *Zhuangzi* is suggesting we do away with all human-made structures and inventions, but rather that we should be careful with how we use them. If humans are a part of nature, then in what way could we justify the argument that they are capable of disrupting it?

The issue comes in when human made tools and measurements cause punctures to what would otherwise be spontaneous, and thus jar our harmony with *tian*. There are many examples of these kinds of tools and developments made by man that do not impinge on *ziran* and are in line with the organic happening of all things. All of these man-made creations lie on a spectrum of spontaneity, and it is mostly intuitive in understanding which of those are more spontaneous than others. A fishing pole, for

example, might be more natural than industrial fishing mechanisms, or an oil rig. This does not mean that we should not fish, but that when plastic from the fishing industry pollutes the water, or overfishing occurs, we should consider reworking our mechanisms. It is not necessarily the case that we should not source oil all together, but at the moment it begins to disrupt the natural ecosystem and cause harm with leaks or explosions, we cannot just continue to move forward without revising the engineering of the rigs. This would be “adding to the process of generation”.

In fact, as pointed out by D’Ambrosio, the Daoist vision of utility and using things might even promote a sense of environmentalism even if it is not necessarily what Daoists had in mind (“Rethinking” 412). Remembering our discussion about Cook Ding in terms of *ziran*, we described the dissolving of a subject-object distinction. In terms of his knack, Cook Ding is not concerned about it at all. Instead, the importance is the connection between his tool and the ox. The harmony between himself, the knife, and the ox work in a harmonious synchrony whereby he is not asserting any skill onto the knife (even if his skill was cultivated over time it was not the product of a plan). It is through his non-interference that the knife can “play” (*you 遊*). This revokes any notion of nature being a model for humans. It is rather that by becoming one with the blade to the carcass that he is efficacious in his knack.

This argument goes beyond the use of tools and into the realm of language as well. Zhuangzi criticizes our reliance on the categories in language, particularly in terms of opposites, for prohibiting one from being able to see a thing as that thing, rather than what it is in relation to something else. Like the use of tools and things, using words as a means to an end prohibits one from acting naturally. In the pursuit of profit or fame, one is bound by using tools and language as a means to an end, rather than becoming one with them as a transformational process.

Tianle 天樂, or Heavenly Joy, is a compound term found in Chapter 13 “Heaven’s Course” *TianDao* 天道 of the *Zhuangzi*.

Heaven’s course is to circulate without accumulation, and it is thus that all the ten thousand things come to completion. An emperor’s course is to circulate without accumulation, and it is thus that all the empire coalesces around him.

A sage's course is to circulate without accumulation, and it is thus that all within the four seas yield before him. Clear-eyed toward Heaven, blocked in sagacity, coursing freely in every direction through all the intrinsic virtuosities of a true king or emperor, he does what he does spontaneously [其自為也], all oblivious, for what he experiences is never anything but stillness. Yet the sage is not still because he think it is *good* to be still. He is still simply because nothing in the world is sufficient to disrupt his mind.

(Ziporyn, "Complete" 148)⁵⁰

By experiencing stillness and simplicity, the sage can understand Heaven. The same stillness and simplicity of Dao can be understood by the sage so as to bring harmony with *tian*. In this way, he allows things to be as they are without imposing unnaturalness or biases on any one thing. Each thing is allowed to flourish spontaneously as it is. The joy of heaven can be found by understanding the joys of Heaven and Earth.

To clearly understand the intrinsic powers of Heaven and Earth is what is called the great root and the great source. This is to harmonize with Heaven. Applying it to bring all in the world equally into accord is to harmonize with humanity. Harmonizing with humanity produces the music, the joy, of humanity. Harmonizing with Heaven produces the music, the joy, of Heaven. (Ziporyn, "Complete" 148)

The question regarding if naturalness will lead to a good life further problematizes notions of spontaneity because the *Zhuangzi* has been argued to be amoral and propose nothing more than stories which might lead to a certain outlook. This problem is far

⁵⁰ Legge also offers an interesting translation of this passage. I want to highlight his translation of 其自為也 to be yet act spontaneously from themselves. The "from themselves" emphasizes the natural and self-generating aspect of the agent. I still chose to use Ziporyn's translation for consistency. I also appreciate Ziporyn translating "the great root" and "the great source" without capitalization as that tends to encourage some sort of lofty philosophical concept which I believe Zhuangzi would have wanted to avoid. See Appendix 3 for Legge's full translation of this passage.

too expansive to address in this thesis, and so I will leave the discussion of ethics aside and analyze the problem apart from any ethical assertion. Instead, can we infer from the text that a level of harmony with *tian* is the way of the sage. The answer of the good life is separate from whether or not it is right or wrong, but rather about if the text suggests living as such might be desired and/or worthwhile. Regardless of what the text may or may not morally suggest, it does seem to provide insight into the joyful, carefree, and uninhibited lifestyle of the sage. At the same time, this is never regarded as a model or normative suggestion.

4.3 Spontaneity and Death

This section will address questions regarding Zhuangzi's views on life and death, and how those views might effect the attainment of spontaneity. Death is certainly a pivotal topic in most philosophical theories. As David Chai points out,

Nothing is more vital to a philosophy of life than death; indeed, our entire conceptualization of existence is predicated upon holding back the nihilistic forces of non-existence. Many of the world's religions and philosophical traditions have sought to elucidate the nature of death. Indeed, many of the world's moral systems are colored by a dichotomist vision of death and life. What is more, when we are not engaged in ethical debates over the nature of death, we happily psychologize it, hoping to justify our deep-seated resentment at being deprived of life's gift ("On Pillowing" 483).

Death in this way is not only relevant to us now, but was also a significant topic of controversy in the time of Zhuangzi which has transcended into the current debate. Death is mentioned several times throughout the text often in a way mocking the human fear of it and subsequent rites that follow. This mocking is also a direct reference to the Confucians and Mohists whose dealings with death through norms and rituals are absurd to Zhuangzi.

Zhuangzi would argue that death is not something to fear or be upset about, be it your own death or that of one of your loved ones, as is so often the case for many

individuals. Instead, death is to be seen as a part of the natural course of things, and planning for it or letting it affect one's emotional response is a futile endeavor.

This view of death being part of the natural processes of change has been adopted by many. Wu Kuang-Ming describes how "A thing's change involves both growth into itself and death into species-transformation [...] death and life are two aspects in the rounds of species-changes among things" (70). Ames highlights the goodness in death by it being the aspect making transformation and all of its complexity and novelty possible as it enables life (Ames, "Death as Transformation" 54). Moeller takes a step further to claim death cannot be a substantial loss because there is not anything substantial to begin with, and because one will simply turn into something else, one cannot really die (Moeller, "Daoism Explained" 84).

David Chai points out how others have focused on the psychological aspect of Zhuangzi's view on death. Chad Hansen sees Zhuangzi's skepticism to doubt the mind and the foolishness in thinking it could know anything about death. Another aspect of the psychological view is present in how views on death affect the emotions. Amy Olberding argues that the grief resulting from death is not possible for the Zhuangzi because death is not disvalued. Similarly, Jung Lee says that "For Zhuangzi, the appropriate emotional and behavioral response to death is not dread, anxiety, or fear but equanimity and acceptance— equanimity based on skepticism of the value of life and acceptance based on the view that death represents a mere episode in the larger narrative of the cosmos" (100). Chai, who's view will be highlighted most closely throughout this section, argues that all of these views fail to address Zhuangzi's meontological notion of time.

By exploring Zhuangzi's views on death, we focus on an important aspect of spontaneity. It would seem that how one views death could have profound effects on his/her capacity to act spontaneously. This is, as mentioned above, a product of viewing the death in terms of its place in the greater transformation of the ten thousand things. In placing death in this arena, one does not disvalue or fear death. One is also able to respond to death appropriately in accordance with Dao rather than with certain mandated rites and norms.

