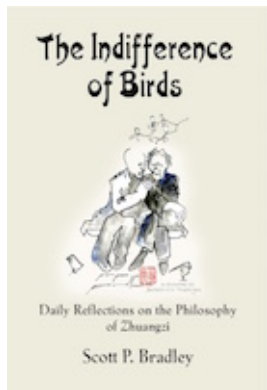


The Indifference of Birds



Daily Reflections on the Philosophy
of Zhuangzi

Scott P. Bradley



The writings of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (Chuang-Tzu) have been inspiring philosophers and spiritual seekers for more than two millennia. His purposeful ambiguity and playfulness allow for endless re-interpretations in new personal and historical contexts.

His suggestion of a mysticism innocent of all metaphysics and religious belief, as well as his incisive critique of the inability of reason to guide us, make him especially relevant in today's post-modern world.

This present work is the product of years of engagement with Zhuangzian philosophy and represents the evolution of yet another personal dao—a philosophy of life—inspired by this most playful of philosophers. As such, it offers itself as only a suggestive possibility; it hopes to inspire others who are so inclined to “evolve along their own daos.”

Since the text originally appeared as blog-posts, the format is designed to provide measured reflections on the philosophy of Zhuangzi that can be read in just a few minutes, while inspiring prolonged thoughtful meditation.

The Indifference of Birds: Daily Reflections on the Philosophy of Zhuangzi

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THE INDIFFERENCE OF BIRDS

**DAILY REFLECTIONS ON
THE PHILOSOPHY OF ZHUANGZI**

SCOTT P. BRADLEY

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**A NEW PHILOSOPHICAL
DAOISM
I – XIII**

I

I have come to the conclusion that the best way to present my take away from Zhuangzi is to admit that it cannot claim to represent even an approximately definitive interpretation of his intended meanings. These must forever remain matters for informed guesses. And this, again at my reading, was precisely the purpose of his intended ambiguity. There are several reasons why such a strategy is necessary and effective from the point of view of Daoist sensibilities.

There are parallels here with Socrates' maieutic method (his tutorial midwifery) and Kierkegaard's "indirect communication" (his adoption of various pseudonyms for the purpose of presenting different perspectives on one idea). The point is to make us engage in a kind of critical thinking that is itself a kind of existential engagement. It's as much about doing and being as it is about knowing. The knowing arises from the being and the doing.

Among Zhuangzi's descriptive representations of the attributes of sagacity is the wonderful suggestion that we "release the mind to play among all expressions (*de*)". Where there are set beliefs and formulae there can be no such play. An absolutist position on the nature of Zhuangzi's Daoism would be as antithetical to this freedom as any other. We must hold our position lightly. We must forget the fish trap, the words, in our having obtained the fish, our freedom, lest we lose it once again.

Though Zhuangzi critiques the sectarian positions of the Confucians and Mohists, and replaces theirs with a more inclusive one of his own, we understand that he understood that sense in which his and

theirs were the same. His was “better” by virtue of its inclusiveness—the formation of a sense of oneness being his understanding of Dao—but it could only be so when it self-effaced in an appreciation of the sameness, the equanimity and oneness, of all *de*.

In this context, we can critique the positions that others take vis-à-vis the nature of Zhuangzi’s Daoism without that becoming sectarian. I feel strongly that many, if not most, very knowledgeable scholars miss the spirit of Zhuangzi’s philosophy entirely. The presumption of such an opinion does not escape me. Nor am I unaware of the dangers of sectarianism in this regard. It is these concerns that have inspired this series.

II

Zhuangzi's intended ambiguity means that any interpretation of him must necessarily involve a personal engagement that can only lead to a unique perspective. This, of course, is precisely what he wanted us to understand through his argument for perspectival relativism. Our cognitive responses to the world arise from our position within it. In this blog I attempt to share my own take on Zhuangzi's philosophical Daoism, and this can only be a new philosophical Daoism. It cannot be "the" new philosophical Daoism, but can nonetheless contribute to the evolution of other points of view just as it is itself so evolving.

