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Sense perception in the Zhuangzi 莊子

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Abstract:	<p>In this essay I explore the controversial issue of sense perception in the Zhuangzi 莊子. Although scholars have not explicitly addressed this aspect of the Chinese text, a common assumption is that the Zhuangzi proposes a mysticism that undermines sense perception in favour of a transcendent self. After an overview of this interpretation, and after analysing some key passages of the text that deal with heart fasting (xinzhai 心齋), sitting and forgetting (zuowang 坐忘) and skill mastery, I argue that in the Zhuangzi sense perception has been read with a metaphysical bias as something that needs to be transcended to reach perfection. My thesis is that the text does not propose a withdrawal from the senses and from the world, but rather warns about the danger of abiding to doctrinal knowledge, thus losing responsive awareness. Indeed, in the Zhuangzi, sense perception is not an impediment on the way to a supersensible reality, but an integral part of one's own being in the world.</p> <p>Through my analysis, I object the idea that the Zhuangzi proposes a mystical union with something not immediately available, which needs to be achieved by transcending the world of "appearances" and sense perception – thus postulating a union with a transcendent entity and reintroducing dualism via unity. This is not only contradictory but also misleading because the Zhuangzi does not point to another world – in a two worlds theory – where one can enter the realm of a transcendent self. On the contrary, in rejecting a univocal ethos, the text suggests one should keep responding to changing circumstances without turning one's perceptual awareness into stable habits. Thus, the Zhuangzi shows how sense perception should be seen, not as a "problem" but as an ethical possibility through which the univocity of doctrinal knowledge can be undermined.</p>

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Abstract

In this essay I explore the controversial issue of sense perception in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Although scholars have not explicitly addressed this aspect of the Chinese text, a common assumption is that the *Zhuangzi* proposes a mysticism that undermines sense perception in favour of a transcendent self. After an overview of this interpretation, and after analysing some key passages of the text that deal with heart fasting (*xinzhai* 心齋), sitting and forgetting (*zuowang* 坐忘) and skill mastery, I demonstrate that some interpreters of the *Zhuangzi* read the text as if it has a metaphysical bent, recommending that sense perception be transcended as a prerequisite to perfection. In contrast, my thesis is that the text does not propose a withdrawal from the senses and from the world, but rather warns about the danger of abiding to doctrinal knowledge, which has the consequence of a person losing their responsive awareness. Indeed, in the *Zhuangzi*, sense perception is not an impediment on the way to a supersensible reality, but an integral part of one's own being in the world.

Through my analysis, I object to the idea that the *Zhuangzi* proposes a mystical union with something not immediately available, which moreover needs to be achieved by transcending the lived world that is encountered through sense perception. My view is that such a move not only postulates union with a transcendent entity, it also forces a dualism between a person's capacities. This is problematic because the *Zhuangzi* does not point to another world – in a two worlds theory – where one must ideally attain the condition of a transcendent self. On the contrary, in rejecting a univocal *ethos*, the text suggests one should keep responding to changing circumstances without turning one's perceptual awareness into entrenched habits. Thus, the *Zhuangzi* shows how sense perception should be seen, not as a “problem” but as an ethical possibility through which the univocity of doctrinal knowledge can be undermined.

1. Introduction

1.1 Scope of the article

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is an anthology written around 4th century B.C.E. and edited by Guo Xiang 郭象 (died 312 CE).¹ Due to its composite nature, the text has been interpreted in many ways. In the introduction to his partial translation of the text, Brook Ziporyn (2009) offers a precise account of how the *Zhuangzi* gives support to many possible – and often contrasting – readings.² In this paper, I consider only the most controversial passages related to sense perception.

Although scholars have not explicitly addressed this aspect of the Chinese text, a problematic assumption held by some scholars is that the *Zhuangzi* proposes a mysticism that undermines sense perception in favour of a transcendent self. After an overview of this interpretation, and analysis of some key passages that seem to support this position, I consider some controversial descriptions of sense perception in the so-called skill stories (section 2). Through this analysis it will become apparent that the text does not propose to abandon sense perception, but to abandon the entrenched habits that prevent fuller perception and appreciation of our world.

More precisely, my analysis intends to show that there is a metaphysical bias³ in interpreting the *Zhuangzi* as proposing:

- (i) a mystical union with something not immediately available
- (ii) “The *Dao*” as an absolute force that transcends the world of sensible experience
- (iii) the rejection of sense perception to reach perfection

Points (i) and (ii) tend to be associated with the passages of the *Zhuangzi* that propose concepts such as “heart fasting” and “sitting and forgetting” (discussed in section 2), whereas (iii) is generally connected to the so-called skill stories (section 3).

The points above ((i)-(iii)) presuppose a clear hierarchical distinction between the sensible and supersensible in which sense perception needs to be transcended in favour of a supersensible realm. Not only does this imply an ontological separation between the

¹ On the problems of authorship and chapters division, see Graham (1979), Liu (1987) (1994) and Klein (2010).