Additionally, one can find a level of emotional peace, stillness and equanimity allowing for spontaneity to occur. An aspect of this view on death is closely related to time. Considering human time is often measured by birth and death, Zhuangzi's meontological notion of time would promote spontaneity as one's self-so-ness is derived from Dao. In what follows, we will explore each of these topics and examine how they could effect one's capacity for spontaneity both conceptually and in everyday life.

4.3.1 Spontaneity and Ritual

We see one story of Zhuangzi mocking Confucian death rituals in Chapter 6,

Three men, Master Sanghu, Meng Zifan, and Master Qin Zhang were friends [...] Soon Master Shanghu died. Before he was buried, Confucius heard about it and sent Zigong to help with the funeral affairs. One [of the two surviving friends] had composed a song, one strummed his zither, and in harmony they sang,

Ah, so,
Sanghu!

Ah, so,
Sanghu!

You've returned to the
genuine. While we remain here
as men, O!

Zigong rushed forward and said, 'May I ask, singing in the presence of a corpse, is a ritual propriety?' The two men looked at each other and laughed, saying, 'What does this guy know about the point of ritual?' (Zhuangzi 6.60-65; Watson 49)

As singing in the sense of an act of joy does not seem outwardly appropriate during the witnessing of a corpse, Zigong immediately gasps. He wonders if this can be considered part of ritual propriety (*li* 禮). The laughing response other two friends is

not to refute the existence of *li* but rather to reject that ritual must mean any one thing universally. The idea that there is a categorical way to respond to death is comical to the men who simply responded spontaneously with song to the death of their friend.

Fraser's analysis of this passage argues that it is the "uncanniness and mystery" as essential qualities of death cannot be stripped away by that ritual. These qualities make ritual a way for us to make sense of and categorize the inevitable naturally occurring transformations of the ten thousand things ("Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi", 419). By the friend's admission of their companion's "return to the genuine", they are expressing this inevitability of death. This, Fraser rightly remarks, is "an allusion, in the Zhuangist conceptual framework, to a return or embrace of Nature (*tian*)". Zhuangzi uses the spontaneous reaction of singing as an example of a rite, but not *the* rite. Fraser's helpful comparison to Xunzi's views elaborate on this point:

The friends' rite does not purport to secure order or organize nature but simply to acknowledge — and celebrate—our place in it. Accordingly, the friends also do not share Xunzi's concern with 'maintaining an unbroken unity in the human, cultural *dao* by incorporating death within it. Instead of seeking a sense of security or belonging by identifying with a heavily ritualized — and therefore familiar and controlled cultural order, their spontaneous ceremony aims at finding peace by situating human life in and identifying with uncontrollable, unfathomable natural processes, achieving an attitude the Zhuangzi elsewhere describes as "being at peace with the moment and dwelling in the flow' (Zhuangzi 1956, 6.52; Watson 1968, 84)." (Fraser, "Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi" 419)

It would seem that Zhuangzi's rejection of specific rites coupled with his focus on the naturalness of death could have a profound effect on how or if one can respond spontaneously. Therefore, there is no wonder death is such an important topic in the text. Death invokes strong emotions which in turn inhibit spontaneity. This reminds us

of our discussion on *ziran* by “not allowing likes and dislikes [*hao* 好 and *e* 惡] to damage you internally, instead making it your constant practice to follow along with the way each this is of itself [*ziran*],

This passage notes a larger and more important point regarding rites and ritual. It shows that Zhuangzi does not outright refute the implementation of rites. What he promotes is just that there are not any certain categorical and uncompromising set of rites that we must follow. In responding to events with spontaneity, rites may arise either for the individual or larger groups. This is an important aspect of Zhuangzi’s spontaneity because it demonstrates flexibility and openness available to agency. Spontaneity for Zhuangzi is not a complete refusal of rites for that in itself would not be spontaneous. It is rather about the reason for performing these rites (which might actually be contradictory to the definition of rites if we define rites as only those performed for duty).

One person may respond to death with their own traditions handed down from generations and culture, and that is spontaneous and appropriate for them. Another may do it in search of fulfilling external factors. For example, one may sing a certain religious song out of a duty or for reasons he/she may not even understand. Another reason may be to demonstrate to others their commitment to a ritual for the purposes of praise, or conversely to avoid blame. This response would not be spontaneous, and may leave the person just as emotionally distraught as prior to completing the ritual. Instead, singing a song that soothes the individual for reasons only in response to their inner understanding would be appropriate to alleviate the pain.

Another passage, and probably the most well-known story about death is about the death of Zhuangzi’s wife.

When Zhuangzi’s wife died, Huizi went to offer his condolences. He found Zhuangzi squatting on the floor singing, accompanying himself by pounding on an overturned washtub held between his splayed legs. Huizi said, ‘You live with someone, raise children with her, grow old with her—not crying over her death is enough already, isn’t it? But to go so far as to pound on a washtub and sing, isn’t that going too far?’

Zhuangzi said, ‘No, it’s not. When this one first died, how could I not feel grief just like anyone else? But then I considered closely how it had all begun: previously, before she was born, there was no life there. Not only no life: no physical form. Not only no physical form: not even energy. Then in the course of some heedless mingling mishmash a change occurred and there was energy, and then this energy changed and there was a physical form, and then this form changed and there was life. Now there has been another change and she is dead. This is how she participates in the making of the spring and the autumn, of the winter and the summer. For the moment a human lies stiffened here, slumbering in this enormous house. And yet there I was getting all weepy, even going on to wail over her. Even to myself I looked like someone without any understanding of fate. So I stopped. (Zhuangzi 18.3, Ziporyn “Complete” 184-85)

Zhuangzi’s recognizes that the death of his wife is just like the changing of the seasons (是相與為春秋冬夏四時行也). Instead of mocking the rituals surrounding death and bereavement, Zhuangzi is focusing on our emotional attachment to death. He is urging us to recognize the sort of inevitability of death as discussed above, so as to invoke a sense of peacefulness rather than extreme emotional anguish.

Whether it is the death of oneself, or the death of others, an individual’s views on death can affect his/her capacity for spontaneity. If one is too worried about death, they may avoid embarking on certain experiences. This is not to say Zhuangzi recommends engaging in life-threatening activities, just insofar as it hinders spontaneity. The sense of equanimity Zhuangzi feels after the death of his wife is an emotional response in direct correlation with his views on transformation and what is natural. It is important to note that his immediate response is grief, but he does not hold on to that grief for long. The grief is an immediate spontaneous and natural response. What would be unnatural would be to hold on to that grief for an extended amount of time without recognizing the sure fate of death.

Zhuangzi takes this idea a step further to say that not only should we recognize the inevitability of death, we should value it just as much as life.

Suddenly Sir Comealong fell ill. Gasping and wheezing, on the verge of keeling over, he was surrounded by his weeping wife and children. Sir Plowshare, coming to visit him, said to them, ‘Ach! Away with you! Do not disturb his transformation!’ Leaning across the doorframe, he said to the invalid, ‘How great is the Process of Creation- Transformation! What will it make you become, where will it send you? Will it make you into a mouse’s liver? Or perhaps an insect’s arm?’

Sir Comealong said, ‘A child obeys its parents wherever they may send him—north, south, east, or west. Now yin and yang are much more to a man than his parents. If they send me to my death and I disobey them, that would make me a traitor—what fault would it be of theirs? For the Great Clump [*da kuai* 大塊] burdens me with a physical form, labors me with life, eases me with a physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old age and rests me with death. What makes my life good is what makes my death good; that I consider my life good is what makes me consider my death good. Now suppose a great master smith were casting metal. If the metal jumped up and said, ‘I insist on being nothing but an Excalibur!’ the smith would surely consider it to be an inauspicious chunk of metal. Now if I, having happened to stumble into a human form, should insist, ‘Only a human! Only a human!’ Creation- Transformation would certainly consider me an inauspicious chunk of a person. So now I look upon all heaven and earth as a great furnace, and the Process of Creation- Transformation as a great blacksmith—where could I go that would not be all right? Total sleep comes, then startle wakings.’ (Zhuangzi 6.53, Ziporyn “Complete” 97-98)

Fraser observes two main points from this passage as ways of defending an equal valuing of life and death: 1) life and death form an integral whole, so you cannot value one without equally valuing the other and 2) “human life is a part and product of the interplay of natural forces”, and because fundamentally these are all composed of *qi*, it would mean that anything emerging from “what makes my life good (*qi*)” is from the

same goodness (“Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi” 423-424). Regarding the former, it is because of life and death being of the same overall process, a “one thing”, we are committed to valuing both equally. Fraser points out that while this point is sufficient to *accept* death, but it is not entirely convincing to *value* death. The latter he finds more persuasive in that the goodness of life is a direct correlation to the goodness of Dao, where the transformation of life into death is equally good.

