

CHAPTER TWO

*Equalizing Assessments of Things*¹

2:1

Ziqi of the Southern Wall was reclining against a low table on the ground, releasing his breath into Heaven above, all in a scatter, as if loosed from a partner.

Yancheng Ziyou stood in attendance before him. “What has happened here?” he said. “Can the body really be made like dried wood, the mind like dead ashes? What reclines against this table now is not what reclined against it before.”

Ziqi said, “A good question, Yan! What has happened here is simply that I have lost *me*. Do you understand? You hear the piping of man but not yet the piping of the earth. You hear the piping of the earth but not yet the piping of Heaven.”

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Ziyou said, “Please tell me more.”

Ziqi replied, “When the Great Clump belches forth its vital breath,² we call it the wind. As soon as it arises, raging cries emerge from all the ten thousand hollows. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard how long the rustling continues, on and on! The towering trees of the forest, a hundred spans around, are riddled with indentations and holes—like noses, mouths, ears; like sockets, enclosures, mortars; like ponds, like puddles. Roarers and whizzers, scolders and sighers, shouters, wailers, boomers, growlers! One leads with a yeee! Another answers with a yuuu! A light breeze brings a small harmony, while a powerful gale makes for a harmony vast and grand. And once the sharp wind has passed, all these holes return to their silent emptiness. Have you never seen all the tempered attunements, all the cunning contentions?”

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Ziyou said, “So the piping of the earth means just the sound of these hollows. And the piping of man would be the sound of bamboo panpipes. What, then, is the piping of Heaven?”

Ziqi said, “It gusts through all the ten thousand differences, allowing each

¹ “Assessment” here renders *lun* 论, meaning a verbally expressed viewpoint or discussion on some matter, a discourse that weighs relevant factors with much or little argument and explanation, but generally with the intent of rendering a judgment and expressing a position on what is so and what is right. An attempt is made here to preserve the ambiguity of this title, *Qiwulun* 齐物論 which can be parsed either as 2-1 or as 1-2, thus meaning either “Assessments that Equalize Things” or “Equalizing the Assessments Made by All Things and, by Extension, All Things So Assessed.” The word *wu* 物, rendered as “thing(s)” here, is in other contexts translated as “being(s)” and denotes not only inanimate objects but also living creatures and even sometimes abstract entities. In the “commentaries” section, the word *lun* is rendered “theories,” as the sense of the term had taken on this more formal implication by the times in which they were written.

² The “Vital breath” is *qi* 氣. See Glossary.

2.5 to go its own way! But since each one selects out its own, what identity can there be for their rouser?"³

2.6 A large consciousness is idle and spacey; a small consciousness is cramped and circumspect. Big talk is bland and flavorless; petty talk is detailed and fragmented. We sleep and our spirits converge; we awake and our bodies open outward. We give, we receive, we act, we construct: all day long we apply our minds to struggles against one thing or another—struggles unadorned or struggles concealed, but in either case tightly packed one after another without gap. The small fears leave us nervous and depleted; the large fears leave us stunned and blank. Shooting forth like an arrow from a bowstring: such is our presumption when we arbitrate right and wrong. Holding fast as if to sworn oaths: such is our defense of our victories. Worn away as if by autumn and winter: such is our daily dwindling, drowning us in our own activities, unable to turn back. Held fast as if bound by cords, we continue along the same ruts.⁴ The mind is left on the verge of death, and nothing can restore its vitality.

2.7 Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, plans and regrets, transformations and stagnations, unguarded abandonment and deliberate posturing—music flowing out of hollows, mushrooms of billowing steam! Day and night they alternate before us, but no one knows whence they sprout. That is enough! That is enough! Is it from all of this, presented ceaselessly day and night, that we come to exist? Without *that* there would be no me, to be sure, but then again without *me* there would be nothing selected out from it all.⁵ This is certainly something close to hand, and yet we do not know what makes it so. If there is some controller behind it all, it is peculiarly devoid of any manifest sign. Its ability to flow and to stop makes its presence plausible, but even then it shows no definite form. That would make it a reality with no definite form.