² Anthologies on the *Zhuangzi* give a good idea of the richness of these interpretations. See, for instance, Mair (1983), Kjellberg and Ivanhoe (1996), Ames (1998), and Ames and Nakajima (2015).

³ I use the term metaphysics in the sense given by Heidegger (1957/1991, 48), who affirms that the setting up of the “partition between the sensible and nonsensible, between the physical and nonphysical is a basic trait of what is called metaphysics and which normatively determines Western thinking.”

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3 experiential self and the world that does not fit the ancient Chinese context – as we shall soon
4 see – but it also neglects the fact that the *Zhuangzi* is critical of hierarchical structures.

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6 As a consequence, this bias skews our understanding of the *Zhuangzi* by proposing a
7 metaphysical two worlds theory that is not present in the text. On the contrary, I propose that
8 the *Zhuangzi*'s view is that we need to clear what has been stored by entrenched habits – those
9 driven by our ideals and doctrines – so as to be responsive; this, in turn, can lead to an ethical
10 – more than epistemic – modesty (section 4). This will become apparent with the analysis of
11 “responding without storing” (*ying er bu cang* 應而不藏) which shows how the *Zhuangzi*
12 rejects a univocal *ethos* and spurs readers to keep responding to changing circumstances without
13 turning one's perceptual awareness to ossified habits. In this way, the *Zhuangzi* considers sense
14 perception not as a “problem” but as an ethical possibility through which the univocity of
15 doctrinal knowledge can and should be undermined (section 5).
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26 1.2 The “problem” of sense perception

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28 To understand the motivations for the mystical interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*, it is crucial to
29 analyse how sense perception is considered as a problem in Western philosophy. As Crane and
30 French (2017) clearly show from the outset, in Western philosophy sense perception is a
31 “pervasive and traditional problem, sometimes called ‘the Problem of Perception’”.⁴ And
32 “when philosophers speak of ‘the’ problem of perception, what they generally have in mind is
33 the question whether we can ever directly perceive the physical world” (Smith 2002, 1).
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39 This “problem” refers back to a traditional epistemic problem exemplified by Cartesian
40 doubts about sensory perception:⁵ because the senses are not always reliable, one cannot trust
41 perception to give a veridical experience of the world. The possibility of a veridical experience
42 of the world implies that there is a truthful and mind-independent world that can be experienced.
43 And, in turn, the presupposition of a truthful and mind-independent world implies both mind-
44 body and appearance-reality dichotomies.
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53 ⁴ See also how the sections of *The Senses and the History of Philosophy* – which is almost entirely the
54 history of Western philosophy – are presented as “problems of perception” and how it is suggested that
55 “the subtitle of [the] volume should be something like *Problems, Perceptual Errors, and*
56 *Misperceptions*” (Glenney and Silva 2019, 2).

57 ⁵ This is not to say that there is only one way to consider sense perception. See, for instance, how Bence
58 Nanay (2010) takes into account other aspects of the topic. Nevertheless, Nanay (2010, 5) acknowledges
59 that “Epistemology has always had special ties to philosophy of perception”.
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3 Early Chinese philosophy, however, does not seem to be concerned about a
4 disembodied mind because the heart (*xin* 心), “the seat of thinking as well as feeling, is not a
5 non-physical entity” (Blake 2019, 34). This is not to say that Chinese philosophy does not
6 present any differentiation between the heart and the body – as we shall see in detail later.⁶ To
7 use the words of Edward Slingerland (2013, 8) – who proposes a ““weak” mind-body dualism”
8 in early Chinese philosophy – “we do not find in early China the sort of distinction between an
9 entirely disembodied *mind*, *esprit*, or *Geist* and an ontologically distinct body that characterizes
10 certain philosophical positions in the West.” As a consequence, I do not propose a *Zhuangzi*-
11 Western philosophy opposition – such a radical opposition would make the *Zhuangzi*
12 philosophically incommensurable. I only suggest that even if early Chinese philosophy
13 distinguishes between the functions of the heart and of the body, this does not result in a
14 substance dualism.
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24 Moreover, in ancient Chinese thought, “structural compatibility of the subject and the
25 object of comprehension was the basic precondition of human perception” (Rošker 2019, 21),
26 and this can hardly imply “the problem” of a mind-independent world or the relevance of the
27 appearance-reality dichotomy. As rightly stated by Geoffrey Lloyd (2006, 313), there was no
28 “ontological divide between the intelligible and the perceptible domains” in ancient China. This
29 means that, in approaching sense perception in the *Zhuangzi*, one needs to be careful to
30 presuppose that sense perception is a “problem”.
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36 Glenney and Silva (2019, 3) warn us that the ideas of the senses, such as the one that
37 we find in Chinese philosophy, “do not align well with our contemporary Western categories
38 and may easily be dismissed as primitive or unscientific”. This shows how the measure to
39 evaluate the problem of sense perception is based on scientific reliability, which is not
40 immediately applicable to the Chinese context. And when, in approaching the *Zhuangzi*,
41 scholars do not find any specific account of the problematic reliability of the perception but
42 only some (seemingly) contradictory statements on the importance of the senses, a popular
43 route out of this problem is the transcendent mystical approach.
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50 Before considering how the *Zhuangzi* is not concerned about sense perception as an
51 epistemic problem in the veridical experience of a mind-independent world, but with the ethical
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57 ⁶ Indeed, we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of the radical East-West opposition. See, for
58 instance, how Zhang Longxi (1998, 110) criticises an “image of China that is nothing but a cultural
59 myth of difference”.
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interference that doctrinal knowledge may have in one's perceptual awareness, let me discuss the mystical approaches in more detail.