If we can agree with Fraser’s interpretation on this passage, we can also see how this sort of acceptance of death and vision of the goodness of *qi* would facilitate spontaneous behavior. We already discussed how it might allow for one to respond with appropriate (in the sense of appropriate to them) rites, but it may also allow for the individual to live more freely and without certain constraints. By simply having the belief that life and death are of equal value, we are rid of fear or stress over it. This psychological attitude alone can allow spontaneity to manifest in various ways. It does not have to mean that this spontaneous reaction is directly related to not fearing death. For some, relinquishing a fear of death, and even valuing it could mean less overall stress in life. Less stress and worry would inherently allow for one to respond naturally to circumstances rather than based on a fear.

4.3.2 Spontaneity and Time

If one does not share this sentiment on death with Zhuangzi, how would it effect his or her life? How would one’s priorities change if he or she feared death? One possibility would be related to how we view time. An aspect of why death can be stressful stems from how it can affect our view on time and worrying about what we can do with it. Aiming to make the most of our time, or worrying about not doing so, presumably would affect one’s priorities and goals. If valuing time is a derivative of valuing death, can we find any evidence of Zhuangzi’s view on time?

David Chai argues that the reason we pay attention to time is because of how we relate to it personally, and that we are aware of time is because “it is that which makes us temporally relevant” (“Meontological” 361). He describes Zhuangzi’s notion of time as meontological, or from the perspective of nothingness. This nothingness derives from the Daoist cosmogonic vision of a timeless world comprised of

ontological nothingness (*wu* 無) and Dao. It began with primal chaos (*hundun* 混沌) which can be thought of as an undifferentiated wholeness, and from there formed the One (*yi* 一) which then gave birth to the many all born out of a mirroring of Dao (“Meontological” 362). Ontic beings then created the platform for us to think of time as we do today, and this version of time is not applicable to the One which is timeless. Ontic beings being preceded by nonbeing then can only measure the duration of their own existence against it.

Of that born before heaven and earth, is it a thing? That which treats things as mere things is not a thing. Those things that issue forth cannot precede other things, yet there were things already extant. Furthermore, there were things already extant before then too, and so on without end (Guo 1990: 763). (“Meontological” 363)

Therefore, because cosmological time is not measured by the birth of ontic beings, time as we think of it now (that which passes in between being and nonbeing), instead begins with the holism of the One. However, the One expresses knowable and actualized things, so is measured in a different temporal realm than Dao which encompasses an “empty equanimity whose purpose is to facilitate the actualization of its own unknowability (“Meontological” 363). Chai concludes that this cosmological time of the One is “inferior and incomplete” in comparison to the nontime of Dao that is immeasurable.

Although Chai rightly points out that the *Zhuangzi* does not refuse the idea of human measured time, his sense of a meontological notion of time will affect how someone conceives of the past, present and future. He translates the following passage as such,

Things cannot avoid being born before they are born and cannot resist dying when they are already dead. Death and life are close to one another, yet their principle cannot be seen. I look for its root but it extends back without end; I search for its end but it stretches on without stopping. Without ending or stopping, having no room for words, this is the shared principle of things.

Dao cannot be taken to have being, and if it does, it cannot be taken to not be so. To call it Dao, this is but a temporary measure (Guo 1990: 917). (“Meontological” 364)

Without thinking in terms of human “temporal directionality”, the sage may be set free from attachments and existential crises. “The Course has no end or beginning, while creatures are born and die” (Zhuangzi 17, Ziporyn “Complete” 177). The sage, then who’s being mirrors the course, lives as though he has no beginning or end as well. This would then clearly have a deep significance on the ability to act spontaneously. If one isn’t stuck with the burden of viewing existence as only a matter of beginning at birth and ending at death, but rather has a cosmogonic view of timelessness, it would seem much easier to act spontaneously.

The *Zhuangzi* stated,

We receive of it some one completed form, a specific fully-formed body, and then we keep that alive only by constantly anticipating its end, grinding and lacerating it against all things around us, everything it does just flashing by and away like an unstoppable galloping horse—is it not sad? All our lives we labor, and nothing is achieved. Worn and exhausted to the point of collapse, never knowing what it all amounts to—how can we not lament this? What good does it do if others say, ‘To us he it not dead’? The body has decayed and the mind went with it. Can this be called anything but an enormous sorrow? (Zhuangzi 2, Ziporyn “Complete” 52)

This passage instantiates a reference to the relativity of time as we measure it. There is an admission to birth and death, but not in a way that gives us a reason to view it as a completion. Our forms are forever transforming as the years pass on as the metaphor of the galloping horse expresses. One can never really pinpoint or capture the image of galloping, just as our existence in the sense of continual transformation. Therefore, our questions of what to do and not do become just as transformative.

Questions of what to do and not do, how to behave and not behave will all directly influence the spontaneity of an individual. When Zhuangzi recommends for the individual to “simply allow their self-transformation”, he is suggesting that these questions are futile in the scheme of the cosmological oneness. When one is able to simply allow for transformation without submitting to illusions about time, spontaneity will naturally ensue. All of the endless possibilities to which Zhuangzi refers will become possible. This is a natural unfolding of time that is not bound by the human imposition of a linear progression. Our conceptions of past present and future only serve to categorize the world in exactly how Zhuangzi sees as an impinging factor to what is otherwise natural.

In terms of how our conception of past present and future determines our daily life, Zhuangzi tells us of Mr. Ranxiang (*ranxiang shi* 冉相氏).

Mr. Ranxiang grasped the principle on which all things revolved and followed them to their completion. His joining with them was without ending or beginning, attainment or time. Changing with them on a daily basis, he himself remained unchanged. The sage has yet to begin thinking of heaven, has yet to begin thinking of man, has yet to begin thinking of a beginning, and has yet to begin thinking of things (Guo 1990: 885). (Chai, “Meontological” 368)

Chai reinforces the thrust of this passage to mean that “given that Dao does not have a measurable beginning or end and lacks attainment of being or time, it can only be characterized as that whose spontaneity lies in the realm of unknowability” (“Meontological” 369). In other words, because the Dao is unknowable and the sage matches this, he darkens with it and becomes just as mysterious.

This in turn allows him to see things as they are without striking his biases.

Mr. Ranxiang, a sage prior to the three sage emperors, grasped the principle of true emptiness as the limitless evolving proceeding of Dao and followed the myriad things to completion. In joining with the transformation of things the

One knew not of ending or beginning, attainment or time. In joining with the transformation of things the One remained unchanged and being unchanged it could thereby spontaneously transform. As his age had such a means, he used it to return to what is natural thereby attaining his true character. Furthermore, using one's mind to seek out heaven as a teacher will not succeed. What can be done to reverse such blind following? The sage has yet to think of heaven and human, but heaven and human exist of themselves. The sage has yet to think of a beginning of things, but the beginning of things lies in selfhood. The movement of the ages bends and stretches but does not stop. Complete in motion it remains vigilant without being excessive, joining with the dark principle of things. How can it be any other way but this! (Zhang 2004: 14.429). (Chai 370-71)

On a daily basis then, one moves freely and spontaneously without judgment for the other. By recognizing the sprout of all things emerging from the undifferentiated oneness of Dao, the true nature of things in their self-so-ness becomes apparent. Because heaven and human appear simultaneously, heaven exists in all things.

