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## Cook Ding meets *homo oeconomicus*. Contrasting Daoist and economic imaginaries of work

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we attempt to de-naturalize the prevailing economic imaginary of work that Max Weber and later commentators described as ‘protestant work ethic,’ epitomized in the figure of *homo oeconomicus*. We do so by contrasting it with the imaginary of skillful work that can be found in vignettes about artisans in the *Zhuangzi*. We argue that there are interesting contrasts between these views concerning 1) direct goal achievement vs. indirect goal achievement through the cultivation of skills; 2) the hierarchization of mental versus physical dimensions of work; 3) the crafting of non-dominating relationships between the working subject, their object, and their instruments of work, which leads to questions about the sustainability of these relationships; and 4) the relationship between work and well-being, which the Daoist texts conceptualize in a much more holistic, but also more presentist way than Western economic rationality. We conclude by pointing out the relevance of these differences for several contemporary debates about work, by denaturalizing a dominant imaginary of work, by distinguishing different forms of work, by suggesting a different relation between work and nature, and by raising questions about the desirability of the automation of work.

**KEYWORDS** Work; *Zhuangzi*; *homo oeconomicus*; imaginary; body; nature

### Introduction

Cook Ding seems to have been a happy worker: a master of the art of cutting up oxes, he receives recognition and praise from his boss, the ruler Wen Hui.<sup>1</sup> This famous episode from the *Zhuangzi* is one of the few passages with vignettes, metaphorical or real, in which an individual is described as being at work, and in great detail (*Zhuangzi* 3/2<sup>2</sup>). Cook Ding’s bodily movements are compared to a ‘dance’, and he describes how he learned the skill of cutting up carcasses through many years of practice. The account of skillful work that is provided in this and other parts of the *Zhuangzi* is very different

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from the account of work that flows from the economic rationality that governs many forms of paid work in contemporary capitalist societies. *Homo oeconomicus* is the symbolic figure that stands for an attitude to work that looks at tasks through an instrumental lens of utility maximization, at workers as resources, and at work processes as sources of cash flow that are to be divided up and organized according to the logic of financial profit.

This paper contrasts the imaginaries of work<sup>3</sup> that appear in the *Zhuangzi* and in contemporary theoretical accounts and practical experiences of work submitted to logics of economic rationality. The point is not so much to contribute to the exegesis of the former text (for the latter, see in particular, with regard to skills, Coutinho, 2014, chap. 7), but rather to provide a close reading of selected passages and to unpack the understanding of work that underlies them. The aim of the comparison is to challenge what are maybe often unconsciously held views about work, its nature, value, and role in society that prevail in contemporary societies, in the Global North but also beyond. Of course, all comparative exercises come with their own perils, for example the continuation of imperial thinking (e.g. Mantena, 2010, chap. 2) or a 'reversed orientalism' that idealizes other cultures (Jalal Al-'Azm, 2014). The question of 'who reads what, when, for what purposes, in what terms, and on whose terms' (Jenco et al., 2019, p. 2) is itself highly political, and the answers to it are all too often shaped by continuing power inequalities within academia and beyond.<sup>4</sup> And of course, the different cultures from which the texts we discuss come from are no homogeneous blocks, and may well contain elements of the imaginary here contrasted as the 'other.'<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, we think that the Daoist imaginary of work that can be distilled from the texts offers interesting entry points into the discussion of work. Even if it may be difficult to draw out direct implications, the comparison helps to de-naturalize an imaginary of work that may all too often appear without alternatives.

The term 'social imaginary' refers to 'the creation of significations and the creation of the images and figures that support these significations' (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 238). Social imaginaries incorporate 'a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life' (C. Taylor, 2004, p. 24). Our adoption of this concept is based on the understanding that by unveiling past and present imaginaries, our ability to prefigure alternative ones is enhanced. To that extent, the comparison is not meant to provide a fully-fledged theory but rather serves as a potential initial step for a much-needed conversation about the future of work. Social imaginaries extend beyond 'the immediate background understanding' of our practices but, at the same time, 'can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines' due to their 'indefinite nature' (C. Taylor, 2004, p. 25). The comparison of the two imaginaries – which do not coincide historically – does not aim at the

establishment of ‘ideal types’ but rather at the provision of a ground for a productive ‘distancing.’ Indeed, for Castoriadis, the nurturing of critical spirit ‘can only exist in and through the establishment of distance with respect to what there is, which entails the conquest of a point of view beyond the given, therefore a work of creation’ (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 42). It is important to note though, that our attempt at disrupting hegemonic imaginaries around work cannot be achieved simply by ‘changing ideas.’ Changing imaginaries requires engaging with weighty embodied practices and with sedimented institutions; in other words, it calls for practical transformations.

The two imaginaries we discuss operate at two levels: structural and phenomenological. Although this paper primarily centers on the latter, we interconnect the two levels throughout the text. In doing so, we let ourselves be guided by what Wright Mills (2000, p. 6) famously called ‘the sociological imagination,’ that ability to ‘grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society.’ Indeed, our analysis transitions between ‘the personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure’ (Wright Mills, 2000, p. 8), so as to provide a better grasp of the complexity of the social phenomena under analysis and of the considerable efforts that it would take to transform them. The vignettes from the *Zhuangzi* invite us to rethink assumptions about the *experiential* level of work and, to some extent, the conditions under which such work can take place. In our comparison, we focus on dimensions such as the goal-directedness of work, the role of the body, the relation between subject, object, and instrument of work, and the conception of well-being that work is supposed to deliver.