2. Mysticism and sense withdrawal

2.1 Transcendent mysticism

According to Isabelle Robinet (1993, 48), the *Zhuangzi* represents the oldest and best example of mystical Daoism. For Benjamin Schwartz (1985, 188), although Daoist mysticism “remains irreducibly Chinese and entirely sui generis”, it shares with other mysticisms a similar idea of union with a transcendent entity. Indeed, for Schwartz (1975, 66) early Daoism “represents the most radical expression of transcendence in China”.

This mystical position is held by other scholars, as suggested by Livia Kohn (2014, 181) who affirms that “Mysticism is the one label that has been attached to the *Zhuangzi* more often than others”.⁷ One of the assumptions of this position is that the *Zhuangzi* advocates for a mystical union with “the Way” or “the *Dao*” (道) conceived as an absolute force or entity (Kohn 1992, 8).⁸ To achieve this end one needs to discard senses and intellect through various techniques of meditation, such as heart fasting (*xinzhai* 心齋)⁹ and sitting and forgetting (*zuowang* 坐忘).¹⁰ For Kohn (2010, 8), this union with “*Dao*” is “the fundamental human birth

⁷ Kohn (2014, 181-185) offers a detailed account of these interpretations.

⁸ There are, however, more immanent understandings of mysticism in Daoism. Besides the general reading that Maurice Friedman (1976, 415) gives of Martin Buber's interpretation of Daoism as “the mysticism of the particular and the concrete”, Lee Yearley (1983, 130) proposes the definition of “intra-worldly mysticism” for the *Zhuangzi*. Unfortunately, Yearley is not consistent in his immanent interpretation and, in later writings, he reads in the *Zhuangzi* a propension towards “transcendent drives” that “exceed the normal capacities of the self” and “surpass the simply human” (Yearley 1996, 154; 174). J. J. Clarke (2000, 147-149) offers a good account of scholars who consider Daoism as a special kind of mysticism – what he calls “Daoist nature mysticism”. According to him, this mysticism is often identified with the *Zhuangzi* and “implies a joyous sense of kinship with nature in all its beauty and diversity, a feeling for the presence of the *dao* in all things, and an aesthetic sense of our ultimate identification with the natural world which avoids the extreme monism and asceticism of other forms of Asian and Western mystical philosophy”. Although I generally agree with these interpretations, I do not see the advantage of using the idea of mysticism for the *Zhuangzi* if it is so different from the “other forms of Asian and Western mystical philosophy”.

⁹ As mentioned, in ancient China *xin* was the organ of feelings and thoughts. The term is generally translated as “mind” or, more properly, “heart-mind”. I prefer to translate it as “heart” so as to avoid the idea of a disembodied mind. More on this later.

¹⁰ *Xinzhai* appears in a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Yan Hui in chapter 4 (9/4/24-28) – references to the *Zhuangzi* are from Hung (1947). Confucius recommends to Yan Hui: “don't listen with

right that is lost through sensory involvement and conscious categorizations”. It is clear that, in Kohn’s interpretation, sense perception is regarded as a hindrance, standing in the way of a person’s reunion with the absolute and transcendent *dao*.

Harold Roth (1999, 125) aligns the practices of the *Zhuangzi* to the “Inward training (Neiye 內業)” chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子 (a collated text incorporating miscellaneous materials from between the 4th to 2nd century B.C.E.)¹¹ and to other mystical traditions present in other parts of the world.¹² In particular, Roth interprets the *Zhuangzi* as advocating apophatic practice (154). He uses the term apophatic to indicate “its more general and original sense: ‘of knowledge of God: obtained through negation,’” so as to “facilitate an experience of the Absolute” (228). Roth adopts a specific hermeneutical tool to interpret the “Neiye” and the *Zhuangzi* – what he calls “mystical hermeneutic” (4); we explore this in detail in the following section.