An inextricable difficulty of reading and interpreting the *Zhuangzi* in general comes when imagining how certain philosophical concepts would manifest in the real world. This stems from the exact unknowability and mystery of Dao that is inherently a characteristic of the sage. It would seem that this was part of Zhuangzi's strategy in not offering any sort of procedure to sagehood, and in avoiding (and even criticizing) notions of ritual. Nonetheless, it can be a fruitful endeavor to explore such possibilities for the current purposes of this thesis. We can imagine one example of how this notion of time and spontaneity would manifest in one's everyday life through examining some everyday anxieties for the average person. This might be in deciding what to eat, although small and mundane it is yet common challenge for many people.

Eating is something that each person has to do each day, and an event that directly effects our health and well-being. Eating poorly can cause bad health and eating well can encourage flourishing. So, presumably, most people will at one time or another experience anxiety over what they should and should not eat.

Additionally, considering the world and health experts carry an assortment of recommendations and opposing theories, it can be stressful in deciding what information to digest.

One might worry that the sage in the *Zhuangzi* might eat only to satiate his cravings without a care for the effects on his health. However, from our above discussion we would have to assume this would not be possible. In theory, by allowing his oneness with Dao, the sage would be incapable of harm and instead always be in harmony. This is directly correlated to the fact that he derives his self-so-ness from Dao. This is different than how Guo Xiang interpreted the text. As Chai points out,

In the case of the *Zhuangzi*, self-so-ness is derived directly from Dao whereas Guo Xiang saw it as inherent to things themselves. From this we may conclude that the *Zhuangzi*'s take on human measured time has a more onto-phenomenological slant than one might at first presume. (Chai, "Meontological" 370)

In deriving one's spontaneity from Dao, the sage will not be capable of gorging nor starvation. In his harmony with oneness and Dao, whether a decision is mundane or significant he will be able to simply respond to the complexities of current circumstances. When hungry, he will eat, when full he will stop. He will eat what nourishes him and avoid what does not. For this the entire of Chapter Three is duly titled "The Primacy of Nourishing Life" 養生主 *yangsheng zhu* (Ziporyn "Complete" 68).

This is not to say he will strive for longevity. Longevity could very well be a result, but is not the goal. For this reason, *Zhuangzi* mocks those who praise Pengzu, a character who was said to have lived thousands of years. "And yet nowadays Pengzu alone has a special reputation for longevity, and everyone tries to match him. Pathetic isn't it?" (*Zhuangzi* 1, Ziporyn "Complete" 43). Longevity, he goes on later to mock as being immeasurable both in quantity and value. In the scheme of *Zhuangzi*'s sense of time, longevity does not exist. He even goes as far as to say Pengzu died an early death. This

is because “Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one” (Zhuangzi 2, Ziporyn “Complete” 56).

4.4 Three Categories of Spontaneity

As we have come to analyze the major themes and passages surrounding spontaneity in the text, we can now build a more precise account of exactly what Zhuangzi means. It would be helpful to categorize the ways in which we can discuss Zhuangzi’s notion of spontaneity into three parts: 1) ontological spontaneity 2) spontaneous behavior, and 3) the conditions for spontaneity to occur. As we have seen, spontaneity in the text is represented in different ways. It is not only a state of being, or an active behavior, but also discussed as a byproduct of certain conditions. These three categories allow us to delineate the different aspects of a single concept. The purpose of delineating spontaneity in this way is to allow an account of what it means to be spontaneous in the text not only through highlighting key passages, but organizing themes in a more explicit way. These categories do not serve to tell us about what spontaneity is per se, but rather offer a way of organizing how to speak about spontaneity.

4.4.1 Ontological Spontaneity

Throughout the varying uses of *ziran* discussed above, we can categorize this aspect of spontaneity as “ontological spontaneity”. Ontological spontaneity references the agent’s nature of being, and demonstrates the agent’s connection to nature as a whole. As we can see from the examples above, *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* is usually used in reference to this connection or discussion of harmony between the realm of heaven and the realm of man, and then more specifically not as a verb or noun, but an adverbial, and an ongoing process. Then and most importantly, as an organic happening.

Ziran as a noun meaning nature or what is natural and spontaneous expresses *ziran* as a characteristic or way of being that can either be attributed to an agent or the nature of another form of being/doing, i.e. “What is unforced” 應之以自然 .

Ontologically, the agent, thing, or event, is not only described *as ziran* but also the actions themselves are described as *ziran*. To “follow along with the way each thing is of itself” is to allow one’s inborn nature, given by Dao, to manifest accordingly through responsiveness. Being *ziran* becomes being one with everything else because a collective responsiveness dissolves distinction between self and other or subject and object.

This connection is a representation of the recurring theme of oneness that we find in the text, and which was also referenced during the above mention of Chapter Fourteen’s use of *ziran*. The state of “perfect unity” 調至一 describes the spontaneous and harmonious relationship between heaven and man, and that which unites them to be one. The strong reflexivity in understanding how to act “*of oneself*” is to not allow for external motivations (especially like those of praise and blame) to impinge on one’s path, but rather to behave as naturally as the wind blows and the river murmurs.

In this way, *ziran* becomes the foundation of the ten thousand things. It is important to remember that during our discussion of *ziran* above we discovered it not to hold a certain philosophical concept, but rather aspects of things connoting an organic happening. Therefore, it is not to be confused with describing a way of being to be emulated, but rather describing the way things are as they are. *Ziran* as an organic happening describes the aspect of spontaneity in the text that is both the self-soness of an entity as well as of Dao. Because things receive their self-soness from Dao, they are one with Dao. This makes their inborn nature (*xing* 性) not only what is true to themselves, but true to the greater harmony of the ten thousand things.

It is for this reason that the sage can overcome the anxieties of the common man. With his tendencies to be a product of his harmony with Dao, he can avoid the harms that might otherwise plague others.

Ruo of the Northern Sea said, ‘When you understand the Course [*Dao* 道], you will be able to see through to this coherence [*li* 理], and then you will certainly understand what is appropriate to each changing situation. This will keep you

from harming yourself with things. Those who have fully realized their intrinsic virtuosities can enter fire without feeling hot, enter water without drowning. Neither heat nor cold can harm them. This is not to say that they treat those things lightly, but rather precisely that they discern where there is danger, remaining calm in both good and bad fortune, careful about what they flee and what they approach. Thus nothing can harm them.

Hence it is said, the Heavenly is internal while the human is external. The intrinsic virtuosities belong the Heavenly. Those who know which activities are of the Heavenly and which are of the human root themselves in the Heavenly and position themselves comfortably in whatever they attain from it. (Ziporyn “Complete” 177)

Through *ziran* being what makes him himself, and what makes the ten thousand things what they are, a simple response to things will always evoke harmony. To simply respond to things is to be spontaneous. It is devoid of calculation and planning, or conscious impositions; for these are the problems in the human.

It is when the human ignores what is *ziran* that harm can ensue. This does not mean that *ziran* represents the heavenly, *ziran* simply represents what everything in the ten thousand things is. *Ziran* as spontaneity is the organic happening of natural patterns, of all of the transformative processes that are inevitably and ceaselessly occurring around us and within us. This aspect of spontaneity helps us to understand the root from where we can receive and be spontaneous. Instead of trying to think of what makes an individual who he/she is, who he/she is just what everything is. It is the moment of striving for an identity outside of this ontological oneness that one loses their innate ability to be spontaneous.

4.4.2 Spontaneous Behavior: *You* 遊

The notion of *you* serves as the representative concept of the second category of spontaneity, “spontaneous behavior”. Spontaneous behavior describes how the agent will act when spontaneity is embodied which encompasses both the active vision of

spontaneity and the passive vision. The passive aspect describes spontaneity in the psychological sense where one is simply responding to circumstances. The active sense demonstrates how one has thoughts and ideas, and that these responses are not completely unfounded or random. They are immediate and appropriate responses to circumstances that unfold organically.