2.9 The hundred bones, the nine openings, the six internal organs are all present here as my body. Which one is most dear to me? Do you delight in all equally, or do you have some favorite among them? Or are they all mere servants and concubines? Are these servants and concubines unable to govern each other? Or do they take turns as master and servant? If there exists a gen-

³ An alternate rendering of this important line is: "It blows forth in ten thousand different ways, allowing each to go as it will. Each takes what it chooses for itself—but then who could it be that activates them all?" And another: "Gusting through this multitude, every one of them different, it yet allows each to go its own way. The taking up of something is done by themselves, so what rouser could there be?" Many commentators accept the textual variant *yi 已* ("to cease") for *ji 己* ("oneself"), so that the line would perhaps mean: "It blows forth the ten thousand differences but also allows them to cease on their own. They take up both [their beginning and their ending] on their own accord—who, then, is the rouser?"

⁴ The translation is based on Wang Fuzhi's reading.

⁵ Analogously, without the wind there would be no sound, but without the holes there would be no particular tone selected out from it and actualized.

uine ruler among them, then whether we could find out the facts about him or not would neither add to nor subtract from that genuineness.

If you regard what you have received as fully formed⁶ once and for all, unable to forget it, all the time it survives is just a vigil spent waiting for its end. In the process, you grind and lacerate yourself against all the things around you. Its activities will be over as quickly as a horse galloping by, unstoppable—is it not sad? All your life you labor, and nothing is achieved. Worn and exhausted to the point of collapse, never knowing what it all amounts to—how can you not lament this? What good does it do if others say, “To us he is not dead”? The body has decayed and the mind went with it. Can this be called anything but an enormous sorrow? Is human life always this bewildering, or am I the only bewildered one? Is there actually any man, or anything in a man, that is not bewildered?

If we follow whatever has so far taken shape, fully formed,⁷ in our minds, making that our teacher, who could ever be without a teacher? The mind comes to be what it is by taking possession of whatever it selects out of the process of alternation—but does that mean it has to truly understand that process? The fool takes something up from it too. But to claim that there are any such things as “right” and “wrong” *before* they come to be fully formed in someone’s mind in this way—that is like saying you left for Yue today and arrived there yesterday.⁸ This is to regard the nonexistent as existent. The existence of the nonexistent is beyond the understanding of even the divine sage-king Yu—so what possible sense could it make to someone like me?

“But human speech is not just a blowing of air. Speech has something of *which* it speaks, something it refers to.” Yes, but what it refers to is peculiarly unfixed. So is there really anything it refers to? Or has nothing ever been referred to? You take it to be different from the chirping of baby birds. But is there really any difference between them? Or is there no difference? Is there any dispute, or is there no dispute? Anything demonstrated, or nothing demonstrated?

How could courses be so obscured that there could be any question of genuine or fake among them? How could words be so obscured that there could be any question of right or wrong among them? Where can you go without it being a course? What can you say without it being affirmable? Courses are obscured by the small accomplishments already formed and completed by them.⁹ Words are obscured by the ostentatious blossoms of reputation that come with them. Hence we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other negates and negating what the other

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⁶ “Fully formed” is *cheng* 成. See Glossary.

⁷ *Cheng*. See Glossary.

⁸ A phrase attributed to Hui Shi; see Chapter 33.

⁹ “Fully formed and completed” is the rendering for *cheng* here. See Glossary.

affirms. But if you want to affirm what they negate and negate what they affirm, nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious:¹⁰

There is no being that is not “that.” There is no being that is not “this.” But one cannot be seeing these from the perspective of “that”: one knows them only from “this” [i.e., from one’s own perspective].¹¹ Thus, we can say: “That” emerges from “this,” and “this” follows from “that.” This is the theory of the simultaneous generation of “this” and “that.” But by the same token, their simultaneous generation is their simultaneous destruction, and vice versa. Simultaneous affirmability is simultaneous negatability, and vice versa. What is circumstantially right is also circumstantially wrong, and vice versa. Thus, the Sage does not proceed from any one of them alone but instead lets them all bask in the broad daylight of Heaven. And that too is only a case of going by the rightness of the present “this.”