2.2 The mystical approach

In Roth’s interpretation of Daoism, the “Absolute” is represented by *dao*.¹³ Whilst Roth distinguishes between theistic mysticism – the union with a single god or divine being – and

your ears, listen with your heart; don’t listen with your heart, listen with your vital energy (*qi* 氣)” – all translations of the *Zhuangzi* into English are by the author, unless otherwise stated. Confucius explains that whilst hearing stops at ears and understanding stops at what tallies (*fu* 符), “*qi* is a clearing (*xu* 虛) that awaits things”. Confucius concludes that this clearing is *xinzhai*. *Zuowang* appears in chapter 6 as another dialogue between Confucius and Yan Hui (17/6/89-93). In this passage, Yan Hui describes his gradual progress: first he forgets *ren* 仁 (benevolence or humaneness), and *yi* 義 (righteousness, duty or responsibility); then he forgets *li* 禮 (rites or proprieties) and *yue* 樂 (music) – which are important Confucian moral commitments – and finally he just sits and forgets. Yan Hui explains that *zuowang* means to: drop away the frame (*duo zhiti* 墮肢體), dismiss the intellect (*chu congming* 黜聰明), part from the body (*li xing* 離形) and discard knowledge (*qu zhi* 去知). In his commentary, Chen Guying (2007, 241) quotes Xu Fuguan who suggests that *chu congming* is linked to *qu zhi* and that forgetting knowledge “*wang zhi* 忘知” is the most important aspect of *zuowang*. For a similar reason I translate *chu congming* as “dismiss the intellect” provided that “intellect” retains its etymological sense of *intellectus* – “a perceiving”, “a discerning”, from *intellego* which indicates the act of understanding but also the capacity of discerning from sense perceptions (literally formed by *inter* “between” and *lego* “to choose”, “to read”). Indeed, in classical Chinese “senses are also said to know, and clarity of perception and intelligence are described with the same term(s), *congming* 聰明, meaning sensitivity and brightness” (Blake 2019, 35). More on this in the next sections.

¹¹ Angus Graham (1989, 100) explains that the *Guanzi* is generally classified as a Legalist text and he refers to the “Neiye” as “possibly the oldest ‘mystical’ text in China”.

¹² As we shall soon see, I disagree with Roth’s broad casting net.

¹³ W. T. Stace (1960, 341-342), one of Roth’s sources, states that the mystic refers to the eternal that transcends the transient world. These references to an eternal and transcending reality echo the position of William James (1902/1985, 320), another important reference for Roth, who affirms that the

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3 monistic mysticism – the union with a single abstract entity, he ultimately affirms that Daoism
4 belongs to the latter. In doing so, he considers *dao* “the Way” that can be reached through the
5 mystical practice of negating awareness of emotions, desires and sense perceptions (154). Both
6 *xinzhai* and *zuowang* are, for Roth, mystical apophatic practices that allow union with “the
7 Way”; he substantiates his arguments with numerous passages in the *Zhuangzi* that propose
8 “inner cultivation”. There is a particular phrase, *dao shu* 道術, which Roth translates as
9 “techniques of the Way”.

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11 Besides the problems relating to a singular, metaphysical *dao* (Lacertosa 2018), the idea
12 of teaching and transmitting mystical techniques in the *Zhuangzi* is particularly problematic. In
13 many important passages, the text shows scepticism towards the possibility of transmitting not
14 only theoretical knowledge but also practical knowledge.¹⁴

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16 This is particularly evident in the second chapter where the use of double rhetorical
17 questions undermines the possibility of a stable approach to teaching, to the point that Wang
18 Ni, in one passage, asks: “How do I know that what I call knowledge is not ignorance? How do
19 I know that what I call ignorance is not knowledge?” (6/2/66). Later, (6/2/68-70) Wang Ni
20 questions also the possibility of determining proper taste (*zheng wei* 正味) and a proper sense
21 of beauty (*zheng se* 正色), thus undermining any categorical position in relation to sense
22 perception. If *dao* is “ineffable and so cannot be known as an object” (Roth 1999, 44) and if
23 knowledge is not determinate, how can it be possible to teach techniques that lead to the
24 mystical “Way”?

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57 “overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic
58 achievement”.

59 ¹⁴ On the problem of scepticism in the *Zhuangzi*, see Kjellberg and Ivanhoe (1996).
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3. Sense perception in the *Zhuangzi*

One way to understand the position of the *Zhuangzi* in relation to sense perception is through the so-called skill stories. These stories portray people in the act of performing or describing their exceptional activities. I examine a few of them in this section.

3.1 Cook Ding

In describing his art of carving oxen, Cook Ding (in chapter 3 (7/3/2-12)) explains that when he first began butchering, he could only see the ox. After three years, he no longer saw the ox as a whole. Finally, he stopped using eyesight, perceiving the ox with his *shen* 神 (variously translated as “spirit”, or “daemonic”).¹⁵ The term *shen* in Cook Ding’s story is found in a complex passage that refers to both the perceptive senses (*guan* 官) and spirit (*shen*). I examine below how different scholars have interpreted the passage (*guan zhi zhi er shen yu xing* 官知止而神欲行):

“With the senses I know where to stop, the daemonic I desire to run its course.” A. C. Graham (1981/1989, 63-64)¹⁶

“Controlling knowledge has stopped and my spirit wills the performance.” Chad Hansen (1992, 287)

“Perception and understanding have come to a stop, and spirit moves where it wants”. Burton Watson (1968/2013, 19)

The vagueness of this passage lends itself to metaphysical readings, which suggest that sense perception must stop in order that *shen*, spirit, takes over in a trance-like dance. Indeed, for Kuang-ming Wu (2007, 269-70) Ding dances “to the divine rhythm of sacred ritual music”. Haiming Wen (2012, 51) goes as far as to affirm that Cook Ding nullifies his knife, turning it

¹⁵ Wim De Reu (2019, 197) rightly comments on this stating that “it would be a misinterpretation of the story if one were to focus on the killing of the ox and project *that* onto the human domain”. For De Reu, the fact that Ding keeps both the knife and the bones intact exemplifies an action that “defuses conflict and avoids harm”.