Zhuangzi invites us to understand how our perspectives are all different and unique. He also suggests we realize how they are the same. All things can be "seen from the point of view of their sameness". How are my views on Zhuangzi the same as every other? They are all both right and wrong. They are all right from the perspective of the individual, and wrong from the perspective of some other. But as one scholar has pointed out, this trajectory toward sameness leads Zhuangzi to imply more emphatically that they are all wrong. They are all wrong to the extent that they think they are right—and that they think they are right is at the most immediate level unavoidable. This broadening perspective helps us to "release the mind to play among the harmony of all *de* [expressions]". Their harmony is their sameness in all being wrong (as well as right).

Knowing we are unavoidably wrong enables us to make the best use of whatever "fish trap" we fabricate while simultaneously "forgetting" it. To be "empty" is not to contain nothing, but to contain everything in unfixed and ungrasping openness. Liu Xianxin

(1896-1932) sees this as defining the difference between Buddhist and Daoist sensibilities: “The main principle of Buddhism is Emptiness: nothing is wanted; all is to be abandoned. The main principle of Daoism is vastness: everything is wanted; all is to be included” (Ziporyn, p 137).

How are they the same? From the Zhuangzian point of view, they are both simply upayic strategies, the values of which can only be determined by their effectiveness as judged by their respective adherents. They are both wrong to the extent that they think that they alone are right. And they are both wrong to the extent that they think they represent the truth of things.

Both have their benefits; both deliver some goods. Fortunately, you don’t have to get it “right” to get it—whatever “it” may be.

III

You don't have to get it right to get it.

This series is inspired by my current reading of Harold Roth's *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. I have long been pushing back against the near ubiquitous tendency to conflate Zhuangzi's philosophy with that of more religious forms of Daoism that preceded and followed it. Roth's project is to do precisely this. "Daoism", its many diverse expressions notwithstanding, is woven into a single cloth. Breathing meditation, the "attainment of the Dao", the inner accumulation of something called *qi* (*ch'i*)—all of them essentially religious practices and conceptions—are taken to be the foundation for all classical Daoist mystical philosophies. This is equivalent to equating the three "great" monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, because they all speak of "God".

My understanding of Zhuangzi leads me to believe that he consciously wished to offer an alternative kind of mysticism, one free of all metaphysical hocus-pocus and definitive technique. When he suggested we depend on nothing, he meant it.

Thus, if there is something to "get"—an experience of freedom, oneness and tranquility—then it does not require any particular knowledge or method. It is something that is inherently possible for human beings to experience quite apart from any imagined extra-mundane "realities". And the means to that experience are many. There is no "right way". You don't have to get it right to get it.

Why Zhuangzi chose this way of non-dependence I do not know. I do know that it speaks to my own need for a post-religious means of coping with the unavoidable existential dangle of the human experience.

Yes, it is all just coping. That's the point. It's not about realizing the Truth. It's not about being saved. It's not about realizing our "true" self or purpose. It's about being human.

This philosophical Daoism is likely not Zhuangzi's philosophical Daoism, though it is an attempt to be approximatingly so. It doesn't matter.

IV

Zhuangzi is clearly taking us for a ride. He's having us on. Missing this is missing the spirit of his philosophy. Consider his use of Confucius. Sometimes he is the protagonist advocating for something suggestive of Zhuangzi's philosophy; other times he's the arch-Confucian, the voice of an imposed morality. There is method in this madness. There is a message in this medium. And part of that message is that we should not take any of it too seriously. Seriousness and literalism are the antithesis of the spirit of Zhuangzi, the spirit of play.

When we play, we take things both very seriously and unseriously at once. We agree to follow arbitrary rules and to give our all to win. We agree to pretend that it matters whether we win or lose. But we know that winning and losing are of no ultimate value at all. It's how we play the game that counts. This is called good sportsmanship. The Zhuangzian sage is a good sportsperson; she takes life very seriously even while knowing it isn't serious at all. And sages are extremely rare.