“This” is also a “that.” “That” is also a “this.” “THAT” posits a “this” and a “that”—a right and a wrong—of its own. But “THIS” also posits a “this” and a “that”—a right and a wrong—of its own. So is there really any “that” versus “this,” any right versus wrong? Or is there really no “that” versus “this”? When “this” and “that”—right and wrong—are no longer coupled as opposites—that is called the Course as Axis, the axis of all courses.¹² When this axis finds its place in the center, it responds to all the endless things it confronts, thwarted by none. For it has an endless supply of “rights,” and an endless supply of “wrongs.” Thus, I say, nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious.

To use this finger to show how a finger is not a finger is no match for using not-this-finger to show how a finger is not a finger. To use this horse to show that a horse is not a horse is no match for using not-this-horse to show that a horse is not a horse. Heaven and earth are one finger. All things are one horse.¹³

¹⁰ The phrase *yiming* 以明 (literally, “use of the light/obvious”) is here rendered as “Illumination of the Obvious.” See *yiming* in the Glossary.

¹¹ This line constitutes an essential turning point in the discussion, but it is very hard to construe. Here, it is interpreted to mean that since we are each restricted to our own perspective—our “this”—but at the same time we manifestly have an awareness of other possible perspectives—since we can say both “this” and “that”—both the “this” and the “that” are present here in the “this.” The rest of this paragraph follows from this consideration.

¹² Neither a singular nor a plural reading of *dao* 道 will suffice in this context. The text says literally “is called the Course-Axis.” This could imply either the axis of the Course or that the Course is an axis.

¹³ An alternate reading of this passage would be something like the following: “To stand in the perspective of what is indicated [i.e., ‘this’] to show how what is not indicated [‘that’] is entailed in every indication [‘this’] is no match for standing in the perspective that is not indicated [‘that’] to show how what is not indicated [‘that’] is entailed in every indication [‘this.’] The rejected alternative in this version is a caricature of a proposition attributed to the “logician” Gongsun Long (who is also mentioned in Chapters 17 and 33): “all things are capable of being pointed out [lit., ‘fingered’], but pointing out can never be pointed out”

Something is affirmative because someone affirms it. Something is negative because someone negates it. Courses are formed¹⁴ by someone walking them. Things are so by being called so. Whence thus and so? From thus and so being affirmed of them. Whence not thus and so? From thus and so being negated of them. Each thing necessarily has some place from which it can be affirmed as thus and so, and some place from which it can be affirmed as acceptable.

So no thing is not right, no thing is not acceptable. For whatever we may define as a beam as opposed to a pillar, as a leper as opposed the great beauty Xishi, or whatever might be [from some perspective] strange, grotesque, uncanny, or deceptive, there is some course that opens them into one another, connecting them to form a oneness. Whenever fragmentation is going on, formation, completion,¹⁵ is also going on. Whenever formation is going on, destruction is also going on.

Hence, all things are neither formed nor destroyed, for these two also open into each other, connecting to form a oneness. It is only someone who really gets all the way through them that can see how the two sides open into each other to form a oneness. Such a person would not define rightness in any one particular way but would instead entrust it to the everyday function [of each being]. Their everyday function is what works for them, and “working” just means this opening up into each other, their way of connecting. Opening to

(*wu wu fei zhi, er zhi fei zhi* 物無非指, 而指非指). This is seemingly meant to show that the act of indicating “this” always fails to indicate itself, and thus every act of “the pointing out of this” is never pointed out as “this,” so the act of indicating some “this” is never itself “this.” All other things are “this,” but the pointing out of “this” can never be “this.” A “pointer out” or “indicator” can also be interpreted to mean what is pointed out, i.e., “a meaning.” The implication is then that the meaning of a statement is also not the meaning, and whatever something may mean, it also means something else besides, which arrives the long way around at Zhuangzi’s own point. Zhuangzi too wants to show that “this” is never merely “this,” but he suggests an alternate method: to show that *this* is also *that*, simply use the Illumination of the Obvious to look at *this* from the perspective of *that*. *This* is then immediately seen as a *that*. A similar point is then made with respect to another paradox attributed to Gongsun: “A white horse is not a horse.” The point here is that “white horse” and “horse” are, strictly speaking, two distinguishable meanings: one indicates a shape and a color, and the other indicates only a shape; indicating a shape and color is not the same as indicating only a shape. So he is using a (white) horse to show that a horse is not a (white) horse. Instead, Zhuangzi wants to arrive at the same conclusion—a horse is not a horse, “this” is not merely “this” but also “that”—but does so merely by pointing out that if “horse” is defined as “this,” it must posit “nonhorseness” as its corresponding “that,” which will also be a “this” with its own perspective, for which “horse” is no longer “this.” Whatever I point out as horse must follow the “this/that” structure, and the defining of it as “horse” is internal to the perspective of the “this,” which is thus undermined when the “this” shifts to the other, nonhorse side. Hence, a horse is not a horse.