We contribute to the philosophy of work (see e.g. Cholby, 2023; Jonker & Rozeboom, 2023), which has recently seen an upswing, introducing a dimension that has, hitherto, often been left implicit or treated derivatively.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary discussions about work, the focus has typically been on normative questions with regard to the *organization* of work, for example whether it offers access to the goods of work (e.g. Gheaus & Herzog, 2016; Tyssedal, 2023), whether it protects workers from exploitation or domination by employers (e.g. González-Ricoy, 2020; Vrousalis, 2020) and to what extent it allows for democratic voice at work (Ferreras et al., 2022; Frega et al., 2019). In critical theory, work has been discussed, for example, with regard to its human significance and human costs (Dejours et al., 2018), the relation between productive and reproductive work (Barca, 2020; Fraser, 2016), or its role in democracy (Honneth, 2023). But there has been less focus on the actual processes of work and the logics it follows. By showing that alternative imaginaries are possible, we also want to invite a discussion about the many hierarchizations with regard to different kinds of work (and hence also of the individuals doing this work) that prevail under current forms of work organization. Our comparison makes visible different ways in which work can be

valuable for the *worker*, for *society*, and for the relation to *nature*, which can in turn inform discussions about the rights of workers, the design of jobs, or the sustainability of work.

The next section (II) describes the vignette about Cook Ding, and a similar vignette about a carver of wooden bell-stands, Qing, in more detail, putting them into their historical context and pointing out some of their noteworthy features. In the third section (III), we describe the economic rationality that is epitomized in *homo oeconomicus*, starting with a brief account of Max Weber's famous work in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2005) and then moving to contemporary examples of jobs which end up trapped in the calculating mentality that follows from the application of economic models to work processes. We choose the cases of artists and academics – jobs which, in our societies, tend to have a more vocational dimension and that thereby provide a fair comparison with the artisanal ones presented in the *Zhuangzi*. These two sections form the basis for our comparison (section IV), in which we focus on four dimensions of work: 1) direct goal achievement versus indirect goal achievement through the cultivation of skills; 2) the hierarchization of mental versus physical dimensions of work; 3) the crafting of non-dominating relationships between the working subject, their object, and their instruments of work, which leads to questions about the sustainability of these relationships; and 4) the relationship between work and well-being, which the Daoist texts conceptualize in a much more holistic, but also more presentist way than the Western imaginary. In the Conclusion (V), we summarize our findings and point out their relevance for several contemporary discussions in the philosophy of work.

### **The *Zhuangzi* on skillful work**

The historical record about Zhuangzi ('Master Zhuang'), Zhuang Zhou the person, is thin, and it is generally agreed that the received text of the book, *Zhuangzi*, contains chapters written both by him and by his followers and disciples, at around the late Warring States Period (476–221 BCE) (Tao, 2021, pp. 11–12). In what follows, we draw on some closely related themes as expressed in vignettes of the received text of the *Zhuangzi*, while readily acknowledging that the whole text itself may not form a coherent whole (Fraser, 2014, pp. 543–544). Our point, as we noted above, is not to provide exegesis, but to unpack and explore an understanding of work that underlies these passages, which can create an interesting contrast with a modern, economic imaginary of work.

Before entering into the vignettes, one further qualification on the use of the concept of 'work' from the historical context of *Zhuangzi* is needed. The book was written at a time when feudalism in ancient China was in decline. People at the time were typically involved in economic activities as peasants,

artisans, merchants, or, in the case of the upper classes, as some form of government officials. For a long time in ancient China, until the 16th century at the earliest, it was widely considered that the things to be done by the gentry, the farmers, the artisans/craftsmen and the merchants in their respective social roles were qualitatively different, according to a normative hierarchy in that order (Yu, 2021, pp. 139–140). While it is not true that the market was the major institution governing the coordination of economic activities at the time, markets for crafts and artwork did exist; crucially, it was not obvious that the artisans and craftsmen in the vignettes in *Zhuangzi* lived off of the patronage of any single aristocrats (see, e.g. *Zhuangzi* 2/6). They were part of a social context of divided labor in which their work was complementary to that done by other workers (e.g. those who tended the animals before they got slaughtered). In consequence, while the concept of ‘work’ in the modern capitalistic sense (i.e. work for profit as capitalists or for wages as employees) was not directly applicable to them, those craftsmen and artisans were not shielded from pressures of productivity, efficiency, and market competition (Yu, 2016, pp. 223–226, 231–233). In this sense, we find *Zhuangzi*’s discussions of their experiences relevant and comparable to the imaginary of work of our time.

Based on the passages on Cook Ding and Woodworker Qing, we reconstruct *Zhuangzi*’s imaginary of skillful work (see also Coutinho, 2014, pp. 174–175). In the first of these vignettes, *Zhuangzi* describes a fantastically skilled butcher, a cook named Ding (*Zhuangzi* 3/2). Cook Ding cuts up an ox so skillfully that his movements are described as him ‘proceed[ing] in the dance.’ The cutting also proceeds so efficiently that the knife used by Cook Ding is not dulled at all. Indeed, Cook Ding reports that the knife is as new as it was when newly acquired nineteen years earlier. In response to the praise of his skill by the ruler Wen Hui, Cook Ding responds that his butchering skill is ultimately guided by the *Dao*. In *Zhuangzi*’s thought, *Dao*, which might be translated literally as ‘the Way,’ signifies the truth of how things in the world – human life, social structures, and natural processes – function and stand in harmony with each other (Coutinho, 2014, pp. 3–4). Cook Ding explains to the ruler that the secret of his skill is that he is very familiar with the natural structure of oxen, due to his long years of practice; therefore

observing the natural lines, (my knife) slips through the great crevices and slides through the great cavities, taking advantage of the facilities thus presented. My art avoids the membranous ligatures, and much more the great bones.

The ox can be cut so efficiently because

[t]here are the interstices of the joints, and the edge of the knife has no (appreciable) thickness; when that which is so thin enters where the interstice is, how easily it moves along! The blade has more than enough room.

In Cook Ding's vignette, *Zhuangzi* provides no explicit statement of the ultimate principle, or *Dao*, but rather illustrates *Dao* as the basis of skillful work by describing how its perception of the world guides the development of skills. Here, the metaphorical implication is that if one clearly perceives the natural structure of the object of one's work, one can always avoid obstacles and take advantage of the 'interstices' that are inevitably there, and then complete the work 'with extraordinary grace, ease and efficacy' (Tao, 2011, pp. 463). Only then is one performing skillful work in the Zhuangzian sense.