When Zhuangzi has a few of his made-up characters discuss the likely facticity of a fantastic sage who subsists on only wind and dew, and who rides on the backs of dragons, what is he up to? In agreement with the madman who proposed such a sage and his belief in him, the interlocutor who is the most sagacious seems to suggest that this is entirely possible. Are we also meant to believe? Or are we meant to simply open our minds to the possibility of experiences beyond the usual?

These are Zhuangzi's "big words"—"useless" from the point of view of "winning" the game of life. But if winning is the all-in-all, then life becomes so serious an affair that it is no fun at all. It is the useless understanding that life need not be taken so seriously that becomes the most useful thing of all.

When Zhuangzi speaks of *qi*, the supposed stuff of which all things are composed and, for some the most rarified form of which the sage accumulates so as to become "spiritual", is he telling us he believes in any such thing or project? Or is he simply making use of the materials at hand to make another point altogether?

When we take Zhuangzi literally we make of him yet another overly serious advocate for fixed religious beliefs and projects. We destroy his message and rob him of the spirit of play.

V

If we take all within the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* as the work of Zhuangzi, there is considerable internal evidence that he was aware of the beliefs and practices of, if not the *Nei Yeh* (“Inner Training”) chapter of the anthology called the *Kuanzi*, than at least the school of thought of which it is representative. Some of “Confucius’s” instructions to his disciple Yan in Chapter Four could be taken as clear allusions to this likely contemporaneous work. (Some have apparently questioned the authenticity of this passage, though I have only read Liu Xiaogan’s (*Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*) dismissal of these doubts.) Zhuangzi makes use of these as he does other materials at hand. But, as a scholar (whose identity I do not have permission to share) has recently pointed out, he also speaks of Confucian virtues without being a Confucian, uselessness without being a Mohist, and “white horses” without being a Logician. If Zhuangzi “released [his] mind to play in the harmony of all *de*”, then he could make use of any of them without our having to believe he fixedly attached to any particular one.

Zhuangzi may very well have practiced some form of breathing meditation; only I would contend that this would not have included the metaphysical beliefs of his contemporaries who also did so. The difference is between religious-mindedness and utterly unfixed openness. This distinction is important because, at my reading, Zhuangzi’s entire vision turns on making use of our (useless) utter not-knowing. The practice of non-dependence, which I take to be an overarching attribute of his proposed dao, includes not relying on any beliefs about the nature of reality. We do not become “empty” in

order to be filled by a “something”, but because empty is what we are and what we must remain if we wish to live authentically.

Admittedly, Zhuangzi is largely what we make him to be. This is how I make him to be because this is what I need him to be if he is to be of use to me, someone who cannot do the religious thing. However, in having taken him as I have, I can now make use of him as I believe he made use of others. In this sense, the “truth” of Zhuangzi’s philosophy does not matter. This is what I mean by “a new philosophical Daoism”; one that makes use of the materials at hand so as to evolve a uniquely personal strategy for the enjoyment of life.

Thanks for the leg up, Zhuangzi—I can take it from here.

VI

This series is also largely inspired by my need to make periodic disclaimers. For all my often apparently unequivocal pronouncements regarding the character of Zhuangzi's Daoism, I wish to make clear that I do not believe I or anyone else can be sure of what we speak. This, I believe, is precisely how Zhuangzi would have had it. (Here I go again.) This is his whole point. Depend on nothing. Release into not-knowing. Live life as it manifests in you, not as you might otherwise wish it to be. Add nothing to the process of life. Don't flee from the actual experience of being human, but rather make creative use of it. Let your inherent adriftedness be an occasion for your wandering, rather than for clinging to chimeric moorings.

Do this. Or don't. It doesn't matter all that much. All is well in any case. Isn't it? It is or it isn't. But from the cosmic perspective it is whether it is or it is not. Isn't it?