You as a psychological state gives us insight into understanding from where the actions of the agent will ensue. It equally encompasses the active aspect of spontaneity in describing the agent as roaming, wandering, or playing. We see many of these instances in a metaphorical sense. For example, Lian Shu's description of the "spirit-man" who "rides upon the air and clouds, as if hitching his chariot to soaring dragons, wandering beyond the four seas" 乘雲氣，御飛龍，而遊乎四海之外 (Zhuangzi 1:11, Ziporyn "Essential" 7). It is still linked to the category of ontological spontaneity in that by being *ziran*, mirroring *dao*, and connecting the realm of heaven and human, that one can behave spontaneously through the activity of *you*. Lian Shu's ability to ride upon the clouds metaphorically achieves the sense of freedom and joy in spontaneity. It is because of his ability to respond spontaneously that this riding sets him flying feeling unfettered by everyday concerns.

The focus of this section is to emphasize *you* as a way to understand how the spontaneous actors behave, but just as important is not explicitly describing these actions. This is because of Zhuangzi's overarching rejection of distinctions. If this thesis outwardly suggested what the spontaneous person would do in any given situation, it would be a disservice to the philosophical thrust of the text. Nevertheless, a generous portion motivating this thesis has been to do just that. The purpose in doing so is to substantiate claims that will make this thesis philosophically convincing in the realm of academia. However, that was not the motivations of the *Zhuangzi*.

Although *you*-ing is rooted in a certain psychological outlook, it directly influences the way one will behave. The actual activity of wandering uninhibited and freely does not mean that one is simply lazing about in the sense of complete unawareness. The fish find joy in swimming about freely. They are unaware of their *you*-ing, but not of their environment. They are moving and acting based on the changing circumstances of their fellow fish, the currents of the water, and the structural

obstacles that precede them. The sage is acutely aware of her surroundings and circumstances and is able to respond accordingly. Action is influenced in attunement with the reality of things. This is in contrast to one who acts based on preconceived notions or societal concerns such as fame and recognition. The action of *you* gives us insight into how the psychological mindset of the spontaneous person in the *Zhuangzi* would behave in the world.

Beyond the concept of *you*, the category of spontaneous behavior is meant to show that spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* is not just a state. It is both passive and active. *You-ing* is just one way that spontaneous behavior manifests. Other obvious examples come from the “skill” stories such as the cicada catcher, the fisherman and Cook Ding (of course remembering that spontaneity is not itself a skill). Recognizing spontaneous behavior as a way that the *Zhuangzi* expresses spontaneity helps to demonstrate that non-deliberate actions can have active aspects. Cook Ding did not *try* to become an expert in his knack, he came upon it by allowing for the natural curvature of the animal to guide him. Further, even this allowing he did not try for. His non-deliberateness is exactly where *Zhuangzi*’s achievement of spontaneity occurs.

4.4.3 The Conditions for Spontaneity to Occur

The final category encompasses passages describing “the conditions for spontaneity to occur”. As discussed, spontaneity involves non-purposivity and as a consequence, one cannot pursue spontaneity directly. Instead, one can allow for the conditions that will let spontaneity occur. One such example is the fasting of the heart-mind. When one fasts the mind, he/she is not deliberately trying to be spontaneous, and is instead relinquishing fixed distinctions and learned behaviors so that spontaneity will naturally ensue. If one were to pursue spontaneity directly, it would be self-defeating. Likewise, pursuing the fasting of the heart mind to indirectly achieve spontaneity would be equally erroneous.

We might notice that the spontaneous actors in the *Zhuangzi* do not involve themselves in other common humanly concerns and environments. Recall the story from Chapter One of this thesis when *Zhuangzi* was asked by two officials of the king

to join the administration. His refusal shows how he would not even put himself in the environment where his spontaneity could be inhibited. It is equally important to be in a conducive environment for spontaneity to occur as it is for the achievement itself.

That said, pursuing the creating of conditions directly would be equally self-defeating. The idea of pursuing anything would be a failure of spontaneity because spontaneity is organic and non-deliberate. Pursuit of spontaneity would put in place a hierarchy of values and mean Zhuangzi was suggesting some normative advice. If we maintain that there is no normative advice present in the text, then this section must be understood in the same way.

The conditions for spontaneity to occur describe how the text promotes non-deliberate agency, and serves to only offer one of the three broad categories in which spontaneity appears as a theme in the text. That is, one of the overarching themes in the text as not depending on things would serve as a condition for spontaneity to occur. That is not to say that one should try not to depend on things, but that not depending on things would be one way that would allow for spontaneity. Likewise, not holding fixed perspectives and openness to new perspectives would also be a way to allow for spontaneity.

This shifting of perspectives is captured by placing one's shifting perspectives in terms of the axis of "Heaven the Potter's Wheel" (天鈞).

But to labor your spirit trying to make all things one, without realizing that it is all the same [whether you do so or not], is called 'Three in the Morning'. What is this Three in the Morning? Once a monkey trainer was distributing chestnuts. He said, 'I'll give you three in the morning and four in the evening.' The monkeys were furious. 'Well then,' he said, 'I'll give you four in the morning and three in the evening.' The monkeys were delighted. This change brought them no loss either in name or in fact, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went along with the 'thisness,' relying on the rightness of the present 'this'. Thus the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others, and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter's Wheel. This is called Walking Two Roads. (Ziporyn, "Complete" 55-56)

The wheel works as a metaphor for affirmations and negations. The monkey trainer allows his perspective to shift along with the demands of the monkeys, and he is not fussed because he recognizes the sameness. Just like a potter's wheel spins and evenly distributes the clay along its borders. Any two values/meanings (which in this case would be the morning or evening chestnut distribution) converge as one as the wheel is constantly spinning. By situating oneself on the axis of Heaven the Potter's Wheel, all of life's distinctions become equal. The unknowability of these distinctions dissolves any sense of hierarchy among values so that the sage can enjoy the stillness of his position.

Ziporyn notes the significance of Zhuangzi's use of this image of "stability in the midst of this instability" ("Complete 65). While others before him used the image to critique the relativism of shifting perspectives, Zhuangzi employs it as a solution to the same. The sage on the axis of the Heaven the Potter's wheel achieves stability, stillness, and equanimity despite the surrounding chaos. Her actions are purely spontaneous because there is nothing to which she is relying on. Affirming whatever is right at the present time and simultaneously shifting into another perspective.

However, not all opposing perspectives are so glaringly equal. What if the monkeys just wanted more overall chestnuts? Then we could see a clear difference and assume since the total number is different, that one perspective might actually be better than the other. Zhuangzi's answer would still be the same. The simple fact that one has a perspective necessarily implies the existence of other perspectives. He explains this in how *shi* and *fei* posit one another.⁵¹ You cannot affirm "this" without the implicit contrast to a "that", but your "this" becomes "that" if you're standing in "that's perspective. One perspective can never hold a higher or lower value than the other.

Placing oneself on this axis creates the condition for spontaneity to occur. By not adhering to one perspective and constantly allowing for the transformation into another, the sage depends on nothing.

⁵¹ The *shi/fei* distinction was introduced in 1.2.3 of this thesis.

4.5 Conclusion

This account of spontaneity takes *ziran* as the foundation. *Ziran* as the foundation of what spontaneity means in the text expresses how Zhuangzi does not advocate a method or procedure to reaching spontaneity. The way it is used in the text is a demonstration of how Zhuangzi would not advocate for any concept as a philosophically superior concept. *Ziran* as spontaneity informs the agent by creating a link between heaven and man whereby oneness is found. Heaven or nature is not to be emulated, but rather supports man in transforming spontaneously along with the ten thousand things. The concept of *you* 遊 gives us insight into both the psychological mindset of the spontaneous actors in the *Zhuangzi* as well as how their actions can manifest. The relationship between spontaneity and nature is understood through a concern for harmony and a particular sense of joy (*tianle* 天樂). The way the text speaks about death (and by proxy also time) has a strong influence on the capacity for spontaneity as well.

