ARTIGO

MOELLER, Hans-Georg. Drunk skills: On contingent excellence in the Zhuangzi. Anais de Filosofia Clássica33, 2023. p. 42–52

ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

Drunk skills: On contingent excellence in the Zhuangzi

Hans-Georg Moeller

Professor of Philosophy at the University of Macau, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6185-3224
HMOELLER@UM.EDU.MO

Recebido: 29 de agosto de 2023
Aprovado:30 setembro de 2023
DOI: 10.47661/afcl.v17i33.65511

ABSTRACT: This paper takes a philosophical look at the "knack stories" in the Zhuangzi by approaching them on the basis of some lesser known and rarely discussed examples, such as that of the drunkard who is able to fall off carts unharmed. It will be argued that the knack stories, including the most famous ones, tend to contain humorous, satirical, or grotesque elements serving to distance readers from their protagonists and to undermine their function as straightforward role models or exemplars to be emulated. Often, the displayed "knacks" are rather mundane and common and not at all socially venerated "arts." In this way, skilfulness and excellence is not so much portrayed as an effect of intentional dedication but rather as the result of the capability of adapting to contingent circumstances. Consequently, skills are not acquired on the basis of personal commitment to a certain task or goal, but through disowning one's activities or dissociating oneself from any identification with one's profession. Thereby, the philosophy of skill in the Zhuangzi turns out to be an important aspect of a more general philosophy of "genuine pretending.".

KEY-WORDS: Zhuangzi; Daoism; knack stories; humor; genuine pretending.

RESUMO: Este artigo examina filosoficamente as "histórias de habilidade" em Zhuangzi, abordando-as a partir de alguns exemplos menos conhecidos e raramente discutidos, como o do bêbado que consegue cair de carruagens sem se ferir. Acredita-se que as histórias de habilidade, incluindo as mais famosas, tendem a conter elementos humorísticos, satíricos ou grotescos, servindo para distanciar os leitores de seus protagonistas e minar sua função como modelos ou exemplos diretos a serem emulados. Frequentemente, as "habilidades" demonstradas são bastante mundanas e ordinárias, e não "artes" socialmente veneradas. Desta forma, a destreza e excelência não são tanto retratadas como um efeito da dedicação intencional, mas sim como resultado da capacidade de adaptação às circunstâncias contingentes. Consequentemente, as habilidades não são adquiridas com base no compromisso pessoal com uma determinada tarefa ou objetivo, mas através do desapego das próprias atividades ou da dissociação de qualquer identificação com a profissão. Assim, a filosofia da habilidade em Zhuangzi revela-se um aspecto importante de uma filosofia mais geral de "fingimento genuíno".

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Zhuangzi; Daoismo; histórias de habilidade; humor; fingimento genuíno.

A. C. Graham asserts that Daoism resists definitions, but he still feels justified to identify "one basic insight" shared by all those who have been labeled philosophical Daoists, namely that one must "learn to reflect his situation like a mirror, and respond to it with the immediacy of an echo to a sound or shadow to a shape." (Graham, 2001, p. 6) Graham calls this mirror-like capacity "spontaneity" or "spontaneous aptitude;" and once Daoists have recovered this "knack" or "skill," it is hoped that they will be able to "forget themselves in their total absorption in the object, and then the trained hand reacts spontaneously with a confidence and precision impossible to anyone who is applying rules and thinking out moves." Obviously, Graham's account relates to two of the most central notions of spontaneity which figure prominently in the *Daodejing* and are also of major relevance in the *Zhuangzi* and other Daoist texts: *wu wei* 無為 (non-action or non-assertive action) and *ziran* 自然 (self-so).