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¹⁴ “Formed” is *cheng*. See Glossary.

¹⁵ “Completion” is *cheng*. See Glossary.

form a connection just means getting what you get: go as far as whatever you happen to get to, and leave it at that. It is all just a matter of going by the rightness of the present “this.” To be doing this without knowing it, and not because you have defined it as right, is called “the Course.”

2.23 But to labor your spirit trying to make all things one, without realizing that it is all the same [whether you do so or not], is called “Three in the Morning.”

What is this Three in the Morning? A monkey trainer was distributing chestnuts. He said, “I’ll give you three in the morning and four in the evening.” The monkeys were furious. “Well then,” he said, “I’ll give you four in the morning and three in the evening.” The monkeys were delighted. This change of description and arrangement caused no loss, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went by the rightness of their present “this.” Thus, the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter’s Wheel.¹⁶ This is called “Walking Two Roads.”

2.24 The understanding of the ancients really got all the way there. Where had it arrived? To the point where, for some, there had never existed so-called things. This is really getting there, as far as you can go. When no things are there, nothing more can be—added!

2.25 Next there were those for whom things existed but never any definite boundaries between them. Next there were those for whom there were boundaries but never any rights and wrongs. When rights and wrongs waxed bright,

¹⁶ Or “the Heavenly Potter’s wheel,” “the Potter’s Wheel of the Heavenly,” “the Potter’s Wheel of Heaven.” In all of Zhuangzi’s coinages involving the word “Heaven,” it is useful to experimentally substitute the words “Natural,” “Undesigned,” “Spontaneous,” or “Skylike.” Hence, one might retranslate this phrase as either “Potter’s Wheel of Nature” or, perhaps more strikingly, “the Skylike Potter’s Wheel.” (See *tian* in Glossary.) The character used here for “Potter’s Wheel” also means “equality.” The two meanings converge in the consideration of the even distribution of clay made possible by the constant spinning of the wheel: the potter’s wheel’s very instability, its constant motion, is what makes things equal. Note also that Chinese cosmology considers Heaven, the sky, to be “rotating”: the stars and constellations turn in the sky, and the seasons—the sky’s varying conditions—are brought in a cyclical sequence. This turning of the seasons is what makes things exist and grow. The turning of the Potter’s Wheel sky brings life, as the potter’s wheel creates pots. The “Qifa” chapter of the *Guanzi*, a text of “Legalist” orientation, states, “To give commands without understanding fixed principles is like trying to establish [the directions] of sunrise and sunset while standing on a turning potter’s wheel.” It is significant that Zhuangzi uses an image of instability that others employ to critique the relativism of shifting perspectives as a solution to the same. This shows the deliberate irony of the use of the verb “rest” in this context, which is connected to the idea of the unmoving center of the spinning wheel, the stability that exists in the midst of this instability without eliminating it: Walking Two Roads. Cf. “the Tranquility of Turmoil” of Chapter 6, specifically 6:38.

the Course began to wane. What set the Course to waning was exactly what brought the cherishing of one thing over another to its fullness.¹⁷

2:26

But is there really any waning versus fullness? Or is there really no such thing as waning versus fullness? In a certain sense, there exists waning versus fullness. In that sense, we can say that the Zhao family are zither players. But in a certain sense, there is no such thing as waning versus fullness. In that sense we can say, on the contrary, that the Zhao family are no zither players.