¹⁶ Graham (1981/1989, 35) renders *shen* as “daemonic” but warns us that it must not be confused with the negative connotation of “demoniac”. For a detailed analysis of *shen* and the importance to consider its wide semantic range, see Sterckx (2007) and Puett (2002, 21-23). For a specific account of *shen* in the *Zhuangzi* and how it is not independent of the body, see Chiu (2016).

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3 into its edge; and suggests that this is “analogous to nullifying one’s body”. These
4 interpretations are in line with those above, in relation to heart fasting (*xinzhai*) and sitting and
5 forgetting (*zuowang*). Their general assumption is that Cook Ding represents an example of
6 attaining absolute perfection through *dao*.
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10 Hansen is one of the strongest opponents of such positions. According to him (1992,
11 287-288), this “absolutist monistic interpretation” makes grasping *dao* as an all-or-nothing
12 matter: “When you have it you suspend entirely all thought and sensation. Surrender yourself
13 to the *Dao* and you can be saved!” For Hansen (2003, 917), Cook Ding does not reach any
14 absolute perfection and does not report any sudden mystical conversion because his *dao* is still
15 developing.
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20 Even more importantly, Cook Ding does not and cannot abandon perception and
21 intellect. Indeed, the mystical interpretation would have difficulty accounting for the second
22 part of the story in which Ding shows that his senses are neither discarded nor suspended:
23 whenever he sees some difficult parts, he becomes especially careful, looks (*shi* 視) attentively
24 and slows his movements down. Only then can Cook Ding proceed to carve the difficult joint.
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29 Still, one cannot avoid asking why whilst in the first part of the story Ding affirms that
30 he is not looking with the eye but proceeds with his *shen*, here, his eyesight occupies a
31 fundamental role. To answer this question we need to better understand the function of the
32 senses (*guan* 官) in relation to the heart (*xin* 心). Before that, let me consider another famous
33 skill story, of Woodworker Qing in chapter 19 (50/19/54-59).
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40 3.2 Woodworker Qing

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42 In this story we find another instance of heart fasting. In explaining how he makes remarkable
43 bell-stands, Qing tells his audience that he fasts: after three days, he is no longer mindful about
44 congratulations and rewards, titles and profit; after five days, he no longer pays attention to
45 reputation and skills; and after seven, he forgets his limbs and his body. Up to this point, Qing’s
46 practice seems to fit into the meditative account of mysticism.
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51 The story continues, however, in a way that contradicts such denial of the body. Qing
52 explains that, after his fasting, he forgets about the royal court and external distractions so as to
53 concentrate (*zhuan* 專) his skill (*qiao* 巧). This already gives a precise indication of the purpose
54 of his fasting, which is not to stop at a meditative state – as the metaphysical bias suggests –
55 but to be ready for his skilful activity. And this implies that to concentrate one’s skill, one needs
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3 fully-functioning sense perception. Only after fasting can Qing enter the mountain forest to
4 *observe* (*guan* 觀) the quality of the trees and to choose the right tree for making a bell-stand
5 with. He affirms:
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10 When my body reaches its highest point (*xingqu zhi yi* 形軀至矣) and I have a complete
11 perception (*jian* 見) of the bell-stand, then I set my hand to carving. If I do not perceive
12 such a tree, I do not proceed. In this way, I match nature with nature (*tian he tian* 天合
13 天). Probably this is the reason why this seems to be the work of *shen*. (50/19/58-59)
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19 This passage deserves several comments. First, more than a withdrawal of the senses, Qing
20 describes heightened perceptive capacities. Far from abandoning this world for a ‘higher’ state
21 of mystical union with ‘reality’, Qing immerses himself in the forest and concentrates his skill
22 to perceive more clearly the structure of the trees. Only through this can he succeed in matching
23 nature with nature. And, yet, why does Qing need to forget his limbs to be efficacious in his
24 action? As anticipated above, the answer lies in the relation between body and heart. We
25 investigate this in the following section.
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37 4. Responding without storing

38 4.1 The relationship between the heart (*xin* 心) and the senses (*guan* 官)