The *Zhuangzi* illustrates the ideal of *wu wei* with narratives. In the more recent English-language literature on the *Zhuangzi*, these are often addressed as "knack stories." One way of looking at the knack stories and the issue of skill in the *Zhuangzi* regards them as setting up examples for a Daoist cultivation ideal. The skillful individuals depicted in the stories are understood as Daoist sages who a practitioner should seek to emulate. This approach connects loosely with a traditional *dao jiao* reading of texts such as the *Zhuangzi* and takes the stories quite literally as illustrations of what one can achieve—if not directly physically then at least spiritually—if one becomes a devoted Daoist. The knack stories thereby take on a religious or a soteriological meaning. They can show how to reach perfection and acquire truth. P.J. Ivanhoe thinks that Zhuangzi had an "unwavering faith in his Way," and therefore, figures such as Cook Ding invite us to "follow Heaven": "There is a pattern in Nature and the Daoist sage follows it" (Ivanhoe, 1993, p. 652). Echoing Ivanhoe, Nathaniel F. Barrett believes that the *Zhuangzi's* knack stories are about a superhuman skill providing "access

to the spontaneous power of an ultimate reality such as the Dao or Heaven" (Barrett, 2011, p. 699). They represent the "religious nature of Zhuangzi's ideal" (Barrett, 2011, p. 700) and invite readers "to commit to some particular worldview," because "spirituality may not be possible without some such commitment" (Barrett, 2011, p. 700). In this view, the skillful craftsmen of the *Zhuangzi* function as religious models eager to achieve "personal transcendence" by a firm commitment to the "ultimate" (Barrett, 2011, p. 699).

Ivanhoe and Barrett use a vocabulary of "faith" and "commitment" to "personal transcendence." This vocabulary not only rings quite a few church bells, but also connotes the more secularized ideal of sincerely or authentically committing to what one identifies as right and true. Barrett, in particular, emphasizes the centrality of such a "commitment" for his religious reading of the *Zhuangzi*. Erik Schwitzgebel, to the contrary, points out that exactly such a commitment is, ironically, put into question in the knack stories in the *Zhuangzi*. The skilled craftsmen, in fact, *do not really care*. Upon closer inspection, it becomes rather obvious that the strange artisans in the *Zhuangzi*, paradoxically, demonstrate quite drastically a non-commitment to the arts they practice. In short, the artisans in the *Zhuangzi's* knack stories, too, can be seen as smooth operators engaging in genuine pretending.

In order to substantiate a reading of the knack stories as showing excellence through genuine pretending, it is important to emphasize the "queer" nature of the role models in the *Zhuangzi*. They are rarely straight exemplars that one can simply take at face value and emulate. They are dissonant, grotesque, exaggerated, or empty role models, and they sometimes bear satirical and ironical features to the point of becoming a parody of a role model.

At least one scholarly article comments on the humorous and bizarre, and thereby dissonant, nature of one of the *Zhuangzi's* famous knack stories, namely that of the swimmer at the Lüliang waterfall

(section 19.10). Shirley Chan notes that the narrative describes an "absurdly impossible challenge" namely the swimmer diving into a cascade where even "fish and turtles and crocodiles could not swim" (Chan, 2011, p. 85). Confucius, who coincidently sees the swimmer plunging into the water, is shocked by this sight, and, taken over by feelings of pity, sends his disciple to rescue him. The swimmer, however, happily emerges from the water and makes the rescue effort look silly. Questioned by Confucius, the swimmer then explains his superior skill. Chan rightly remarks that "we smile as we picture the discomfiture of the great sage who thought he was performing a meritorious act of saving a life" (Chan, 2011, p. 86). The story bears many of the hallmarks of comedy such as the absurdly exaggerated nature of the swimmer's task, the comical relief of feelings of anxiety, and the carnivalistic exposure of the wise and moral Confucius as a fool. These comical elements on their own should already serve to distance the reader from looking at the text as a straightforward emulation story. The swimmer is not only a master of his art; he is also a jester and a mocker.