Every presentation of Daoism, at least of the philosophic variety, is a new philosophical Daoism. There is no such thing as a fixed definition and experience of Daoism. Why would we wish it to be otherwise? Why would we wish to follow rather than to lead? Because, unless we are self-deceived, we know we can only lead ourselves, and that is a lonely experience. Why would we wish to believe in the already-fixed rather than to create anew? Because, unless we are delusional, we know that whatever we create is as ridiculously tenuous as we know ourselves to be. It's so much easier and more comforting to abrogate responsibility to external authorities which somehow escape the scrutiny of doubt.

Then there is the problem of personal reality. I realize little of my own blabber. But surely the blabbering sages realized their own blabber. That's why they're sages, right? We can believe that what we believe is real, because we believe that it was real for someone else. This is called begging the question, placing the conclusion in the premise. Sages exist because they say they do—or more sagaciously, someone else says they do.

“The ancients called this, ‘fleeing from the Lord’s dangle’.” I call it fleeing from your real experience. Whether there actually are or were sages, we live more authentically when we leave the question moot.

VII

“Daos are made by walking them.” Is there anyone who does not have a dao? We all walk a dao. Daos are unavoidable. Can we walk another’s dao? We can try. This is what we mostly do. Only now it is an inauthentic dao. Now it is a dao that fails to express our own individual experience; and this amounts to a flight from our own self-experience.

Are there then authentic and inauthentic daos? There are. But of course there is also neither. There are only daos that more closely approximate one or the other. Perfection and purity are only ideal abstractions—only helpful when understood as such; only full when empty.

Can we be authentically inauthentic? Sure; that’s called honesty. Can we be inauthentically authentic? Sure; that’s called hypocrisy and self-deception. Can we be both at once? Could we be otherwise?

“Daos are made by walking them.” Zhuangzi says so because he wishes to show their relative nature. We create our own unique daos. All daos are human creations. There’s no true Dao (Guidance) out there that we can discover. Heaven will not guide us. Any spoken Dao is not-Dao, but just a dao. In this he agrees with Laozi. Why is it that so much “Daoism” also agrees, only to once again speak of “attaining the Dao”? This Dao, though ineffable, is a something that can guide us mysteriously, mystically. Not to worry—there is True Guidance after all.

This is not Zhuangzi’s dao. In Zhuangzi’s dao, Dao remains silent; it is present only as an absence. It is yin to our yang. It entices us to

release into Mystery. Mystery does not yang. It does not guide. It provides no answers.

Because Dao provides no one dao, no single dao alone reflects Dao. All daos are human creations; and in this sense they are all equal. All daos are Dao, where Dao is this apparent Happening and the mystery of this Happening. In this they are also all equal.

For Zhuangzi, psychological Dao is the only attainable Dao, and this entails the convergence of all daos; the realization of a oneness. This is the equalization of all daos, and the “attainment of Dao”.

All daos, whether authentic or inauthentic, are equal and affirmable. But they do not all equally contribute to human flourishing. We can therefore also judge between them. But can we judge for others? How much authenticity can any particular person take? How much inauthenticity is unavoidable and even necessary? We can only find out for ourselves by consciously walking our own daos.

VIII

The declaration that I am doing a new philosophical Daoism sounds pretentious to say the least. But I say so only because I am unable to discover an old one. Several are there to be sure, but I cannot be sure what they are. Nor do I believe that anyone else can, however more scholarly. Indeed, scholarship might easily be an impediment. Scholarship easily misses the forest for the trees; and scholarship often fears the subjective commitment that alone can discover the spirit behind the words. Thus, everyone who thoughtfully engages with Daoism is creating their own new philosophical Daoism.

Whoever is reading this is likely doing so out of an interest in Daoism or some parallel philosophy. To my thinking, you too are creating your own unique philosophy of life. And that is about the best we can do. If there is no one, true solution to life's contingencies then whatever response we formulate will be our own. But we don't build from nothing; we make use of all the materials at hand. I like to make use of Zhuangzi. His sense of things speaks well to my experience. Or, at least, my experience finds that sense in him.