It is important to distinguish the excellent performance of skillful work from performing work with economic efficiency in the modern sense (see also Chiu, 2019, pp. 8–9). In Cook Ding's vignette, it is not mentioned that the ox gets cut with great speed, or that it gets cut in shapes that were planned ahead and determined by the butcher. Rather, the ox gets cut with ease and grace, because the way Cook Ding uses his knife follows the natural structure of the carcass. The efficacy of the cutting is praised for its effortless grace (graceful like a 'dance'), for the performance, and for the sharpness of the tool used, the knife, being *preserved* as if none of it was spent in the cutting. Furthermore, Cook Ding stresses that after practicing cutting oxen for so long, he 'deal[s] with it in a spirit-like manner, and do[es] not look at it with [his] eyes.' As Coutinho nicely puts it, this implies that the kind of skills to be guided by *Dao* as praised by *Zhuangzi* 'involves the ability to sense, interpret, and respond to the subtle tendencies of the phenomena one is engaged with, subtle differences that lie beneath the threshold of ordinary perception and description' (Coutinho, 2014, p. 175).

In another vignette, Qing, a woodworker, carves a piece of wood and makes a bell-stand, the beauty of which amazes the audience (*Zhuangzi*, 19/11). When asked about the art behind such a masterpiece, Qing replies that the key is that he 'did not venture to waste any of [his] power.' Qing would fast for seven days before going into the forest, a ritual practice that he uses to clear any distractions from his mind – the concerns for rewards, fames, and even '[his] four limbs and [his] whole person' – so that he can focus all his attention on the completion of the bell-stand. Then he goes to the forest and observes the natural forms of the trees, until he can find one that fits perfectly for a bell-stand and work on it. Qing stresses that he would only work on a tree that fit perfectly for being a bell-stand: if no suitable trees were to be found, he would rather abandon the project. That is, a fit object or material, to Qing, a precondition for applying his art of making a masterpiece.

Here, again through the mouth of an artisan figure, *Zhuangzi* explicates aspects of an imaginary of skillful work. Once more, the artisan is not being praised for his speed of production, or for the ability to realize his plan of production regardless of obstacles. Rather, the efficacy of the work lies in it, first, not wasting any power or energy on the part of the worker; and, second,

not wasting any materials that are not perfectly fit for the task. Qing would rather abandon the project – even if it is commissioned by the Court – if the materials are not appropriate. He is not praised by *Zhuangzi* for fulfilling the Court's order of production, but for his mastery as such.

Thus, *Zhuangzi's* vignettes suggest a distinctive understanding of the relationship between the worker and the object or material of work. It does not imply a conception of nature according to which only leaving it as it is would be normatively desirable; otherwise, for *Zhuangzi*, the ox should not have been cut, and the bell-stand should not have been made out of the tree. To *Zhuangzi*, it is desirable that the ox and the tree were transformed by human work, but only if they are transformed by a skillful worker who can perceive the natural structure of things, and then transform those things in a way that aligns perfectly with the natural structures (see also Tao, 2011, p. 469). Importantly, performing skillful work in the *Zhuangzian* sense is also good for the worker: truly skillful work is performed effortlessly, and the worker's energy is not exhausted or dulled due to being spent on unsuitable materials. As Fraser puts it, it should be an exercise of one's inherent potency skillfully, in which the agent finds the process of discovering the possible use of their potency fulfilling. The workers and the materials interact, so to speak, in a mutually constructive way (Fraser, 2014, p. 548, p. 555).

We believe that the *Zhuangzian* imaginary of skillful work as we sketched it here is coherent and appealing, and interesting insights can be drawn when it is contrasted with a modern conception of work that is shaped by economic rationality. *Zhuangzi's* thought was sometimes considered as a form of immorality (Fraser, 2018) or skepticism (Chiu, 2019). A *Zhuangzian* ethic, if it could be construed at all, was also considered by many commentators as socially and politically escapist (Tao, 2021, pp. 334–335). These attributions do have some groundings in the text (see, for example, *Zhuangzi* 4/1, 13/9). In this paper, however, we do not take a position on these issues concerning the characterization of *Zhuangzi's* philosophy as a whole. We also do not take a stance on the more metaphysical dimensions of the *Zhuangzi* (see, e.g. Chai, 2019; Hung, 2019); rather, we maintain that the reflections on skillful work in *Zhuangzi* are of philosophical interest in their own right.

### ***Homo oeconomicus* goes to work**

Before providing a more detailed comparison between Daoist and economic imaginaries of work, and after having presented some defining features of the former, let us sketch the main attributes of the latter. Max Weber concludes his famous analysis of the elective affinities between Calvinism and capitalism with a reference to the 'modern economic man,' the character of which constitutes the basis of bourgeois economic life (Weber, 2005, p. 117). In this section, we will present – with the help of Weber himself and



contemporary authors – some of the core components of *homo oeconomicus* and some examples in contemporary societies, so as to provide a standpoint from which to make a comparison with the main tenets of the *Zhuangzian* imaginary of skillful work. That being said, our use of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is not based on an unqualified agreement with his macro-sociological thesis. Although Weber himself already foresaw the limits of his analysis (Weber, 2005, p. 49), his take definitely falls short when it comes to assessing the objective conditions that enabled capitalism, at times even confounding capitalism with mercantilism (Weber, 2005, p. -xxxii).<sup>7</sup> We nonetheless find his analysis of the *subjective predispositions* needed for capitalism to flourish quite fertile, and we follow Weeks in her treatment of Weber's analysis 'less as a strictly historical claim than as a genealogical device' (2011, p. 41).<sup>8</sup>

Weber introduces Benjamin Franklin as the perfect embodiment of the *homo oeconomicus*' ethos: Franklin's autobiography shows him as someone constantly aware of his time as an asset to be used rationally, careful about his reputation due to its importance for credit-worthiness, and worried about cultivating virtues such as industry, frugality, and punctuality (Weber, 2005, pp. 14–17). However, the most important aspect of this new ethics is for Weber the transformation of a desire for more money into a duty. From then on, the creation of wealth will not only be 'morally permissible, but actually enjoined' (Weber, 2005, p. 108). An end in itself, the act of making money – and thus the work that is done in order to earn it – is not only detached from any sense of enjoyment, but also from the material needs that money is supposed to satisfy (Weber, 2005, p. 18).<sup>9</sup> To that extent, work is neither performed for the activity itself nor even for the fulfillment of needs, but for the purpose of creating and acquiring money, which transforms the logic to which labor itself is submitted to. From now on, 'the real moral objection is to relaxation in the security of possession,' that is, to idleness and to the enjoyment of wealth with no productive purpose in mind (Weber, 2005, p. 104).