Once readers allow themselves to withdraw some of their perhaps misplaced awe of the skillful craftsmen in the *Zhuangzi*, other potentially comical features of the knack stories will emerge. Isn't the Cook Ding narrative, the mother of all knack stories in the *Zhuangzi*, a bit ridiculous from the start: what sort of ruler plunges to the depths of a butcher to learn about nourishing life? And isn't the *Zhuangzi* also starting in a humorous key when it satirically describes the bloody and ghastly dismemberment of a carcass as a symphonic event where the rhythm of "the "thwacking tones of flesh falling from bone" accompanies the whizzing sound of the knife "with its resonant thwing" so that each stroke rings out "the perfect note, attuned to the 'Dance of the Mulberry Grove' or the 'Jingshou Chorus' of the ancient sage kings"? (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 22). Couldn't the text here be read as a bitingly sarcastic parody of the *ancient sage king's own butchering of people* that the *Zhuangzi* sometimes alludes to when, for instance, depicting sage emperor Yao as

lusting for potentially genocidal attacks against the "Zong, Kuai, and Xu'ao" (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 17) in the *Qiwulun* chapter (section 2.10), or when the *Robber Zhi* chapter (section 29.1) describes the Yellow Emperor's battles as having "made the blood stream for a hundred miles?" (Graham, 2001, p. 17). And isn't there at least a hint of parody when the first example of skill in the knack-story-chapter 19 of the *Zhuangzi* is, in a most profane fashion, a story about a drunkard falling totally tanked off a cart? Do we have to take him as a face-value exemplar for our spiritual cultivation and for committing ourselves to finding Heaven's patterns?

The knack stories in the *Zhuangzi* are not all parodies or humorous throughout. But some of them contain comical elements which, in conjunction with other recurrent features such as absurd exaggerations or clearly profane elements, serve to dissociate the reader from their "heroes" and put any unwavering commitment to their tasks into question. It seems that if there is a pattern among the strange artisans and artists then it is precisely the insincerity in their undertakings. A drunkard, I assume, does not embrace the Way of Drinking as a Heavenly call, does not attain "personal transcendence," and also does not impart a clearly discernable "normative vision." Yet, I gladly admit that he still fits Graham's general definition of Daoist skill quoted above since he is surely capable of *forgetting himself in total absorption of himself in the object* (i.e. in his liquor). And there can be no doubt that, when falling from a cart, he can do so "spontaneously with a confidence and precision impossible to anyone who is applying rules and thinking out moves." (Graham, 2001, p. 6).

Irony and the surreal split the readers from the Daoist artists and artisans in the *Zhuangzi*, and set up a healthy distance so that one is spared a mode of devotion and desires of imitation. At the very least, this is a hermeneutic function of irony and the surreal that readers can respond to, if so inclined. They are set free not to emulate, and still enjoy and reflect. Perhaps more importantly from a philosophical

perspective, these literary devices also serve to establish a difference between the depicted artists and their arts. Just as a drunkard does not normally identify himself with his art and does not look at it as a most personal profession that he has perfected and thereby enhanced his innermost potentials to the utmost, many of the other model artists in the *Zhuangzi* dissociate themselves from their activities as well.

The most commonly noted aspect of this dissociation is the physiological and psychological disengagement process by which the artisans "disown" their activities. Cook Ding, for instance, becomes good at carving up oxen once he no longer looks at them with his eyes. This process is described in more detail in the case of Woodworker Qing (*Zhuangzi*, 19:11) who, before making his marvelous bell stand, engages for several days in an exercise of "fasting of the heart-mind" (*xin qi* 心齊), analogous to the exercise of *xin zhai* (心齋) recommended by Confucius to Yan Hui before going on a visit to the ruler of Wei. The various forms of the fasting of the heart-mind correspond to the famous notion of losing one's self (*sang wo* 喪我) which is poetically described at the beginning of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. They also correspond to the process of "sitting and forgetting" (*zuo wang* 坐忘) that Yan Hui famously depicts in a dialogue with Confucius (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 49). When Yan Hui has described to Confucius his *zuo wang* exercise, Confucius exclaims in admiration: "If you go along with it, you have no preferences; if you let yourself transform, you have no permanence!" (*Graham, 2001, p. 92*). This could well be read as a definition of genuine pretending. Read from a social or existential perspective, Confucius' pronouncement praises the capacity to affirm the contingency of one's roles and tasks by "having no preference" for them, and to excel at them by not identifying with them as "permanent".