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Zhao Wen's zither playing, Master Kuang's baton waving, Huizi's desk slumping—the understanding these three had of their arts flourished richly. This was what they flourished in, and thus they pursued these arts to the end of their days. They delighted in them, and observing that this delight of theirs was not shared, they wanted to make it obvious to others. So they tried to make others understand as obvious what was not obvious to them, and thus some ended their days debating about the obscurities of “hardness” and “whiteness,” and Zhao Wen's son ended his days still grappling with his father's zither strings. Can this be called success, being fully accomplished at something? In that case, even I am fully accomplished. Can this be called failure, lacking the full accomplishment of something? If so, neither I nor anything else can be considered fully accomplished.

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Thus, the Radiance of Drift and Doubt is the sage's only map. He makes no definition of what is right but instead entrusts it to the everyday function of each thing. This is what I call the Illumination of the Obvious.

2:29

Now I will try some words here about “this.” But I don't know if it belongs in the same category as “this” or not. For belonging in a category and not belonging in that category themselves form a single category! Being similar is so similar to being dissimilar! So there is finally no way to keep it different from “that.”

2:30

Nevertheless, let me try to say it. There is a beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-a-beginning. There is existence. There is nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-nonexistence. Suddenly there is nonexistence. But I do not-yet know whether “the existence of nonexistence” is ultimately existence or nonexistence.

Now I have said something. But I do not-yet know: has what I have said really said anything? Or has it not really said anything?

2:31

Nothing in the world is larger than the tip of a hair in autumn, and Mt. Tai is small. No one lives longer than a dead child, and old Pengzu died an early death. Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one.

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¹⁷ The single word *cheng*, depending on its antonym in each case, is translated variously as fullness, completion, formation, fully formed, success, or accomplishment in this and the preceding passages. See Glossary.

But if we are all one, can there be any words? But since I have already declared that we are “one,” can there be no words? The one and the word are already two, the two and the original unnamed one are three.¹⁸ Going on like this, even a skilled chronicler could not keep up with it, not to mention a lesser man. So even moving from nonexistence to existence we already arrive at three—how much more when we move from existence to existence! Rather than moving from anywhere to anywhere, then, let us just go by the rightness of whatever is before us as the present “this.”

2:33

Now, courses have never had any sealed borders between them, and words have never had any constant sustainability.¹⁹ It is by establishing definitions of what is “this,” what is “right,” that boundaries are made. Let me explain what I mean by boundaries: There are right and left, then there are classes of things and ideas of the proper responses to them,²⁰ then there are roles and disputes, then there are competitions and struggles. Let’s call these the Eight Virtues! As for the sage, he may admit that something exists beyond the six limits of the known world, but he does not further discuss it. As for what is within the known world, he will discuss it but not express an opinion on it. As for historical events, he will give an opinion but not debate it. For wherever a division is made, something is left undivided. Wherever debate shows one of two alternatives to be right, something remains undistinguished and unshown. What is it? The sage hides it in his embrace, while the masses of people debate it, trying to demonstrate it to one another. Thus I say that demonstration by debate always leaves something unseen.

2:34

The Great Course is unproclaimed. Great demonstration uses no words. Great Humanity is not humane. Great rectitude is not fastidious. Great courage is not invasive. For when the Course becomes explicit, it ceases to be the Course. When words demonstrate by debate, they fail to communicate. When Humanity is constantly sustained, it cannot reach its maturity.²¹ When rectitude is pure, it cannot extend itself to others. When courage is invasive, it

¹⁸ A. C. Graham’s comment on this passage is unimprovable:

Hui Shih [Huizi] had said that ‘Heaven and earth are one unit’ [see Chapter 33]. At first sight one might expect [Zhuangzi] to agree with that at least. But to refuse to distinguish alternatives is to refuse to affirm even “Everything is one” against “Things are many.” He observes that in saying it the statement itself is additional to the One which it is about, so that already there are two (Plato makes a similar point about the One and its name in *The Sophist*). It may be noticed that [Zhuangzi] never does say that everything is one (except as one side of a paradox [Chapter 5, specifically 5:5]), [but rather] always speaks subjectively of the sage treating [all things] as one (Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 56).

¹⁹ “Constant sustainability” is *chang*. See Glossary.

²⁰ “Proper responses” is *yi*. See *ren yi* in Glossary.