Work must not only be socially distributed, through a rational division of labor that impersonally orders society, it must also be rightfully calculated, measured, and evaluated. A contemporary example of these logics can be found in the introduction of 'professional practice' in fine arts education. Through it, future artists are not merely offered career advice: they are trained in the development of a specific subjectivity, capable of adopting 'attitudes and forms of behaviour thought likely to advantage the individual within established, competitive market conditions' (Kenning, 2019, p. 118). This translates, more specifically, into a focus on 'producing regular applications for funding and commissions; developing self-marketing and proficiency with social media; networking with agencies and arts organisations and circulating at arts events' (cited in Kenning, 2019, p. 119). Rather than activities primarily focused on the creation of

artistic works, artistic practices become 'administrative and sociable practices' (Kenning, 2019, p. 119). Arguably, the entrepreneurial mindset that future artists are expected to develop, modifies the channels of recognition that get activated through the labour process: rather than the quality of the work, what is recognized is the individual's ability to partake in a specific economic *ethos*. According to Kenning, through its encouragement of '*behavioural compliance and cognitive adaptation to the realities of market competition*,' this model of strategic professionalism, can work against 'the imaginative and critical ambitions' that any art school must have, if it wishes to participate in 'the formation of counter-hegemonic cultures and collective identities' (Kenning, 2019, p. 126, italics in the original).

Jobs related to knowledge production, especially (but not only) in higher education, can also be taken as a clear example of this economic logic affecting the work experience of individuals. In their study of the impact that neoliberal practices such as 'new public management' have had in universities, Olssen and Peters point out that 'targets and performance criteria' progressively encroach upon the autonomy of the academic role, affecting both teaching and research independence (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 326). In particular, they worry about the increasing dependence on 'managed/funded research,' which not only re-directs the worker's activities – forcing them to spend a higher amount of time in searching ways to make their research interests attractive for the market and in providing evidence of the research's demonstrable impact on society – but also runs the risk of compromising their intellectual freedom (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 326). In contemporary societies run by an economic imaginary, the intellectual labor experience gets deeply transformed: what counts is performance that can be diligently calculated through 'strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 313).

In Weber, even recreational or sportive activities acquire their value by being subsumed to professional life; if 'necessary for physical efficiency,' they are perceived as acceptable (Weber, 2005, p. 112). This calculative drift, in which work, and even leisure, end up being trapped, is to a certain extent unavoidable given a market economy. If, in the realm of labor, 'economic rationalization begins with counting and calculating' (Gorz, 1989, p. 109), then these two extend whenever social production is done for exchange rather than for consumption. The market demands of products to be submitted to a homogenizing logic capable of occluding their heterogeneous nature, a situation that inevitably ensues in the valuing of 'the *quantity of work* per unit of product *in itself*, regardless of the lived experience of that work' (Gorz, 1989, p. 109). Abstract labor is thus the result of exchange, which requires our work to be calculated 'on homogeneous, linear time schedules, which are insensitive to the natural rhythms of life' (Gorz, 1989, p. 109).<sup>10</sup>

This separation of work from nature is connected to an adjacent problem: quantitative approaches detach laboring activities from any sense of limits. To that extent, one could say that because ‘quantitative measure inherently admits of no principle of self-limitation’ (Gorz, 1989, p. 113), these calculative tendencies enhance the problem of environmental sustainability. Ironically, though, the predictability in which work is expected to occur, could not predict the ecological crisis, because the economic modeling on which it is based ignored natural limits and saw scarcity as conquerable through innovation and technology, through the ever-improving application of the calculating mind to economic issues (Jonsson & Wennerlind, 2023).

Given these characteristics, the logic to which Weber is referring to acquires both an insidious and an expansive character. The expansion of economic thinking since the 1980s – often captured under the term ‘neoliberalism’ – has carried this approach to work also into areas such as ‘jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity’ (Brown, 2015, p. 121). To be sure, our claim is not that this is the *only* logic of work that individuals experience. For many individuals, work retains an expressive dimension – or if it does not, this is perceived as a deficit (see e.g. Ferreras, 2007). Nonetheless, as the social imaginary enhanced by dominant social institutions and practices with the power to shape work conditions for the majority of the population, this imaginary arguably leaves its mark on social life.

To sum up, the transformation of labor emptied from any consideration of its particularities, the reduction of the reality of work to systems of valuation, metrics and calculus, the separation of labor activities from natural processes, and the complete submission of work to the requirement of wealth creation, constitute the core of the economic imaginary of work. Although largely naturalized, this imaginary is nothing but a historical result – something that becomes even clearer when we compare it to alternative visions, such as the one presented in the *Zhuangzi*.