The proclamation of the "death of God" offends many, but I think Nietzsche wasn't so much trying to offend as to bear witness to a cultural paradigm shift. This represents a great parting of ways. Is Truth out there waiting to be discovered, or are we required to create our own? My experience leads me to choose the latter. It's a scary and daunting task, but such is life. It's also liberating. There is no Truth. That's one less thing to worry about. (This is not to say there is no Truth, but only that there is none for me.)

Everyone's building their own philosophy of life; everyone's just trying to cope. Perhaps those who can believe find it easier than others, but I'm not so sure. Perhaps those who don't question much find it easier than those that do. This seems more likely. Indeed, these, like newborn babes, may be reflections of sagacity.

Socrates' famous dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living" is as false as it is true. If every life is not worth living, then no life is. Still, for those so disposed—those who need to question—an enquiry into what can make for a happier life is well worth the effort. And, quite frankly, it seems likely that the benefit lies mostly in the effort rather than in the results. Thinking can be fun. And it helps one get through the day.

IX

There is mysticism in Zhuangzi's suggested response to life. This mysticism does not, however, fit within the standard representations of mysticism. One of these is the belief that one can "unite" with some ultimate reality. In the case of most representations of Daoism, this would be "the Dao", the Source that interpenetrates all reality. There is also *qi* (*ch'i*), the "vital force" that gives life (and being) to all things. This can be "accumulated" by the sage, extending her life and giving her inner power. The relationship between these two is unclear.

Secondly, when one unites with this ultimate reality, one gains insight into the Truth. Since Dao interpenetrates all things, communion with Dao enables an understanding of all things. This can lead to powers of prognostication.

Thirdly, this union with metaphysical Dao and accumulation of *qi* is accomplished through the practice of breathing meditation whereby one empties one's mind of all thought and emotion.

If this is the mysticism of Daoism, then Zhuangzi was clearly not a Daoist. His mysticism takes the absence of any and all imagined metaphysical realities as its point of departure. It begins and ends in not-knowing. This is fundamental; absent this and his philosophy collapses. As for meditative practice, he may very well have done some, but its purpose and importance would have been much different. Reliance on any "technique" is depending on something, and for Zhuangzi dependence on nothing lies at the heart of his mystical movement. We need only witness the near obsession of

those who do advocate such practice, to see that Zhuangzi did not share this commitment. His allusions to meditative practice, like his narratives generally, seem designed more to suggest positive outcomes than the means to their realization.

Alternatively, we could broaden our understanding of Daoism to include Zhuangzi's skeptical branch. But he does, in fact, seem to be such an anomaly within the context of Daoism that it might be best to remove him altogether. Daoists, needless to say, would find no need to do so, since they have thoroughly molded him to their purposes.

This is not about the right way versus the wrong way, or even the correct way to interpret Zhuangzi. What is important to me is to preserve the way in which I have molded him to *my* purposes. This is not to suggest that there are no textual justifications for my understanding of Zhuangzi, but only that these are prejudiced by my experience. Nor do I wish to *depend on* however I understand Zhuangzi; having caught my fish, I'd rather eat it than the fish trap.

X

Zhuangzi's mysticism is quite simple. Finding ourselves embedded in Mystery, we affirm it so completely for that to amount to releasing ourselves entirely into it. And this amounts to a sense of oneness with it. One with Process, what process could possibly harm us?

Mystery is as much "in here" as it is "out there". Absolutely everything is Mystery. The totality of our experience is Mystery. Thus, releasing into Mystery is releasing into ourselves, our most immediate experience of Mystery. It's the affirmation of our entire human experience. It's shouting "Yes!" to life.

There is much in life that we do not particularly like; suffering, death, harm done to others, and our own failings top the list. Affirming the Totality entails affirming these as well. This is what makes such a movement so difficult, especially in the case of evil. Yet, affirming these as the expression of Mystery does not mean complete acquiescence to them. This is the importance of "walking two roads at once", the ability to hold to a cosmic view and a human view simultaneously. The former informs the latter so as to insure our concerns do not destroy our peace and thankfulness. We rightfully attempt to extend life, prevent suffering, curb harm to others, and improve ourselves. Only now these are done in the light of a broader context.