²¹ “Maturity” is *cheng*.

cannot succeed.²² These five are originally round, but they are forced toward squareness.

Hence, when the understanding consciousness comes to rest in what it does not know, it has reached its utmost. The demonstration that uses no words, the Course that is not a course—who “understands” these things? If there is something able to “understand” them [in this sense], it can be called the Heavenly Reservoir—poured into without ever getting full, ladled out of without ever running out, ever not-knowing its own source.²³

This is called the Shadowy Splendor.

In ancient times, Yao asked Shun, “I want to attack Zong, Kuai, and Xu’ao, for though I sit facing south on the throne, still I am not at ease. Why is this?”

Shun said, “Though these three may continue to dwell out among the grasses and brambles, why should this make you ill at ease? Once upon a time, ten suns rose in the sky at once, and the ten thousand things were all simultaneously illuminated. And how much better are many Virtuosities than many suns?²⁴

Nie Que²⁵ asked Wang Ni, “Do you know what all things agree in considering right?”

Wang Ni said, “How could I know that?”

Nie Que said, “Do you know that you don’t know?”

Wang Ni said, “How could I know that?”

Nie Que said, “Then are all beings devoid of knowledge?”

Wang Ni said, “How could I know that? Still, let me try to say something about this. How could I know that what I call ‘knowing’ is not really ‘not-knowing’? How could I know that what I call ‘not-knowing’ is not really ‘knowing’?”

²² “Succeed” is *cheng*.

²³ Or “Skylike Reservoir” instead of “Heavenly Reservoir.” Here, the Heavenly Reservoir (*tianfu* 天府) is construed as a name not for “the Course that is not a course,” but for what would be able to “understand it”—i.e., to know it by not knowing it, by coming to rest in what it does not know. In other words, the Heavenly Reservoir is the Daoist’s wild-card mind, rather than its object, the Course. Note the similar Zhuangzian phrases for Daoist subjectivity, e.g., the “Numinous Reservoir” (*lingfu* 靈府; see 5:16). Both “know” and “understand” in this passage are renderings of *zhi* 知 (see Glossary).

²⁴ For Yao and Shun, see 1:9, note 13. According to the *Huainanzi*, “In the time of Yao, ten suns rose in the sky at once, scorching the grains and crops, killing the plants and grasses.” The story is meant to show that there can be only a single ruler, just as there can be only a single sun. Many suns will be “too much of a good thing,” killing off the crops. Hence, Yao had nine of the suns shot out of the sky, thereby establishing unified rule. Zhuangzi’s parody turns this point on its head. Yao thinks ten different standards of “rightness” will lead to chaos—there must be a single unified truth, a single ruler. Zhuangzi here allows all things their own rightness—and thereby there will be all the more illumination, with each thing its own sun.

²⁵ The name Nie Que means “toothless.” Cf. 7:1.

But now let me take a stab at asking you about it. When people sleep in a damp place, they wake up deathly ill and sore about the waist—but what about eels? If people live in trees, they tremble with fear and worry—but how about monkeys? Of these three, which ‘knows’ what is the right²⁶ place to live? People eat the flesh of their livestock, deer eat grass, snakes eat centipedes, hawks and eagles eat mice. Of these four, which ‘knows’ the right thing to eat? Monkeys take she-monkeys for mates, bucks mount does, male fish frolic with female fish, while humans regard Mao Qiang and Lady Li as great beauties—but when fish see them they dart into the depths, when birds see them they soar into the skies, when deer see them they bolt away without looking back. Which of these four ‘knows’ what is rightly alluring? From where I see it, the transitions of Humanity and Responsibility and the trails of right and wrong are hopelessly tangled and confused. How could I know how to distinguish which is right among them?”

Nie Que said, “If that’s the case, then you can’t even tell benefit from harm. Does the Consummate Person really fail to distinguish between benefit and harm?”

2:39 Wang Ni said, “The Consummate Person is miraculous, beyond understanding! The lakes may burst into flames around him, but this can’t make him feel it is too hot. The rivers may freeze over, but this can’t make him feel it is too cold. Ferocious thunder may crumble the mountains, the winds may shake the seas, but this cannot make him feel startled. Such a person chariots on the clouds and winds, piggybacks on the sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Even death and life can do nothing to change him—much less the transitions between benefit and harm!”