Chapter Five

Conclusion: The Present Account of Spontaneity within the Scholarly Debate

Now that we have an account of spontaneity in the text, we can move on to comparing and contrasting it to other views to see where it stands in the wider debate on spontaneity. We can recall in Chapter One of this thesis categorizing the views on spontaneity into five camps: 1) the self-negation camp 2) the minimal agency camp 3) the internal vs external camp 4) the internal following nature vs external camp, and 5) the transforming self camp. This chapter will elaborate on each camp's views in light of what we have discussed thus far. By putting the above account of spontaneity in comparison and contrast with these views we will come to find how certain views may not seem correct, and more importantly, how even those that we can agree with are lacking in providing a full picture of spontaneity. After analyzing each view, we will be able to better understand the concept of spontaneity in the text and reevaluate if the account presented here is coherent.

5.1 The Self-Negation Camp

One popular way of talking about spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* has been through examining how the text comparatively relates to the Buddhist notion of no-self. In negating or renouncing the self, through similar means to Buddhist methods like meditation and relinquishing desires, one can act spontaneously because she is not inhibited by externalities. To recap, here are some examples of scholars who take this view.

David Loy likens the self of the *Zhuangzi* to Buddhist notion of “no-self” in that both deny the ontological self (52). He says, “When there is no thing or self that exerts itself to do things, there is the spontaneity (*ziran*, ‘so of itself’) of actions that are experienced as no actions (*wu wei*), of transformations that are just as much non-transformations” (59). For Loy, by eradicating any sense of an “I”, one goes beyond the self, and does not cling or attach to externalities that influence or inhibit behaving naturally and according to one's natural tendencies based on the circumstances. It is

important to point out that Loy does well not to equate the *Zhuangzi* and Buddhism, but he still says, “the targets and conclusions of their philosophies are remarkably similar” (51). Likewise, David Hall describes the self in the *Zhuangzi* as being achieved when one becomes liberated from an unchanging identity (“Nietzsche and Chuang-Tzu”). By this liberation of the self, one finds spontaneity in action by not attaching to any identity, or at least not a fixed one. Edward Slingerland has advocated a similar reading in *Effortless Action*: “it is precisely by eliminating (false) self-forgetting or making it empty—that one is able to realize the true self” (187).

There is not an immediate problem with the assertion in these interpretations that the self should not be understood as having a fixed identity, that is very clear in both the *Zhuangzi* and Buddhist thought. My contention lies in how labeling the *Zhuangzi* as having a no-self doctrine seems to wholly deny any sense of personhood, even if that was not the intention of their work. For example, Hall’s analysis is correct in many ways by recognizing the problem with mapping a modern concept of the self onto Daoist texts. That is, we cannot say that Daoists notions of no-self are a rejection of the modern version of self because that version did not exist yet for Daoists to propose some kind of alternative. This is at the core problem of labeling the *Zhuangzi* as having a no-self doctrine, in that doing so it presupposes a rejection of the modern view of self, that of which Zhuangzi obviously had no idea about.

Drawing comparisons between the *Zhuangzi* and Buddhism can surely be a worthwhile philosophical contribution. However, the no-self deconstructivist arguments of Buddhist philosophers like Nagarjuna aim to demonstrate our sameness, whereas the *Zhuangzi* is emphasizing our differences and the oneness among them. Our differences are our sameness in the dissolving of distinctions. As briefly discussed above, the Daoist vision of cosmology wherein all of the universe is comprised of *qi* recognizes our individuality within the allotment of *qi* bestowed upon each unique thing (sentient and non-sentient). The mainstream Neo-Daoist approach to *ziran* is that each thing is endowed with a certain allotment of *qi* that dictates its/his/her role within the world. Each individual’s capacity is a reflection of their natural share of *qi* and by emptying the heart-mind one allows for self- realization.

Guo Xiang’s commentary on the *xin zhai* passage exemplifies this reading.

4.21.1G 去異端而任獨（者）也（乎）。 *Qu yiduan er ren du (zhe) ye (hu).*

Get rid of what you can observe and rely on singularity.

4.21.3G （遣）〔遺〕耳目，去心意，而符氣性之自得，此虛以待物者也。

((*Qian*) (*yi*) *ermu*, *qu xinyi*, *er fu qi xing zhi zede*, *ci xu yi dai wu zhe ye*.)

Forget the ear and eye, get rid of the heart-mind's ideas, and be in accord with your vital energy in the original state of self-realization, this is to use emptiness to respond to things.

4.21.4G 虛其心則至道集於懷也。 (*Xu qi xin ze zhi dao ji yu huai ye*.)

Empty the heart-mind and then you can reach the state where the Dao collects. (Guo Qingfan, My Translation)

Here we can see how Guo uses 端 *duan* to point to what can be observed whereas 獨 *du* points to the core, or what our original state is before we've been "carved". "I have heard it said, 'After all the carving and chiseling, [復歸於朴] return to the unhewn!'" (Zhuangzi 20, Ziporyn "Complete"198). It is the state of self-realization 自得 *zede* Dao fill and collect.

If we follow the cosmological idea of the Yijing 易經, the universe formed out of an undifferentiated reservoir of *qi* 氣 that eventually separated and coalesced into distinct patterns, images, and shapes, until there were individual things (*qi* 器). As discussed in Chapter Four on Zhuangzi's meontological notion of time, the world was born from nothing (*wu* 無), or rather "no-thing-ness"—what Ivanhoe deems "a state in which there were no discrete and individualized entities" (234). A world composed of *qi* where humans manifest from *qi* creates a oneness among all things. The whole self is thus transformed along with all things, but still maintains some certain *qi* allotment.

Recall in the previous chapter of this thesis when we read of the death of Zhuangzi's wife. When his friend Hui Shih comes to visit him expecting him to be

mourning, only to find Zhuangzi happily singing and playing the drums. Zhuangzi was naturally in despair at first, but came to a realization; her death is just like the changing of the seasons (是相與為春秋冬夏四時行也 Zhuangzi 18.8.3). Similarly, Chapter 5 describes the ideal mindset,

death and life, surviving and perishing, failure and success, poverty and wealth, superiority and inferiority, disgrace and honor, hunger and thirst, cold and heat— these are the transformations of events, the proceedings of fate. Day and night they come to us, one replacing another, and yet our understanding can never compass what it is that begins them. So there is no need to let them disrupt our harmony, and we must deny them entrance into our numinous reservoir (5:14-15, Ziporyn “Essential” 36-37)

This description of transformation promotes a sense of ease, but not a complete loss of identity. Guo Xiang’s commentary on Zhuangzi 10 supports this by recognizing the tragedy in one losing one’s identity and authenticity (Chan, Stanford Encyclopedia). Buddhist notions no-self equate all beings, whereas Zhuangzi seems to be claiming some sense of personhood that differentiates us based on our individual *qi* allotment.

Chris Joachim has pointed out that another problem with these interpretations is that they assume a modern sense of self in that it is “something to have or lose, to possess or forget, and so forth” (45). He attributes this phenomenon all the way back to Augustine who paved the way for the slew of dichotomies embedded in our psyche, which all essentially rely on the opposition of the inner and outer (38). This shifts in turn to the modern view of an internal “true self” and an external social self, a distinction which should not be taken to map directly onto the *Zhuangzi*. He also talks about the uses of *shen* 身 or body, and *xin* 心 as referring to both the physical and mental aspect of one’s person (49). Zhuangzi positively speaks of *shen* as something not to forget, but is more ambiguous about *xin* in that an empty *xin* is good and one tangled with knowledge is not. He reads *wu ji* (literally translated as no- self, but not necessarily meaning so philosophically) as one not making his/herself stand out, but not that they have “no self”.

All of these instances assert additional evidence to a sense of personhood in the *Zhuangzi*. After much further technical analysis, Joachim's final conclusion is that "it does far more harm than good to interpret and to translate *Zhuangzi* by reference to concepts of 'the self'" (56). While he is right to address the danger in this method, it might still be a fruitful practice as long as the proper precautions are taken in order to understand the text in its contextualized time and place. Nonetheless, I find his arguments compelling and sufficient to assert some sense of personhood in the text.⁵²

However, this is not a thesis about the "self" in the *Zhuangzi*, nor is there sufficient space to offer a full analysis of the topic of the self in the current thesis. Instead, we can agree with Joachim's caution toward what we are calling the self-negation camp. The bigger question is, what does this mean for the present account of spontaneity?