## **Comparing Cook Ding and *Homo oeconomicus***

### ***Ways to achieve one’s goals***

The work done by cook Ding and woodcarver Qing clearly has a goal: cutting up a carcass to prepare it for consumption, or producing a bell-stand. And yet, it is quite different from the goal-directedness of the economic approach. This is not only a matter of pressures of efficiency and speed that stand in tension with the slow carefulness and focus on intrinsic quality that craftsmanship requires (cf. also Sennett, 2006, pp. 194–195), although these dimensions are also present. Rather, the way in which goals are meant to be achieved is completely different. *Homo oeconomicus* defines a goal, and then thinks rationally and strategically about the different steps that need

to be taken to arrive at it – he or she *plans* (typically in a way that uses quantitative measures for the different steps). These steps become purely instrumental, and they can be separated (between different workers, or between workers and machines) and organized in whatever way promises to be most efficient in the sense of costing least time and/or money. Management (with tools such as organizational charts, flow charts, or process management tools) becomes central for coordinating and optimizing these different steps. From the perspective of workers, work becomes a series of ‘to do’s,’ according to the timetable and plan laid out beforehand. While for many workers, the latter are laid out by managers, for artists or academics who have internalized the economistic imaginary of work, it is a matter of following through on their self-designed plans, under the pressures created by external evaluation and recognition systems.

The work by the *Zhuangzian* artisans is certainly also systematic, but in a very different way and focused not on the quantity, but the quality of work. Their preparation consists mostly in *preparing themselves* to become the kind of person, with the right bodily skills, but also the right mindset, to execute the task at hand. This preparation takes place in different temporalities: what is emphasized in the vignette about Ding is the yearlong practice that transformed him into a perfect cook (see also Tao, 2011, p. 469), whereas in Qing (who presumably also had undergone yearlong training) the emphasis is on the seven days of fasting that prepare him for the work. Fasting helps Qing to clear his mind from distracting thoughts about the distant future; his whole mind is then focused on finding the right tree for the most beautiful bell-stand, which apparently happens without the need for further planning. In fact, there are various passages in the *Zhuangzi* that reject planning (e.g. 5/5, ‘The sagely man lays no plan,’ 6/2, ‘The True men of old ... did not lay plans ...,’ 12/11, critique of the ‘scheming mind’), expressing what seems to be a general skepticism of the possibility of anticipating the future by planning ahead. The skillful artisans Ding and Qing do not directly plan either, but rather attempt to put themselves into the best possible shape for tackling their tasks.

In the economistic conception of work, such an indirect way of achieving goals, without focusing on them during the process, is hardly present. The pervasiveness of calculative planning can be gauged by the fact that the possibility of goal achievement through indirection stands in need of careful explanation and justification, as provided by Kay (2011). He collects various historical cases, from science and business life, in which discoveries, breakthroughs, or other goals were achieved indirectly. A key argument on his part is that real-life problems, in contrast to many games, are marred by complexity and uncertainty, which means that ‘high-level objectives’ cannot easily be ‘broken down in advance into specific goals and actions’ (Kay, 2011, p. 77). Given the way in which ‘real problems are incompletely and imperfectly

specified,' we often have to proceed in small steps (Kay, 2011, p. 109); even consistency, as a 'hallmark of rationality' may not be the highest virtue because it 'belongs to a world far more certain than the one we inhabit' (Kay, 2011, p. 177). Like the Daoist texts, Kay emphasizes the importance of experience and practical skills – rather than a shallow notion of 'intuition' (Kay, 2011, pp. 182–184) – in contrast to the formal planning approach suggested by the economic imaginary.

### ***The hierarchization between mental and physical dimensions of work***

Related to the importance of planning is the fact that the economic approach tends to prioritize the mental dimensions of work over the physical one. Taylor, the father of modern factory planning, was very explicit on the point that workers should be considered as mere 'hands,' to the point that 'all possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department' (F. W. Taylor, 2011, p. 98). This goes hand in hand with a glorification of those doing the 'brain work,' who are seen as the ones who 'hold [an institution] together and make it work' in the words of Peter Drucker, an influential management scholar (Drucker, 1974, p. 12). From the perspective of workers, this creates a duality of activities with an inbuilt hierarchization; workers are *either* expected to only do mental work *or* to execute the orders. Of course, as noted above, more recent management approaches also want employees to engage emotionally and out of their own intrinsic motivation with the goals of the organization they work for. And yet, what is noteworthy in comparison with the *Zhuangzian* account of skillful work is that the *body* of workers always remains a blind spot.<sup>11</sup> Attention to the bodily states of those doing work is of course not completely absent from modern workplaces, but it enters it in a different way: as health and safety regulations that are imposed by the state and that stand in inherent tension with the cost-saving imperative of the economic logic.

In contrast, the artisanal work of Ding and Qing cannot even be imagined without taking seriously the role of the body. But this stems not only from the fact that it is artisanal work that requires bodily skills. What the vignettes also suggest is that these bodily skills combine perception, understanding and the ability to execute one's tasks in a unique. This also becomes clear in another passage of the *Zhuangzi* that praises embodied skill (19/13): 'The artisan Chui made things round (and square) more exactly than if he had used the circle and square. The operation of his fingers on (the forms of) things was like the transformations of them (in nature), and required no application of his mind; and so his intelligence was entire and encountered no resistance.' One's body here becomes an embodiment of one's intelligence, such that 'no application of [the] mind' is required for fulfilling a difficult task (see also Coutinho, 2014, p. 175).<sup>12</sup> Importantly, the artisans' embodied knowledge is theirs, and they

voluntarily put it into the service of work. As masters of their art, they are difficult to replace – a situation that is foreign to the economic imaginary of work in which those who execute different steps of divided labor tend to be understood as replaceable.<sup>13</sup>

### ***A relation of respect between worker, instrument and material***

Another noteworthy aspect of the Daoist imaginary of work as depicted in the *Zhuangzi* is the relationship that the individuals establish both with their instruments of work and with their natural surroundings. Rather than the dominating position of subjects *vis-a-vis* nature characteristic of the economic imaginary, we find a more adapted and considerate relationship between elements.