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40 According to Jane Geaney (2002, 13), the early Chinese believed that the heart “is not
41 distinguished from the other senses in its ability to know its discriminations”. Even more
42 importantly, although the heart has “a special knowledge capacity (for verifying the operations
43 of seeing and hearing), it does not do so from a position of detachment from the body”. As a
44 consequence, for Geaney nothing suggests that sense perception – or, to use her terminology,
45 sense discrimination – must be transcended as prerequisite to a supersensible form of
46 knowing.¹⁷
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57 ¹⁷ Similarly, for Hansen (2002, 207) “we need not infer that Daoist must be referring to a reality in a
58 classical Western (e.g., Parmenidean) sense – as something independent of or transcending sense
59 experience, conceptions, and beliefs”.
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3 Geaney gives us an important hint toward the understanding of sensible experience in
4 the *Zhuangzi*. Two comments are necessary for the moment. First, senses and heart are both
5 involved in the process of knowing and discriminating (*bian* 辨). Second, if knowledge arises
6 from sensory discriminations, we need to understand the relation between the senses and
7 knowledge in the text and why the *Zhuangzi* seems to be ambivalent about some of the senses.
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11 Geaney (2002, 57) points out that every time the *Zhuangzi* proposes the abandonment
12 of hearing or seeing, there is always a rejection of knowledge: “the *Zhuangzi* rejects the eyes
13 and ears and thereby rejects the knowledge they represent” (59). But what kind of knowledge
14 do they represent?
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18 From an examination of some contemporaneous texts, namely, the *Lunyu*, *Mozi*, *Mengzi*
19 and *Xunzi*, Geaney (82) concludes that, although hearing and sight can sometimes refer to the
20 senses collectively, they are used in these texts to “indicate knowledge of the world and the
21 power to control it”.¹⁸ It is not by chance that in ancient China the metaphor of the senses as
22 officials (*guan* 官) under the control of the ruler, the heart (*xin*), was so common.¹⁹ In this
23 context, the text questions the problematic assumption that identifies the heart as the “true ruler”
24 (*zhen zai* 真宰) among the organs (4/2/16-20); according to *Zhuangzi*, the other organs may
25 take turns in this function and therefore the attempt to identify a ruler among them cannot be
26 justified.²⁰ This metaphorically implies that if there are no hierarchical structures within the
27 body, one should be careful to not arbitrarily give precedence to the heart as the ruler of the
28 other organs, and the primary capacity for knowledge.
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41 4.2 The predetermined heart vs. the heart like a mirror

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43 By seeing the problem of sense perception in relation to the heart (*xin*) as a specialised capacity
44 for knowledge, it becomes clear that *Zhuangzi*'s accounts of not using the sensory organs should
45 not be read literally but metaphorically. Ding and Qing do not literally abandon their bodies
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50 ¹⁸ For a detailed account of how senses are related to knowledge and discrimination in early Chinese
51 thought, see also Blake (2019) – in particular p. 35. For the problem of scepticism in pre-Han China,
52 see Fraser (2011). It is not possible here to discuss in detail how the *Zhuangzi* needs to be read in relation
53 to Confucianism and Mohism. On this, see Chiu (2018).

54 ¹⁹ On this, see Raphals (2021). Furthermore, as seen previously, the *Zhuangzi* not only rejects the
55 acquisition of knowledge with which to control the world, but is also critical of the process of knowing
56 through discrimination (*bian*). I have discussed elsewhere how this does not mean that the *Zhuangzi*
57 refuses discrimination *tout court* (Lacertosa 2019).

58 ²⁰ According to Kim-chong Chong (2011, 429) this passage “suggests that the heart-mind is just one
59 organ among the others and there is no true ruler.”
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with their sense perceptions. They abandon the preconstructed form of knowledge entrenched within their bodies and hearts, and it is this entrenched nature of their knowledge that needs to be abandoned.

This is particularly evident when the *Zhuangzi* (4/2/21-22) criticises the predetermined and completed heart (*cheng xin* 成心) which represents a form of knowledge that follows a fixed pattern of discriminations made of affirmations and negations (*shifei* 是非).²¹ To follow fixed patterns implies that senses too are oriented toward a fixed set of values or outcomes, and this limits their capacity to be responsive.

Cheng xin is therefore the opposite of using the heart like a mirror (*yong xin ruo jing* 用心若鏡) that the *Zhuangzi* prizes in chapter 7 (21/7/32-33). In this passage, the text openly affirms that the utmost person (*zhiren* 至人) uses the heart like a mirror. This shows that the *Zhuangzi* does not reject the heart and its perception of the world. Rather, it is quite the opposite. In using the heart like a mirror, the utmost person responds (*ying* 應) but does not store (*cang* 藏). How a person responds without storing is the subject of the next section.