On what basis can we justify affirming the Totality? Isn't this just an arbitrary determination? From the point of view of reason, it is. But from the point of view of life, it is not. This is what life is and does. Life is affirmation. It is its own celebration. With reference to the

protestations of reason, Zhuangzi suggests we not “add to the process of life”. Let the broader experience of life guide us, rather than the worries of the deliberating mind. Reason might call this “circular”, but then so is reason’s own self-justification. That’s why it’s all Mystery.

XI

One of the most evocative metaphors that Zhuangzi uses to suggest releasing ourselves into Mystery is “hiding the world in the world”. If we hide our boat in a swamp, someone will eventually come along and steal it. There was somewhere into which the boat could be lost—somewhere out there in the broader world. But what if we were to hide our boat in the whole world? Where then could it be lost? Hiding the world in the world is hiding not only our boat, but also everything else, including our most precious selves, in the greater world (Mystery) where nothing can be lost.

Zhuangzi uses this metaphor in the context of our fear of death, the apparent loss of ourselves. If, instead of clinging to this particular identity, we release ourselves into the apparently ceaseless transformation of all identities, release into Transformation, where is there any room for us to be lost? This obviously requires loosening our grip on our self-identity. Just as we must be willing to “lose” the boat in order to never lose it, so also must we “lose” ourselves so as to have nothing to lose.

This, I think, is primarily what Zhuangzi has in mind when he entreats us to “just be empty, nothing more”. To be empty is to have no-fixed-identity. It is to enjoy our present identity as part of the larger context wherein all identities are forever transforming.

Is this simply a ploy, an intellectual and palliative sleight of hand designed to ease our passing? For the most part, I think it is. It is essentially a psychological strategy for coping with the existential dangle—our ever not-knowing despite our hunger for the same—of

our inherent experience. However, given our point of departure that all is Mystery, such a strategy seems both intellectually or existentially honest. We must remember that none of this is about the “truth” of things, but only always about our experience of things. Such is life.

Still, this is more than just an intellectual exercise; there is mysticism involved here; and this entails transformative experience. Nice things happen when we release into Mystery. Thankfulness happens. (And thankfulness feels good.) Tranquility happens. (Of which I can at least testify to some fleeting approximation—let’s not get all absolutist and silly, not to mention dishonest.)

XII

The concept of no-fixed-identity suggests that one can release one's grip on one's particular self-identity while still enjoying the same. The spirit of play can help to illustrate this arrangement. Play requires taking the game seriously, while simultaneously understanding that it is in fact just a game, something made up for our enjoyment. It's only fun when not taken too seriously.

We can play at being a someone. There's transcendence involved here. But who is "we"? There is always an assumed someone, it seems, and transcendence is a ceaseless dialectic—certainly beyond logic and maybe even time. We can imagine or experience the non-dual only because we remain dual. Self is essentially dualistic, and self is required if we wish to think and experience life. This is why I believe no-self means no-fixed-self.

This is intended as descriptive of an actual experience, of course, and not simply as an idea. Can one actually realize this? I, at least, cannot say for sure. I can only testify that the exercise (play) of attempting to do so yields some interesting and enjoyably incremental results. How does one attempt to realize it? Again, I can only speak of my own practice—imaginative meditation.

Clinging to a fixed-identity—one that can be lost and must forever be protected and propped up—let's call it an egoic-self—a self trapped in itself—is mostly just a bad habit. Self is an evolved habit—not an evil—just what's happened. There's no need to disparage it. But nor is there any reason why we shouldn't wish to improve upon its performance when some aspects of it prove dysfunctional. Nothing's

perfect. Nothing's "meant" to be. Imaginative meditation amounts to the consideration of other possible, more beneficial habits—new ways of thinking and being. It entails venturing forth into new experiences—mystical experiences.