As mentioned earlier, Cook Ding explains that while cutting the ox, he makes sure that his knife ‘slips through’ and ‘slides’ through the animal – conveying an image of the labor act as one that goes along with the qualities of the object being used, rather than against them. Cook Ding admits the need of staying away from those features of the animal that would make his work unnecessarily difficult, such as ‘membranous ligatures’ or ‘great bones.’ In saying so, he presents a situation in which the material upon which he is working – in this case, as a cook, an animal – is respected, to some extent, in its idiosyncrasy. The point is not to cut the animal’s body no matter how, or even do it in a way that is more efficient and/or methodical; rather, the point is to do it in a way that (although it does not respect the animal’s full autonomy by keeping it alive) appreciates the characteristics of the animal and takes them into account. The very act of cutting would happen differently if what was being cut was not an ox. It is not an indiscriminate act, applicable in the exact same terms, to any other thing. The cook considers the materiality with which he is working, and in doing so, he is able to establish a more respectful relation with it. Here, the respect for nature’s autonomy is not expressed in leaving it untouched, but in developing a particular way of relating to it. Thus, as Tao claims (2011, p. 469),

if it were a case of Heaven/nature over human, he would not have cut the ox to begin with; if it were a case of human over Heaven/nature, he would have simply hacked his way through the body of the ox and would have to change his chopper frequently. He rejects both. Instead, his is a case in which there is a perfect alignment (qi 齊) or attunement (tong 通) between Heaven/nature and human.

The relationship with his instrument of work, the knife, is remarkable. Cook Ding underlines that were he ‘an ordinary cook,’ he would acquire a new knife every month; every year, were he ‘a good cook.’ However, the excellence of his labor and his self-understanding as an exceptional cook stand in direct

relation to the fact that he has been able to use his knife for nineteen years. An evident case is being made for the value of maintenance and of taking care of the very tools that enable labor in the first place, that is, a recognition of them as an essential part of the labor process. Rather than an attempt at saving resources at all costs, or a carelessness in the replacement of instruments – more characteristic of the economic imaginary –, we witness a high regard of the tools necessary for work, which are themselves worthy of one's labor and attention. Tools, instead of becoming alien to the worker – either because they do not belong to them or because they are used for purposes that the worker cannot recognize as theirs – become a natural extension of the worker, one that deserves considerable care.<sup>14</sup>

The woodworker Qing's story is also revealing. While recounting his trip to the forest, he admits, first of all, looking 'at the natural forms of the trees.' It is only when he finds the perfect one, that he is able to prefigure the bell-stand. Qing even confesses that if he had not found such a tree, he would have simply aborted his task. In other words, not any tree would do the work – such indifference to the materiality of the object would have disregarded the fact that natural surroundings themselves have a say, or at least play a role, in the labor process itself. Communication would probably be too strong a term to use here, but Qing seems to depend on receiving some kind of message from nature itself, a message that would not only facilitate his enterprise but even determine whether the enterprise is to take place or not. We do not have here an understanding of nature as capital, as it is characteristic of an economic rationality that quantifies the inputs of nature – 'natural capital' being a term nowadays used by mainstream economics and by environmental policy alike (Battistoni, 2017, p. 5). Instead, what we have is a form of world-making that takes into further consideration the importance of human and non-human nature in bringing about labor products.

In short, in contrast with the economic imaginary of work that instead of respecting nature, naturalizes attitudes and social relations that lean towards its sheer domination, the Daoist imaginary offers, not a perfectly harmonious, but certainly a more reconciliatory relation to it. If an admittance of nature's autonomy (Heyd, 2005; Merchant, 2016) might be reading too much into the *Zhuangzi*, we could nonetheless perceive a better and more respectful alignment between humans, instruments, and non-human nature in the text.

### ***The relation between work and human well-being***

*Zhuangzi's* imaginary of work also contrasts sharply with the *homo oeconomicus* imaginary with regard to their views on the relation between work and human well-being. As we have seen, in Section III, the *homo oeconomicus* imaginary of work, though one could trace its origin to some form of Christian asceticism, is now no longer based on any religious roots. Instead, work

becomes an end in itself, and is presumed to be at the center of human life, in whatever terms, religious or secular, one explains its ethical meaning. Furthermore, work is conceptualized as something to be exclusively evaluated by economic rationality – the more efficiency and productivity, to be calculated by the amount of money or profit thus generated, the better. Workers benefit from work only instrumentally, namely insofar as they can earn a salary that they use to seek well-being in their private lives. *Zhuangzi's* imaginary of work, by contrast, clearly puts the well-being of the worker at the center of its conception of skillful work. As we have seen, part of the reason why Ding's and Qing's work is praised as well-performed is that the workers' powers are not 'wasted.' Hard work without a purpose is condemned in many places of the *Zhuangzi*. How is it better than death, *Zhuangzi* asks in a famous passage, '[t]o be constantly toiling all one's lifetime, without seeing the fruit of one's labour, and to be weary and worn out with his labour, without knowing where he is going to?' (*Zhuangzi*, 2/3). Concerns about economic efficiency and productivity, on the other hand, are peripheral.

It is also striking that the conception of well-being described in *Zhuangzi* as related to skillful work is predominately bodily, which is consistent with the general outline of Daoist thought in general. As Coutinho (2014, p. 170) puts it, *Zhuangzi*

observe[s] vegetative processes, and to the extent we learn from animals, it is their movement, balance, and dexterity, their ability to withstand hardship and interact harmoniously . . . Natural flourishing is manifested physically in health, emotional well-being, and longevity, so [we should] directly imitate and embody these processes and modes of behavior and interaction . . .

In other words, skillful work contributes to human well-being not because of the material wealth it could produce, or because a plan predetermined by the human mind could be realized in work. Rather, work contributes to human well-being to the extent that in performing the work, the workers can sufficiently maintain 'health, emotional well-being, and longevity.'