4.3 Responding without storing

“Responding without storing” denotes a process of perceiving the world in such a way that is not hindered by and does not retain predetermined notions of what the world must be like. The fasting of the heart is a metaphor that suggests precisely this possibility of being responsive to the constant changing world. Earlier, I questioned the hierarchical prioritization of the ruling knowledge of the heart (see also Geaney (2002, 84) and Blake (2019, 35)).²² From this angle, we may understand the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of the senses in the skill stories as related to the critique of the predetermined heart. Indeed, in both cases, completion (*cheng* 成) obstructs responsiveness (*ying*). This is clear in the story of the lute player Zhao Wen:

The appearance of affirmations and negations (*shifei*) is the reason why *dao* is damaged, and when *dao* is damaged, partiality becomes complete (*cheng*). Is there really

²¹ For a detailed analysis of *shifei*, see Graham (1969-1970, 142-43).

²² It is worth mentioning that the later Mohists documents that are related to the issue of knowledge (in particular 67/42/2–68/42/4) do not mention the word *xin*. Instead, they use the word *zhi* 知 “intelligence” – defined as the ability (*cai* 材) of knowing – compared to the ability of seeing (*jian* 見). As a consequence, understanding (*zhi* 智, same as 智) is compared to clear-sightedness (*ming* 明). On this, see Graham (1978, 59-60; 266-267).

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3 something damaged and complete? Or is there not? To have something damaged and
4 complete can be compared to Zhao Wen playing the lute. Not to have something
5 damaged and complete can be compared to Zhao Wen not playing the lute. (5/2/42-43)
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10 The passage seems to propose a conundrum: how can something be complete and
11 simultaneously damaged? From the perspective of the *Zhuangzi*, the striving for completion is
12 damaging because it shapes a person's choice from prior commitments, thus favouring one set
13 of outcomes over the others. In this sense Zhao Wen not playing the lute metaphorically refers
14 to a process that cannot reach completion because *no completion target* is sought, and therefore
15 multiple possibilities remain open. This does not mean that Zhao Wen does not play the lute in
16 a literal sense. It only means that one should not hold on to predetermined styles, that is to say:
17 to avoid holding on to predetermined knowledge and ingrained physical habits. Indeed, a skill
18 involves not only knowledge but also physical ability, and this means that responding without
19 storing pertains to the person as a whole.
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27 In the *Zhuangzi*, sense perception has sometimes been read with a metaphysical bias, as
28 an impediment on the way to a supersensible reality, as something that needs to be transcended
29 to reach perfection. However, as I have shown, the *Zhuangzi* opposes precisely this idea of
30 completion. As a consequence, is the pursuit of one's being in a state of union with *dao* not
31 itself a quest for completion?
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35 Why should one abandon perception if the utmost person responds without storing? The
36 point is that the *Zhuangzi* does not reject sense perception and knowledge but warns against
37 adopting univocal doctrinal positions. Therefore, forgetting one's body and acting with one's
38 spirit (*shen*) does not literally mean to stop perceiving the world. It only means to abandon
39 those habits that hinder the responsiveness of the body and heart. And, in doing so, this allows
40 us to be open to alternatives with an ethical – more than epistemic – modesty. Indeed, the main
41 point is not to deemphasise one's claim to knowledge – which is nevertheless fundamental as
42 a means to the ethical end – but to deemphasise entrenched patterns of conduct that we are so
43 complacent about.
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55 4.4 The clearing (*xu* 虛) that awaits things

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57 Instead of denying the use of the senses, the *Zhuangzi* proposes to clear them from ingrained
58 habits and practices through embodying a certain 'emptiness' (*xu*). *Xu* (literally "emptiness")
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3 involves *clearing* what has been stored through conventional practices, so that a person may
4 become responsive to the world. According to Chris Fraser (2008, 142), the condition of *xu*
5 captures a scenario in which the agent “maintains a kind of loose, responsive, psychophysical
6 equilibrium and lets the body take over, or move ‘of itself’, in guiding action”. Fraser (2019,
7 172) gives the example of the expert swimmer (49/19/24) who forgets the water but his “*shen*
8 continues to respond to it sensitively and intelligently”. It is interesting too, that for Steve
9 Coutinho (2019, 91), *shen* does not refer to a supersensible condition, but actually describes
10 “hypersensitivity to the subtlest tendencies just before the threshold of perceptual awareness”.

11
12 From both accounts, the point is precisely to find the equilibrium on this hypersensitive
13 threshold which acts with a mirror-like aptitude, that is to say: to keep responding to changing
14 circumstances without turning one’s perceptual awareness into entrenched habits. This is the
15 metaphorical meaning of forgetting:

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17 The fish-trap is used because there is the fish; catch the fish and then forget the trap.

18 The snare is used because there is the rabbit; catch the rabbit and then forget the snare.

19 Words are used because there is meaning; get the meaning and then forget the words.

20 Where can I find someone who forgets words and have a word with her? (75/26/48-49)

21
22 In this ironic passage, the act of forgetting is not a withdrawal from the world or from society.
23 There is no *absolute* forgetting but only a forgetting that clears the way from the obstacles of
24 conventional knowledge and values. The point is not to reach absolute silence or stillness but
25 to dismiss ossified styles and habits – indeed, “a *dao* is obscured by small achievements, words
26 are obscured by pompous styles” (4/2/25-26).