If we can assert some sense of personhood in the *Zhuangzi* in light of the above analysis, we must be careful that it is not under the context of an internal an external person. The whole person moves freely and does not distinguish between an inner "true self" and external impositions. The spontaneous agent need not relinquish a sense of personhood in order to achieve spontaneity. The closest thing we can imagine to this sort of view would be the fasting of the heart-mind. But even then that is merely a fasting of learned distinctions and categories, not a refusal of personhood. In the sense of the ten thousand things all being made up of *qi*, we are one, but we still maintain personhood based on our unique *qi* allotment.

⁵² One challenge to my argument might be that I am no expert in Buddhist philosophy and my analysis lacks proper understanding of the Buddhist notions of no-self. While this might certainly be the case, and one which I am open to reconsidering, my primary concern is not necessarily evaluating a comparison or the parallels between the *Zhuangzi* and Buddhism, it is with the danger in equating the two. Even if they are more similar than this paper suggests, there is still another problem. Even if the *Zhuangzi* does have similar methods and conclusions to Buddhism, using the vocabulary of "no-soul" or "no-self" does not allow the audience at hand to distinguish between the two philosophies. Almost all scholars who fall into the self-negation camp agree that there are certain differences and important nuances, and so why should we use the same terminology? Instead, it might be better to do comparative work that notes the similarities while still making clear the differences by explaining that no-self if Buddhism emphasizes the breakdown of the elements of the self, and in the *Zhuangzi* the emphasis is on the transformational nature of the self, and therefore, using different terminology for each philosophy is helpful. The former is a deconstruction of self and other whereby any sense of personhood is completely lost, but the latter still seems to suggest some sense of personhood. Categorizing the two theories under one name only confuses the rigor of the philosophy and disregards the important differences of each. Some might argue that a no-self theory and transformative-self theory are not mutually exclusive, and further that the former entails the latter. However, whether or not this is the case, it would still need to be explicated in this way in order to confuse readers, which has been overlooked by those proponents of the no-self theory.

5.2 The Minimal Agency Camp

The second camp of scholars we will discuss is perhaps one of the key motivations for this thesis, and that is those with the “minimal agency” reading. Scholars in this camp suggest that the *Zhuangzi* advocates a kind of laissez-faire attitude whereby one’s demeanor of acceptance allows her to just follow along with whatever comes her way. Recall our discussion in Chapter One Section 1.2 above: Victor Mair, for example, has characterized the notion of *you* 遊, or wandering/playing, this way by taking the implied acceptance of things as frivolously carefree, and worse, lazy (2010). Similarly, A. C. Graham has characterized the term as akin to how one would have described a psychedelic experience in the 1960s (“*Chuang-Tzu*”, 8). Schwitzgebel concluded that *Zhuangzi*’s ideal “appears instead to be something like lazing about, doing nothing, mastering nothing, and serving no purpose” (“Unskilled” 104).

The biggest problem with these readings is their tendency to promote conceptualizing the *Zhuangzi* as a “do nothing” text. As we have already discussed in the previous chapter regarding the active aspects of *you* and spontaneity, the *Zhuangzi* also promotes a very active aspect to spontaneity.

It should seem clear that the figures described, such as Yan Hui, do not sit and do nothing, they allow for circumstances and natural responsiveness to guide them. The Consummate Person is not lazy because she fails to define herself. By living a life not based on praise or blame, she accepts the endless transformation of things as they are, but that does not mean she is zoned out at Woodstock. The fasting of the heart-mind expresses a retreat from conditioned norms and conventions that inhibit one’s natural spontaneity, but it does not connote pure idleness. The skill stories are usually used as the most concrete evidence to support this view in that they exhibit the strong level of cultivation reached to achieve such spontaneity. However, we have already demonstrated how spontaneity should not be thought of as a skill, and that “going with the flow” readings such as this do not do justice to the active aspects of spontaneity.

The concepts of *ziran* and *wuwei* have been widely discussed in terms of Daoist notions of skepticism towards ethical and social norms, motivating a face-value interpretation without analyzing the terms themselves and the specific ways in which they are used. As pointed out by Bryan Van Norden, “Although both Confucius and Mencius had stressed the need to read the classical texts critically, Zhuangzi is possibly the first thinker in the Chinese tradition to suggest that we have no way of being sure what the ancient sages thought” (“Competing” 253). Because of this, it has been the purpose for him and several other scholars to prove that “face-value interpretation” an incorrect one. In other words, *ziran* and *wuwei* do not literally mean to do nothing.

Similarly, Karyn Lai, for example, suggests that *ziran* and *wuwei* together provide a “unifying ethical framework” in the *Daodejing*, and “taken together, emphasize the mutually responsive and spontaneous nature of relational interaction” (326). She makes the important contrast between what it means to translate *ziran* as natural and *ziran* as spontaneity,

ziran as spontaneity focuses on one particular aspect of the natural world, the uncontrived movements and changes that occur within the natural environment... theinterdependent self is circumscribed by certain aspects of its wider environment and yet is able to instantiate itself in original and novel ways. (330)

Her reading suggests that *ziran* and *wuwei* when embodied allow agency to be motivated by the circumstances, and moreover, in a proactive way that might entail challenging certain norms and customs.

Although Lai’s claims are based on her analysis of the *Daodejing*, and I would argue that the *Zhuangzi* also advocates a similar reading.⁵³ It is important to understand these concepts in both their active and passive readings because the worry is that the text promotes doing nothing. Lai points out the various (and obvious) problems with this kind of naturalistic interpretation of *ziran* as an ethical system because we are

⁵³ This is only to highlight the active aspects of each term, and a reminder not to equate *ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* and in the *Laozi* as was addressed and analyzed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

forced to ask “Where is the current [flow] coming from?” or ‘Who controls the current?’ (328). However, questions of ethics and morality are out of the scope of this thesis. What is important is to note the acknowledgment of reading *ziran* as a passive and active concept.

Ziran as an organic happening demonstrates things emerging and generating of themselves. Any one thing is not idle and waiting to be told how to be. There is creativity involved in the process as we saw in our discussion on the reflexivity present in the term. The non-deliberate and non-purposive characteristics do not mean that the responsiveness of the sage is completely detached and aloof. These characteristics do not serve to mean “doing nothing”. The spontaneous actors in the choose, move, and act. But all of it comes from the *ziran* mindset.

For example, Zhuangzi chose not to live a life in government. This act was based on his observation of government officials possibly performing their roles out of a desire for reputation and fame which did not feel spontaneous to him. At the same time, someone entering government because it is truly their passion would not be shunned by Zhuangzi. Similarly fishes are responding to the infinite stimuli surrounding them and still able to move in a harmonious cohesive whole. It is the distractions of distinctions that pull the human out of their natural ability for spontaneity.

Another interesting question to note comes in reference to Misha Tadd’s paper exploring *ziran* as authority or authenticity. He says,

At the three levels of cosmos, individual, and society, this authoritative *ziran* not only functions as a transcendent ideal that generates imperfect replications of itself, but also one that provides space for proactive striving because *ziran* produces both what “is” and what “ought” to be. (207)

It is an important and difficult question when discussing Zhuangzi’s notion of *ziran*. We must be cognizant of the positive light Zhuangzi seems to spin on the concept while also respecting that he is not giving us any indication of telling us to strive to be *ziran*. For this reason, Tadd views *ziran* both as what “is” and what “ought” to be. Considering the purposes of this paper, and the strategic exclusion of ethics, I will not

debate on this topic directly. I will only say that reading the text in terms of ethics threatens the original literary style and potentially distracts the reader. Instead of putting the text in ethical terms, we can simply address that there may be things we can learn from the text regardless of whether or not it is telling us what is good or bad.