Importantly, the emphasis on bodily well-being in *Zhuangzi* does not imply that work is something to be avoided as much as possible. Rather, the point is to maintain a proper relationship between the worker, the instrument used in work, and the raw materials for work. Cook Ding mentioned that even following the natural structure of the ox, at times there are complicated joints that are difficult to cut. Yet, instead of not cutting at all, Ding explained, in those sites 'I proceed vigilantly and with caution, not allowing my eyes to wander from the place, and moving my hand slowly' (*Zhuangzi* 3/2, translation altered). Skills, in other words, are required to resolve the difficulties encountered in work, and it is good that such difficulties can be resolved, but only if they are resolved in a way the natural structure and process allow, a way that is open to a worker who is



sufficiently skillful. Furthermore, when the raw materials, i.e. nature, is transformed by respectful human work, bodily well-being is persevered. The worker's well-being thus cannot be attained independently of the nature being worked on by suitable skills and sufficient attention (see Tao, 2011, pp. 466–468).

Csikszentmihályi (1990, pp. 150–151) reads the episode of Cook Ding purely from the perspective of his own conception of 'flow' (see also Sellmann, 2019). Flow describes a form of intense enjoyment that is based on the use of one's skills in a way that is neither too demanding nor too easy, in ways that are goal-directed and include clear feed-back, leading to a high degree of concentration on the task that lets one's sense of self disappear (chap. 2, 3, and p. 71 summarizing). Flow experiences are intrinsically rewarding, and therefore highly motivating for individuals, even when it comes to difficult or risky tasks (ibid.). What Csikszentmihályi's concept shares with the Daoist descriptions of skilled work is the disappearance of a focus on oneself (Csikszentmihályi, 1990, p. 53), and the attention to the task itself, rather than to future rewards to which the task might be instrumental (let alone thoughts of punishment that might rise fears of failure and thereby develop a motivating force) (Csikszentmihályi, 1990, pp. 67–70).

But Csikszentmihályi's approach, coming from individual psychology and informed by research on the functioning of the human brain, uses a notion of enjoyment that does not ask deeper questions about the relation of an individual to other human beings or nature. The concept of 'flow' is applied to games, artistic endeavors, sports, and potentially also to work (Csikszentmihályi, 1990, chap. 7).<sup>15</sup> But there is no expectation that work contributes to the well-being of others, or puts the individual into a specific relation with the natural world. Instead, 'flow' means that an individual enjoys their work, which can be achieved if 'a job inherently resembles a game – with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals, and immediate feed-back' (Csikszentmihályi, 1990, p. 152). Contemporary research on flow experiences at work often connects it to the productivity of workers (see e.g. Pfeifer & Wolters, 2021).

The *Zhuangzi* imaginary of good work, in contrast, sees the worker as part of a larger universe. The vignette about cook Ding is preceded by a short reflection on human life (3/1) in which 'the practice of what is good' is described as 'an accordance with the Central Element (of our nature)'. The latter refers to 'the regular way to preserve the body, to maintain the life, to nourish our relatives, and to complete our term of years' (translation altered). Of course, interpreting these passages would require entering more deeply into exegetical questions about the character of the social and natural universe in the Daoist vision than we here can do. What is clear is that the well-being of the worker is not understood in an atomistic way, but rather seeing

the individual as always part of a larger social and natural whole (see also Perkins, 2019).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have compared the Daoist imaginary of skillful work that appears in the text of the *Zhuangzi* with the economic imaginary of work that is symbolized in the figure of *homo oeconomicus*. We have focused on four dimensions of comparison: ways to achieve one's goals, the hierarchization between mental and physical dimensions of work, the relation of respect between worker, instrument, and material, and the relation between work and well-being. On all counts, the Daoist imaginary provides a striking contrast to the way in which work is imagined in the line that goes from Weber's protestant work ethic to a secular, but no less methodological and quantitative, imaginary of work.

What is the point of such a comparison across time, space, and social and cultural contexts? We certainly do not plead for a return to universal artisanship, nor do we hold that the elements we have identified in the Daoist texts would be completely foreign to other cultural contexts. Artistic and artisanal work, whether it is the stonemasonry Ruskin celebrated or the making of musical instruments, continue to exist, albeit in niches. And of course, there are also inevitable limits to the Daoist conception of work. For example, the idea that one should avoid obstacles and find one's way around them, or that one simply does not do certain tasks if no perfectly fitted material is available, is certainly not applicable to all forms of work. Even if one separates the vignettes about artisans from the broader ethical and metaphysical claims of the *Zhuangzi*, as we have done here, there remains a question mark about the relation between these vignettes and the escapist and nihilist strands in the text.

We nonetheless think that the comparison can contribute to contemporary discussions about work in at least three ways. The first is to denaturalize a conception of work that is all too often taken for granted. Castoriadis reminds us that imaginaries inform society's radical imagination, which is not 'the capacity to have "images" (or to be seen) in a "mirror" but the capacity to posit that which is not, to see in something that which is not there' (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 151). The imaginary that *homo oeconomicus* embeds is, arguably, deeply woven into the cultural fabric of many societies. As Rodgers writes about the US: 'Like most ethical claims, the idea that work should lie at the very center of moral life disguises itself as timeless and unmoving' (2014, position 33). By exploring an imaginary of work from a distant historical period, in a different cultural context, the contingency of other conceptions of work becomes visible.

While the presentation of an alternative imaginary does not amount to a normative justification, it seems clear that the economic imaginary, and the social practices that follow from it, require rethinking. Critics of the current model of work (e.g. Chamberlain, 2018; Weeks, 2011) call for a fundamental rethinking of the role that work, as traditionally understood, plays in society. But at the same time, it is clear that the fulfillment of certain human needs will require human activities, whether one calls them ‘work’ or something else. Drawing on alternative imaginaries can support the development of other visions of work, which are environmentally and socially more sustainable than the economic imaginary embodied in *homo oeconomicus*.