Quite clearly, the image of the excellent drunkard who has perfected the art of surviving falls off of carts implies neither that one should embrace drunkenness as one's authentic state of being nor that one should permanently identify with this skill. The dissociation

between the artist and his art and the corresponding emphasis on contingency becomes explicit in the conclusion of the story of the master swimmer. The swimmer says to Confucius: "I have no course (*dao*)." (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 81). He does not *own* his art or his way of life —and neither is he owned or defined by it. To the contrary, he follows the course of the water while "not making it my personal thing." (*bu wei si* 不為私) In fact, it does not matter to him where he moves about; he does not see himself as swimmer to whom the water is "his element." Just as Yan Hui when sitting and forgetting, the diver has no preference for any specific environment, and thus can equally adjust to any: "I was born on land and at ease on land;" but likewise he says: "I grew up with the water, and am at ease in the water." And he concludes by saying what in an attempted literal translation is in English: "That which is the case is so while one does not know if it is so by me" (*bu zhi wu suoyi ran er ran* 不知吾所以然而然). In a free rendering this would be: "One cannot claim any ownership of whatever one is doing." This is, once more, an ancient Chinese definition of genuine pretending. And in the cases of both the swimmer and the drunkard it serves as an explanation for why one can be very good at what one is doing in an everyday life context, such as drinking, walking, or swimming—rather than in an extraordinary or mystical endeavor.

The process of disowning one's activities or dissociating oneself from an identification with one's profession is outlined in more detail in the narrative of Woodworker Qing. When an interlocutor, the woodworker's superior, his ruler and employer the Marquis of Lu, attempts to ascribe him with a specific talent or art (*shu* 術), Qing refuses such identification. Echoing the swimmer who refuses to "own up to" any *dao* of his own, the woodworker admits to be in a line of profession and having a social role, but he does not look at it as a personal quality: "I am an artisan, but what art would I have?" When further explaining the details of the "fasting of the heart-mind" (*xin qi*) that eventually enables him to make a perfect bell stand, he not only

describes a physio-psychological "cleansing" process, but also a social and existential dissociation from his profession, role, and activity. Just as he no longer regards his body and mind as his own, he also distances himself from all potentially ensuing social praise or failure, and even from his employer, the very person who he is talking to; after seven days of fasting, he says "there is no regal court" anymore to him. Paradoxically, the wood worker claims to be best at the tasks tied to his profession when his practice is void of any personal investment. In other words, he serves his lord best by not caring about him anymore.

It is crucial to note here that in an ancient China one typically did not decide on but inherited one's profession as a craftsman and was thus "born into it" by natural coincidence. The tasks which artisans in the *Zhuangzi* perform are not freely chosen by them, but encountered by "fate" (*ming* 命), to use the terminology employed by the master swimmer. Rather than pretending that a profession he did not and could not pick is truly his, these artisans disowns it, and thereby accepts it impersonally.

Seen in this way, the great accomplishments that these Daoist artisans achieve in the eyes of others do not mean much to themselves. By disowning their crafts, they protect themselves against a social "reification" on the basis of their roles or presumed talents; they avoid becoming "celebrities"—at least in their own estimation. At the same time, they also become immune to idolizing their arts. They do what they happen to find themselves assigned with, or what their present circumstances demand. Their activities are radically contingent: the swimmer swims not because he regards the art of swimming as greatly meaningful or spiritually rewarding, but because he grew up with the water. The only apparent reason for the woodworker to make bell stands out of trees is that the Marquis of Lu commissions him to do so because he happened to be born into the bell stand maker profession. Quite conspicuously, all arts of the excellent artisans are characterized as contingent either upon the natural or social circumstances that the

artisans have been "growing up" in. There is no ultimate need for any of those arts—while, arguably, we may need butchers, there is no need for cutting up oxen musically—and none of the artisans sets out to embellish their craft as essential or specifically justifies what he does. To the contrary, the swimmer, for instance, points out that he refrains from "knowing" any particular reason for why he is doing what he is good at.