Imagination takes place in the spirit of play. Nothing need be taken as "real"—it's all just having fun because that's the best we can do, and fun is fun. Religious-mindedness is taking things far too seriously, and that is the death of fun.

XIII

It seems logical enough to assume there can be no identity without existence, but can there be existence without identity? Is there existence without identity when there is no mind to think it? Probably; but it's hard, if not impossible, for the mind to think it. Even so-called Non-Being and non-existence seem to have existence. Where there is thought, everything thought has an assigned identity. The "problem" of identity seems to be a creation of the discriminating mind.

This is a rock; and more than that, it is this specific rock, my pet rock. Previously, it was part of a boulder, and had no such identity. What does this tell me of its present identity? In the future, it will likely become many smaller rocks, sand, dust, atoms, and..? What will have become of its present identity? Shall I mourn the future loss of this rock? Or can I instead imagine identity as a non-essential attribute somewhat more aligned with hardness or density so that its loss does not affect its continuity? I can't; but I can learn something in the attempt.

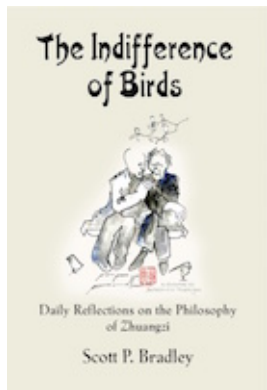
Might I just as well mourn that it previously had no identity? What's the difference between its previously not having been this rock and its future ceasing to be this rock? Why do I mourn my own likely loss of identity and not that I once had none? Who says I have an identity in any case? I do.

Are we really any different than this rock? Cosmically speaking, we are not. But wait! *I* most certainly am! The loss of my own identity is something I do not wish to entertain, cosmic perspectives

notwithstanding. I must be an exception. Perhaps I am an eternal soul (at least going forward; going backward seems a bit more problematical). Or maybe there's just One Identity, I AM, and that's me (and you, too, if you wish). Whew! I feel better already.

Whatever "solution" we might devise to deal with the probable loss of our identity in death, it's clear that we want one. "I haven't a clue" is probably the most honest response. This leads Zhuangzi to suggest we "just hand it all over to the unavoidable"—in thankfulness and trust. No theory is going to change reality, in any case. But he also dabbles a bit in his own imaginative solution. Since Transformation seems the universal way of things, why not simply identify with that? One with Change, what change could harm you? But this requires breaking our addiction to fixed-identity—identity as the essential, rather than as accidental. It requires imagining a kind of continuity completely innocent of identity. This is his no-fixed-identity—an experience that can only occur beyond the deliberating mind that cannot dispense with identity.

This "solution" led Fang Yizhi (1611-1671) to accuse Zhuangzi of "cooking up his own pot of Buddha-flesh" (p 170)—dodging his own existential dangle. There could be some truth in this, but if we grant Zhuangzi the possibility of consistency, then his imaginative solution can be understood as but another self-aware coping strategy, and not a representation of the truth of things.



The writings of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (Chuang-Tzu) have been inspiring philosophers and spiritual seekers for more than two millennia. His purposeful ambiguity and playfulness allow for endless re-interpretations in new personal and historical contexts.

His suggestion of a mysticism innocent of all metaphysics and religious belief, as well as his incisive critique of the inability of reason to guide us, make him especially relevant in today's post-modern world.

This present work is the product of years of engagement with Zhuangzian philosophy and represents the evolution of yet another personal dao—a philosophy of life—inspired by this most playful of philosophers. As such, it offers itself as only a suggestive possibility; it hopes to inspire others who are so inclined to “evolve along their own daos.”

Since the text originally appeared as blog-posts, the format is designed to provide measured reflections on the philosophy of Zhuangzi that can be read in just a few minutes, while inspiring prolonged thoughtful meditation.

The Indifference of Birds: Daily Reflections on the Philosophy of Zhuangzi

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