2:40 Ju Quezi asked Chang Wuzi, “I have heard the Master relating the claim that the sage does not engage in projects, does not seek benefit, does not avoid harm, does not pursue happiness, does not follow any specific course. He says something by saying nothing, and says nothing by saying something, and thus does he wander, beyond the dust and grime. The Master considered these rude and careless words, but I believe they are the practice of the Mysterious Course. What do you think?”

Chang Wuzi said, “These words would send even the Yellow Emperor into fevers of confusion. How could Confucius understand them? And you, on the contrary, are judging far too prematurely. You see an egg and try to get it to crow at dawn; you see a crossbow pellet and try to roast it for your dinner. I’m going to try speaking some reckless words. How about listening just as recklessly? While the mass of men are beleaguered and harried, the sage is dim and dense, standing shoulder to shoulder with the sun and moon, scooping up time

²⁶ “Right” is *zheng* 正, the same word translated in Chapter 1 as “true,” as in the “true color [of the sky]” (1:4) and “chariot upon what is true both to Heaven and to earth” (1:8). See Glossary.

and space and smooching them all together, leaving them all to their own slippery mush so that every enslavement is also an ennobling. He is there taking part in the diversity of ten thousand harvests, but in each he tastes one and the same purity of fully formed maturation.²⁷ For to him each thing is just so, each thing is right, and so he enfolds them all within himself by affirming the rightness of each.

“How, then, do I know that delighting in life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows the way back? Lady Li was a daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first captured and brought to Qin, she wept until tears drenched her collar. But when she got to the palace, sharing the king’s luxurious bed and feasting on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead don’t regret the way they used to cling to life? ‘If you dream of drinking wine, in the morning you will weep. If you dream of weeping, in the morning you will go out hunting.’²⁸ While dreaming you don’t know it’s a dream. You might even interpret a dream in your dream—and then you wake up and realize it was *all* a dream.”

“Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream. And yet, fools imagine they are already awake—how clearly and certainly they understand it all! This one is a lord, they decide, that one is a shepherd—what prejudice! Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you’re dreaming, I’m dreaming too. So if you were to ‘agree’ with these words as right, I would name that nothing more than a way of offering condolences for the demise of their strangeness.²⁹ For actually, even if some great sage shows up after ten thousand generations who knows how to unravel them, it would still be as if he arrived after only a single day.”

“Suppose you and I get into a debate. If you win and I lose, does that really mean you are right and I am wrong? If I win and you lose, does that really mean I’m right and you’re wrong? Must one of us be right and the other wrong? Or could both of us be right, or both of us wrong? If neither you nor I can know, a third person would be even more benighted. Whom should we have straighten

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²⁷ “Fully formed maturation” is *cheng*. See Glossary.

²⁸ This sentence is phrased in the gnomic diction of a dream prognostication text, possibly quoting a well-known folk belief.

²⁹ This phrase has given commentators many headaches. Zhuangzi’s coinage, used in modern Chinese to translate “paradox,” is usually glossed as something like the “Supreme Swindle,” or the “Ultimate Monstrosity.” Taking the phrase more literally, the present translation (“offering condolences for the demise of the strangeness”) is a bit more adventurous. The implication is that to merely judge these paradoxical words as “true” or “right” (*shi qi yan*; 是其言 cf. Chapter 1, note 16) is a way of killing off their salutary strangeness and then eulogizing the corpse with these laudatory titles. Better to leave them unjudged and fully strange, evoking the Radiance of Drift and Doubt.

out³⁰ the matter? Someone who agrees with you? But since he already agrees with you, how can he straighten it out? Someone who agrees with me? But since, she already agrees with me, how can he straighten it out? Someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he straighten it out? Someone who agrees with both of us? But since he already agrees with both of us, how can he straighten it out? So neither you nor I nor any third party can ever know how it is—shall we wait for yet some “other”³¹?