Just as one finds no genius cultivating subjectivity through artistic performance in the knack stories of the *Zhuangzi*, one also does not find a veneration of the sublime. The skills that the Daoist masters excel at are coincidental and mundane, or, as in the case of the drunkard, even profane. They are common crafts practiced by common people by chance of birth or circumstances. In the knack stories, practical excellence is associated with affirmation of contingency, with a capacity to disown one's position and role in society, with not showing a personal preference for what one does, and with being able to not identify with one's profession.

The affirmation of contingency entailed in the knack stories is perhaps most evident in the drunkard allegory, which is also the most "carnivalistic" of them. The allegory of the drunkard is not so much a model for emulation, but a comical critique of those who are keen on internalizing their social persona by committing to their roles. The drunkard is a profane *zhenren* who is good at taking a fall because he does not consider himself as an artist or a celebrity when he's falling. He simply falls when he falls. But he does not "with his personality personalize what is 'from heaven'" (*bu yi ren ren tian* 不以人人天); he is not, I presume, a committed alcoholic (in the Heidegerrian sense of authentic commitment). This is to say, he does not give rise to the creation of an ideal of the art of falling off of carts, and thus is immune against all sorts of vanities that may arise from identifying oneself with what one happens to be good at. In a satirical fashion the drunkard thus mocks the social construction of excellence and, by extension also the inability to survive a fall from grace that may come with the personal

investment in being regarded as truly good at something.

The danger of idealizing excellence, and thereby perverting and destroying it, makes the Daoist masters ambiguous figures who often exercise contingent crafts, profane arts, or grotesquely exaggerated skills. The paradoxical nature of being an empty Daoist exemplar is particular evident with respect to "Carpenter Chui" 工倕who could draw the shapes of the things he built with his magically skillful hand and did not use any tools such as compasses or T-squares. He is praised briefly for these talents in section 19.13, it seems, as just one more example in addition to the many other knack stories in this chapter. However, in distinction from the other narratives, Carpenter Chui's short appearance in the chapter is devoid of ambiguity. As if the composers of the *Zhuangzi* had become uneasy with such a straightforward and non-dissonant knack episode, Carpenter Chui also appears in section 10.2 where he is treated in a rather different way—here, the idol meets his twilight and the hammer has been taken out:

> Only when we destroy the hooks and rope levels, abandon the compasses and T-squares, and break Carpenter Chui's fingers will the people of the world be able to retain their skills. (Ziporyn, 2009, pp. 64–65).

This section does not contradict the knack stories of the *Zhuangzi*, but only confirms one central aspect of them: namely their emphasis on genuine pretending by means of empty role models. Once a figure such as Carpenter Chui becomes an idol seeking emulation it only serves to "hero-worship completeness" (*xiong cheng* 雄成) and needs to be disowned by the text. Typically, the knack stories in the *Zhuangzi* present masters who distance themselves from their skillfulness and enact it contingently. Whenever there is a tendency to establish a figure that internalizes their skill, idolatry and "the disease of conceit" may arise. The *Zhuangzi* reacts drastically to such a danger and "shockingly" undermines potentially dogmatic readings.

References

GRAHAM, A.C. trans. (2001). *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

IVANHOE, Philip J. (1993). “Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Dao.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (4), 639–54.

BARRETT, Nathaniel F. (2011). “*Wuwei* and Flow: Comparative Reflections on Spirituality, Transcendence, and Skill in the *Zhuangzi*.” *Philosophy East and West* 61 (4), 679–706.

CHAN, Shirley (2011). “Identifying Daoist Humor: Reading the *Liezi*.” In *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches*, edited by Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner Davis, 73–88. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

ZIPORYN, Brook. trans. (2009). *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Zhuangzi: https://ctext.org/zhuangzi.