27
28 In this sense, it is difficult to agree with positions such as held by Yang Rur-bin (2003,
29 90) who affirms that “in the process of seeking the Dao, one must go through a stage wherein
30 perception and rationality disintegrate”. Besides the fact that for the *Zhuangzi* there is no such
31 thing as mere disintegration – because division is formation and formation is disintegration
32 (4/2/35-36)²³ – the problem with this kind of self-denial is that it misleadingly imposes a
33 Platonic two worlds conception on the text (as Yingshi Yü (2016, 6) also does in stating that
34 “Zhuangzi lived in ‘this world,’ but at the same time, his spirit wandered in the ‘other world’”).

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²³ In commenting on this passage, Chen Guying (2008, 218) explains that in its fragmented dissolution,
a thing contributes to the formation of a new one and the constitution of this new thing includes the
element of the former dissolved one.

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3 In affirming a higher-level supersensible reality, this two worlds idea not only misses
4 the importance of an aesthetic and responsive experience of the world, it also overlooks the
5 crucial role played by the constant transformation of things that does not gesture at any
6 metaphysical realm in the *Zhuangzi*. Here, even death is nothing but change: whether
7 transforming into a rat's liver or an insect leg (17/6/55-56), one will suddenly wake up after a
8 sound sleep (17/6/60) and still partake in the everchanging becoming of the myriad things
9 (*wanwu* 萬物).

20 21 5. Conclusion

22
23 From the previous analysis, I have demonstrated that it is quite plausible that the *Zhuangzi*
24 ethically and metaphorically warns against distinctions and taking one organ of knowledge as
25 ruling over the others.²⁴ If heart and senses are all responsible for producing distinctions and
26 knowledge, then the problem is not whether knowing-that has priority over knowing-how, or
27 *vice-versa*, but the ethical dimension of knowing *tout court*. Indeed, practical knowledge can
28 become rigid and unresponsive as any other stored, transmitted and learned interpretive content.

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30 The apparent contradictions of the text seem to mirror the possibility for something to
31 be simultaneously damaged and complete. The *Zhuangzi* does not negate the importance to
32 achieve excellence, rather it ethically warns against turning this into entrenched doctrine with
33 accompanying habits – in short, a univocal *ethos*. The text seems to suggest that excellence
34 should never become complete so as to avoid producing or accepting an imposing and imposed
35 *ethos*.

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37 The moment this happens, one needs a clearing that reinstates responsiveness. And this
38 clearing refers to the body as a whole with no distinction between the senses and heart. To
39 proceed in a mirror-like attitude one needs an undivided perception and an integral awareness.

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51 ²⁴ This is not to say that the *Zhuangzi* does not present some forms of dualism. The entire discussion on
52 *shifei* 是非 in the second chapter demonstrates the all-pervasive presence of polarities. With its double
53 rhetorical questions, however, the *Zhuangzi* questions the very possibility of considering these polarities
54 as real dualities, thus hinting that they are only contrasting positions introduced for the sake of
55 disputation. And although it is true that the *Zhuangzi* distinguishes between the mediate experience of
56 reality (which is influenced by univocal doctrines) and a more immediate experience of reality (which
57 tries to respond without storing), this distinction does not introduce a metaphysical duality – that is to
58 say, the world does not have a more or less superficial form but there is a more or less superficial way
59 to experience it. As we have seen, the point is to match nature with nature.
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3 Thus the *Zhuangzi* shows how sense perception should be seen not as a “problem” but as an
4 ethical possibility through which the univocity of doctrinal knowledge can be undermined. And
5 this changes the way we understand the *Zhuangzi* as neither mystical nor sceptical, but as
6 proposing ethical engagement with the world in which sense perception helps to counteract
7 ossifying and ossified habits.
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11 To conclude then, let me mention one last story, the one of the wheelwright Bian –
12 chapter 13 (36/13/68-74). It seems as if Bian is talking to us – the readers of the *Zhuangzi* –
13 asking what we are reading. Similarly to Duke Huan, we would say that we are reading “the
14 words of the sages” (*shengren zhi yan* 聖人之言). For Bian, these words are the inert residues
15 of the people from the past. Interestingly, Bian explains himself by describing his activity: in
16 making a wheel, he proceeds with the right pace, feeling the wood with his hands and
17 responding with the heart (*de zhi yu shou er ying yu xin* 得之於手而應於心). According to Bian,
18 this fully responsive perceptual awareness cannot be put into words and cannot be conveyed,
19 not even to his son.
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23 Bian believes that the words from the past are inert because printed words cannot
24 transmit knowledge – a knowledge that comes from a responsive heart and senses, not from
25 predefined doctrines, in ink on bamboo strips. Thus, through the words of the wheelwright
26 Bian, in its usual ironic and paradoxical form, the *Zhuangzi* proposes that we avoid univocal
27 doctrinal knowledge by closing the book that we are reading and by experiencing the world
28 first hand. And this is certainly a good way to make its words alive again without falling in the
29 cul-de-sac of a “completed” *ethos*.
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