“What is meant by harmonizing with them by means of their Heavenly Transitions³²? It means ‘right’ is also ‘not right,’ and ‘so’ is also ‘not so.’ If right were ultimately right, its differentiation from not-right would require no debate. If so were ultimately so, its differentiation from not so would require no debate. Thus, even though the transforming voices may depend on one another, this is tantamount to not depending on³³ anything at all.³⁴

Harmonize with them all by means of their Heavenly Transitions, follow along with them in their limitless overflowings, and you will be able to fully live out your years. Forget what year it is, forget what should or should not be.³⁵ Let yourself be jostled and shaken by the boundlessness—for that is how to be lodged securely in the boundlessness!”

The penumbra³⁶ said to the shadow, “First you were walking, then you were standing still. First you were sitting, then you were upright. Why can’t you decide on a single course of action?”

³⁰ “Straighten out” is *zheng*, as in note 26 of this chapter. See Glossary.

³¹ “Wait for some ‘other’” is *dai bi* 待彼. For *dai*, see 1:8, 2:44, 2:45, 2:48, 4:9, 6:5, 6:29, 7:15, and Glossary. *Bi*, here translated “other,” is the word used for “that” as opposed to “this” earlier in this chapter.

³² “Heavenly Transitions” is *tian ni* 天倪. This might also be called their Natural Transitions or, more concretely, their nondeliberate, rotating “Skylike” Transitions. *Ni* means literally “beginnings” or “child” on the one hand and “borders” on the other, put together here to form the meaning “transitions”—a beginning that crosses a division. The term also figures importantly in Chapter 27.

³³ “Depending on” is *dai* 待. See 1:8, 2:44, 2:45, 2:48, 4:9, 6:5, 6:29, 7:15, and Glossary.

³⁴ The sounds of the wind, the voices of the debaters, may depend on and wait for each other to render a judgment on which is right and which is wrong, but in fact they can never straighten each other out, each being right from its own perspective, so in the end they are not mutually dependent at all for their rightness. In fact, it is just their full dependence on each other, the mutual entailment of “this” and “that,” that renders them independent. Cf. 1:8.

³⁵ “What should or should not be” is *yi*. See *ren yi* in Glossary.

³⁶ The “penumbra” is a mythical creature, described as the shadow of the shadow, or the faint dimness around the edge of a shadow. But the name means literally “the neither of the two,” presenting a conceptual rhyme with “Walking Two Roads.”

The shadow said, “Do I depend on³⁷ something to make me as I am? Does what I depend on depend on something else? Do I depend on it as a snake does on its skin, or a cicada on its shell? How would I know why I am so or not so?”

2:48

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities! Such is what we call the transformation of one thing into another.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Primacy of Nourishing Life¹

3:1

The flow of my life is bound by its limits; the mind bent on knowledge, however, never is.² If forced to follow something limited by no bounds, the bounded [current of life] is put in danger. And to meet this danger by enhancing knowledge even further—that merely exacerbates the danger. What it³ does may be “good,” but not to the point of bringing reputation. What it does may be “evil,” but not to the point of bringing punishment.⁴ It tends to

3:2

³⁷ *Dai* again. See 1:8, 2:44, 2:45, 4:9, 6:5, 6:29, 7:15, and Glossary.

¹ The title of this chapter could also be interpreted to mean, “Nourishing the Host [or Master] of Life,” which is how many of our commentators take it. Alternately, it could mean, “What Is Primary in Nourishing Life.”

² This sentence is often interpreted to mean, “My life is limited, but knowledge is unlimited.” On this reading, “life” refers to the duration of a human life span, while “knowledge” is interpreted as “the body of knowable things to be learned.” The point would then be that my life span is too short to learn all there is to learn, and hence the pursuit of learning is a futile, even dangerous endeavor. But this reading of both *sheng* 生 (life) and *zhi* 知 (here translated as “the mind bent on knowledge”) is not consistent with the usage of those words in the rest of the Inner Chapters, nor the usual usage in texts of this period generally, where the former refers to the process of coming to be, and the latter primarily to the faculty of knowing rather than the field of things to be known. See Glossary. Nonetheless, something of this sense of the inexhaustibility of knowables is not irrelevant to the points being made in this chapter.

³ I.e., the undirected flow of life.

⁴ These two lines are often read as conditional imperatives: “When you do good, stay away from reputation. When you do evil, stay away from punishment.”