5.3 Internal Vs External and Internal Following Nature Vs External

Remembering our discussion of the Internal Vs. External camp in Chapter One above, their conception of spontaneity is explained by distinguishing between an internal and external self. The internal self is the spontaneous and natural self that is able to be as such by virtue of one's inborn nature. Then because of external factors, such as trying to create an identity, clinging to motivations such as praise and blame, or following preconceived notions rather than responding to immediate circumstances, the internal self can thus be disturbed. For Zhuangzi, the internal (*nei* 內) and external (*wai* 外) do not exist. Because the bulk of the "whole person" analysis has already been done, this section will only serve to reiterate that even making this category to begin with is the part of the plague of the human and immediately inhibits spontaneity.

Nonetheless, for the purposes of scholarly research, distinguishing between the internal and external can be helpful because it highlights a common and mistaken (according to Zhuangzi) human concern. The idea that we have some internal self that we can search for, explore, and exude is an idea foreign to the *Zhuangzi*. The use of *nei* and *wai* result in the tendency of the human to attach to an identity. Instead, the entire person and all organs work interdependently. There is not a certain autonomous organ, what we might think of as the brain, that can control the emotions, what we might think of as the heart. Thus, this distinction is important in terms of exposing the problem with it, and expressing Zhuangzi's concern. The spontaneous person would not distinguish between an internal and external person and instead would respond to circumstances just as wholly as their being is.

The Internal Following Nature Vs External camp shares the same focus of explaining spontaneity as the previous camp, but they highlight the internal as being a reflection of *tian*, heaven or nature. The internal self is again the natural and

spontaneous person, but this person in particular is a manifestation of heaven. If this distinction is made in light of the acknowledgment that Zhuangzi promotes the idea of an entire person, there are aspects of this view that we can make sense of.

For example, Zhuangzi very explicitly identifies between heaven and human. What is less clear is what constitutes the connection between them. We can recall from Chapter 4 Section 2 of this thesis that the main concern was that there be harmony. We also concluded that following nature as a model was not a view present in the text. Therefore, as long as these distinctions are clarified, this view would align with the present account of spontaneity.

5.4 Transforming Self

The Transforming Self camp focuses on the ability of the agent to constantly transform along with the ten thousand things. This is possible by not making sharp distinctions and by not allowing the plague of the *cheng xin* to dictate one's thoughts and behavior. This reading emphasizes the idea, contra Confucianism, that the *xin* does not have moral autonomy, or that there is not a clear separation between the heart and the mind whereby the mind can act against the heart.

Notions of the transforming self resonate with the text, so long as they are not in the sense of a conscious effort to transform. Instead, Zhuangzi's sense of transformation allows the person to change in effortless and natural ways. This transformation comes as a result of simply responding to circumstances. For this reason, we call this idea the transforming self instead of self-transforming. Self-transformation gestures towards an identifiable agent who consciously transforms itself, whereas the transforming self is transformed "of" itself.

Noticing this caveat, the readings by Allinson and Kjellberg might not agree with the current account of spontaneity. By viewing the text as having a project in the first place might go against the entirety of Zhuangzi's philosophy. Recall from Chapter One of this thesis that these readings deem the *Zhuangzi* by Allinson as a project of self-transformation, and by Kjellberg as "aporetic skepticism". Of course, we cannot

know the motivations of the authors of the text, but we can at least surmise that Zhuangzi would not have promoted a sense of a person with ambitions to transform themselves. The fact that the text is therapeutic in nature to certain readers is probably true, but most likely not the aim of Zhuangzi himself.

5.5 Conclusion

The present account of spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* has taken all of the different ways the text expounds spontaneity and developed how they fit together. First, passages about the internal and external aspects of a person express the assertion of an entire person. This person shares a sense of oneness with the ten thousand things but retains personhood and agency. The unconscious and non-deliberate aspects of the agent's spontaneity are a reflection of her ability to respond organically to circumstances. The human concern with reputation and distinction are held in the *cheng xin* which can be mitigated by a fasting of the heart-mind. This fasting is not to find a "true self" but rather to allow for natural inclinations to manifest.

This also separates spontaneity from skill. Spontaneity is not something to strive for or cultivate in the way a skill is. We saw this first through a thorough analysis of *ziran*. *Ziran* expresses the organic happening of all things. This is expressed in the reflexivity of the term and the "unvarying" and "rightness" of *ziran*. Although the term can be translated as a noun, it is always active in its verbal nature. Organic expresses the non-deliberate aspect and happening expresses the ceaseless transformative aspect.

This account of *ziran* helped us to understand the psychological mindset that allows for spontaneous action. The agent who can *you* or wander can do so because of their unawareness of doing so, and each individual thing can *you* differently and uniquely. In this version of spontaneity there is room for creativity and exploration, and the active aspect was illuminated. We saw how this mindset could affect one's views on death, and how viewing death in terms of a continuity (and even valuing death) would aid in one's capacity for spontaneity. Finally, we saw how certain interpretations and readings of the text were lacking and/or not correctly represent Zhuangzi's meaning.

By taking *ziran* as the foundation of spontaneity in the text, this thesis has also offered something new. *Ziran* was previously overlooked and usually attributed only to Laozi. Understanding *ziran* as an organic happening is also a contribution that helps to give new meaning to Zhuangzi's *ziran*. *Ziran* as an organic happening sets apart Zhuangzi's specific use of the term by simply describing things as they are (and are happening) rather than something to be embodied or modeled.

Appendix

1. These stories are usually referred to as skill stories but as we shall see I argue for a different version of skill than other scholars in that these stories are about something else first and the result might just be skillfulness. The so-called “skill stories” include Cook Ding in *Zhuangzi* 3, the swimmer in *Zhuangzi* 19, the cicada catcher in *Zhuangzi* 19, the ferryman in *Zhuangzi* 19, the engraver *Qing* in *Zhuangzi* 19, the painter in *Zhuangzi* 20, the forger of swords in *Zhuangzi* 22.
2. When Confucius was on his way to Chu, he passed through a forest where he saw a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as though he were grabbing them with his hand. Confucius said, “What skill *you* have! Is there (a) *dao*?” “I have (a) *dao*”, said the hunchback. “For the first five or six months I practiced balancing two balls on top of each other on the end of the pole and, if they don’t fall off, I will lose very few cicadas. Then I balance three balls and, if they don’t fall off, I will lose only one cicada in ten. Then I balance five balls and, if they don’t fall off, I know it will be as easy as grabbing them with my hand. I position my body like a stiff tree trunk and hold my arm like an old dry limb. No matter how expansive heaven and earth are, or how numerous the ten thousand things, I’m aware of nothing but cicada wings. Not wavering, not tipping, not letting any of the other ten thousand things take the place of those cicada wings—how can I help but succeed in taking them?” Confucius turned to his followers and said, “He keeps his will undivided and concentrates his spirit—is this not what we say about the venerable hunchback?” (Watson 199–200)
3. The Way of Heaven operates (unceasingly), and leaves no accumulation (of its influence) in any particular place, so that all things are brought to perfection by it; so does the Way of the Dis operate, and all under the sky turn to them (as their directors); so also does the Way of the Sages operate, and all within the seas submit to them. Those who clearly understand (the Way of) Heaven, who are in sympathy with (that of) the sages, and familiar through the universe and in the four quarters (of the earth) with the work of the Dis and the kings, yet act

spontaneously from themselves: [...] With this retiring (from public life), and enjoying themselves at leisure, we find the scholars who dwell by the rivers and seas, among the hills and forests, all submissive to it; with this coming forward to active life and comforting their age, their merit is great, and their fame is distinguished - and all the world becomes united in one. (Such men) by their stillness become sages; and by their movement, kings.

Doing-nothing, they are honoured; in their plain simplicity, no one in the world can strive with them (for the palm of) excellence. The clear understanding of the virtue of Heaven and Earth is what is called 'The Great Root,' and 'The Great Origin;' - they who have it are in harmony with Heaven, and so they produce all equable arrangements in the world - they are those who are in harmony with men. Being in harmony with men is called the joy of men; being in harmony with Heaven is called the joy of Heaven. (Legge, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/tian-dao>)

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