A second way in which the comparison can be relevant is by asking the question of whether the Daoist approach, or elements of it, might be of particular relevance for some forms of work, because its features make the economic approach unsuitable and might even lead to its backfiring. One can raise this question with regard to forms of work that deal with highly unpredictable materials or situations, which make a mockery of the idea of neatly laid out plans with quantified steps to be reached one after the other. One can also raise it with regard to forms of work for which skills, whether physical or mental, and year-long training that leads to an intuitive mastery of the issues at hand, are central. Of course, a key question is which forms of work should be understood as such – one can ask whether, for example, teaching should be understood along these lines. But if one can agree that this is the case, this implies that a rather different logic of work is needed than the one that currently dominates such activities (see e.g. Aviv, 2014). This would also lead to larger questions about the social organization of such forms of work, including the question of who does it and whether it should be organized in a market-based way or not.

Taking seriously the possibility that some work might be better done along the lines embodied by cook Ding rather than *homo oeconomicus* has potentially far-reaching implications for institutional structures. For example, it would suggest avoiding fine-grained step-by-step evaluations of an activity such as teaching and suggest more holistic forms of evaluation. Certainly, more argumentation is needed for making this case, and in pluralistic societies, with individuals holding different conceptions of the good, it may not be possible, nor desirable, to use one model for all workers in a certain field. But at the very least, the dominance of the *homo oeconomicus* imaginary deserves to be questioned. Complementing it with other possible imaginaries of work is one way of doing so.

Thirdly, as already mentioned, there are many independent reasons to rethink the logic of work that dominates in our societies: questions about the ecological sustainability of our economic systems and hence also of the forms of work done within it, but also questions about digital technologies and their impact on work. The respectful way in which cook Ding and woodcarver

Qing relate to their materials raises interesting debates about the different attitudes towards the materials and instruments of work that shape many current forms of work (and indeed our whole ways of life). While cook Ding's knife may not be a model directly applicable to today's world, it can at least provide inspiration for thinking about more sustainable ways of relating to the material dimensions of work. Moreover, it seems clear that if one wants to allow modern workers to adopt, at least up to a point, attitudes towards work that resemble more that of Ding or Qing, then they need to be given more autonomy in the sphere of production and at the workplace: the ability to determine their own rhythm of work, to develop their skills, to choose their tasks flexibly, and to deliberate what exactly they would like to produce. But in contemporary societies, this is often made difficult because of a general sense of 'overload,' of having to meet unrealistic demands so that it becomes impossible to closely focus on one task, leading to exhaustion of the mind and body of workers (e.g. Kelly & Moen, 2020), as well as because of the authority granted to the market in the production process. While this happens in the name of 'efficiency,' it raises serious questions about the well-being of workers, and also about the social sustainability of such forms of work in the sense that it comes at the cost of individual and social health and long-term resilience.

Lastly, reflecting on cook Ding and woodcarver Qing also stimulates thought-provoking questions when it comes to the automatization of work, which is currently in an accelerating phase thanks to advances in artificial intelligence and other technologies. If artisanal work gets replaced by, say, 3D printing, what is lost for those who do this work? Which forms of 'labor-saving' technology are truly desirable – maybe because they can replace the kind of 'toil' that the *Zhuangzi* clearly condemn – and which ones might mean the loss of opportunities for human flourishing (cf. also Hsieh, 2019)? If work is to be understood as, in some sense, part of a good life, embedded in the natural world, not merely as something that achieves an external goal in an instrumental way, then this question gets a different flavor. But of course, finding answers to it remains our own task.

## Notes

1. Csikszentmihályi (1990, pp. 150–151) argues that Cook Ding's work can be understood as a case of 'flow,' in one of the few cases in which we found a reference to this example in the Anglophone literature on work. We discuss the relation between these concepts in more detail below, but our set of comparisons is broader than that suggested by the 'flow' concept.
2. We follow the convention of citing the *Zhuangzi* edition of the Chinese Text Project (<http://ctext.org/zhuangzi>) by chapter number and paragraph number. In the Chinese Text Project Edition the name of the Cook, 'Ding,' was not translated. Here we follow the translation of Watson (2013, p. 19).

3. We use the terms 'work' and 'labor' interchangeably. Our focus is on work done in social contexts outside of the household and the family, in contexts in which individuals contribute to divided labor in exchange for material benefits, typically in the form of a wage or some other compensation that allows them to in turn draw on the fruits of the work of others (e.g. by exchanging or buying other food products).
4. The context of this text is a project funded by a Western university with the aim of broadening the conception of work prevalent in the Anglophone philosophical discussion.
5. A prominent example in the Anglophone world is the arts and crafts movement, and especially Ruskin. See for example Hsieh (2019).
6. For reasons of space, we cannot discuss broader questions about the role of work in individuals' lives, e.g. whether a few hours of drudgery could be compensated by valuable activities in other spheres of life. Instead, our focus is on the *kind* of work individuals do in their productive role, i.e. when contributing to social production in a context of divided labor.
7. For some important criticisms, see Delacroix and Nielsen (2001); Grossman (2006); Cantoni (2015).
8. On the social and cultural history of work ethics in the US, see also Rodgers (2014).
9. For a critique of Weber's interpretation of Franklin's writings, see Dickson and McLachlan (1989).
10. It is worth noting that, for Gorz, existing socialist planned economies had a similar work ethic and calculative approach to work (Gorz, 1989, p. 41).
11. This forgetfulness is not accidental, to the extent that the body itself is usually considered the site of capitalist exploitation and immiseration. See Fracchia (2008).
12. Note, however, that some interpreters question the praise of skill as such in the *Zhuangzi*, see Chui, 2018, pp. 1071–1072.
13. This stands in contrast to the way in which the role of managers and in particular of 'entrepreneurs' is imagined, cf. for example Schumpeter's (1942) praise of (presumably also irreplaceable and unique) entrepreneurs as the bringers of 'creative destruction.'
14. Of course, there are deeper questions lurking here about what unalienated work could ever be (e.g. Kandiyali, 2020 for a recent discussion). For reasons of space, we cannot expand on them here.
15. Interestingly, in one of the examples of flow at work, describing a farm woman living in a traditional village in the Italian Alps, Csíkszentmihályi does speak about her being 'perfectly content and serene with the role she plays in the universe' (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 146). But he does not explore any further what this sense of harmony with the universe would imply.

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