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Being

Perspective versus Substance

The question of being may be understood as the question of the nature of things and of how they are in the world; our understanding of being has profound implications for the way we understand the world as a whole. Therefore it is appropriate to begin this study with the question of being.

Being as Identity

This question may be investigated in at least two ways. One is to ask generally what it means to exist; this is the question about the nature of existence. Such was the approach of Martin Heidegger when he asked and addressed the question “What is being?” Another way to investigate being is to ask specifically what an existent is; it is the question of identity, the question about the nature of the basic elements of the world. For example, according to Sir Arthur Eddington, the entity I am observing can be viewed in two ways: on the one hand a commonsensical table that has extension, occupies a chunk of space, and is substantial, and on the other a table that is actually a mass of electrons with ample empty space between them.¹ Presumably there is only one thing here. Now, which one is the thing? Some people say that there is only one thing that is self-identical and it has attributes or properties. Then the question is,

what is it? In the above case, is the table a property of the mass of electrons or is the mass of electrons a property of the table? Others may insist that there are actually two things, which coincide in space. Then, are there just two of them or are there more? What is the relationship between them in addition to their spatial coincidence?

The question of being is one of extreme importance, because, whether we are aware of it or not, many of our views on other aspects of the world are dependent on our views on this issue. As a matter of fact, every person, philosopher or nonphilosopher alike, has some view on it, even though most people hold their views tacitly. People who hold different perspectives on this issue hold fundamentally different worldviews. Their worldviews can be so radically different that they hardly share enough common ground to convey to each other their positions on related issues.

My focus in this chapter is on the issue of being as identity, that is, the question of what an existent can be said to be. I believe the dominant views on this issue in the East and the West are quite different, and that many other disparate views are consequences of this fundamental difference. For this reason it is crucial that we recognize their dissimilarities if we wish to understand both sides and their perspectives on many other issues.

Roughly speaking, the dominant view in the West has tended to see the world as consisting of basic elements or “bricks” (e.g., atoms) that are extended in space and make up the world largely through spatial organization. From this perspective, change is merely in appearances, and the world is static at a fundamental level. The philosophical focus within this assumption is usually on identifying the basic elements or fundamental bricks, and then explaining how change is possible in a world of these mostly static elements (e.g., in Descartes’s view). In contrast, many Eastern philosophers believe that the fundamental element or elements in the world are more subtle and formless. For these philosophers the fundamental nature of the world is change. The static is found merely in the appearance of a world that is essentially dynamic. One of their challenges here is to account for apparent constancy amid change.

In the Chinese tradition, the so-called “five-elements (*wu xing* 五行),” namely, metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, are not understood as five static “bricks,” but as dynamic principles that are

agents themselves. The five elements may be reminiscent of the ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles' "four elements," namely, water, air, fire, and earth. They are, however, in fact very different in that the Chinese "five elements" are not inertial matter that has to be activated from without by some external principles as Empedocles' "four elements" are. The Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 B.C.E.) said "*xing zhe xing ye* 行者行也," that is, "*xing*" means "acting" or "behaving."² Therefore, "*wu xing*" can be better translated as "five agents" or "five operations."

The "five elements" are believed to be five types of *qi* 气 (*chi*).³ The Chinese believe that the fundamental element or material of the world is *qi*, which has been appropriately translated into English as "energy-force." Unlike atoms, in Chinese philosophy *qi* is intangible, dynamic, and yet forms the myriad of things in the world. This concept of something intangible as the foundation of reality may appear to many Westerners incomprehensible. Fortunately, modern physics has provided a useful instrument for making sense of this concept. *Qi* is not exactly energy in modern physics, but if one can comprehend how, at the fundamental level of the world, energy, which is intangible and dynamic, is equivalent or convertible to matter, one has a good analogy to work with in comprehending the Chinese *qi*.⁴

While "*qi*" denotes reality at the fundamental level, our everyday life, however, deals mostly with the so-called "midsized" entities, such as chairs, horses, and trees. Most people in both the West and the East seem to agree that there are indeed these entities. It does not mean, however, that they agree on the way the world is constituted at this level. The dominant Chinese understanding of the world at its fundamental level as fluid, *qi*-like extends to various levels of the world, including the level of "midsized" objects. In this chapter I will compare the view of Zhuang Zi 庄子 (Chuang Tzu, b. 369 B.C.E.), a Chinese Taoist philosopher, on what an entity is with a highly influential Western view that derives from Aristotle. I will show not only that they are different but also how Zhuang Zi's ontology is a viable alternative to Aristotelian ontology.

The Being of the Ox

A common view of being in the West goes like this: an entity falls into a certain substance category *S* and is an *s*; there are other

things that can be said of the *s*, but those are merely qualities or properties; being *s* is its primary being and it determines the entity's identity. For example, the entity is an *ox*, which falls into the substance category "ox." Being that individual ox determines the entity's identity; its being brown, seven feet long, composed of the mass *m*, and so on, are its properties. This is a view held, explicitly or implicitly, by many Western philosophers.

The origin of this view may be traced back to Aristotle's doctrine of *ousia*, that is, primary being or substance,⁵ as it is usually interpreted. Aristotle discusses the problem of *ousia* in *Metaphysics*, mainly in the "central books." His discussions are lengthy, meticulous, and sometimes inconsistent. Commentators are often widely divided with regard to what is really Aristotle's position on the issues. Here I present Aristotle in a standard interpretation.

Aristotle maintains that philosophy is the science of Being *qua* Being:

The term "being" is used in several senses, as we pointed out previously in our account of the various senses of terms. In one sense, it signifies whatness and a *this*; in another, it signifies a quality or a quantity or one of the others which are predicated in this way. Although "being" is used in so many senses, it is evident that of these the primary sense is whatness, and used in this sense it signifies a substance. For when we state that this has some quality, we say it is good or bad but not that it is three cubits long or a man; but when we state what it is, we say that it is a man or a god but not white or hot or three cubits long.⁶

Accordingly, there are many ways in which one can speak of an individual entity's whatness, but only one way refers to primary substance ("a what" or "a something"), the others are predicates (or properties). It is to this primary being that the "what-it-is-to-be" or essence (*to ti en einai*) belongs.⁷ Thus, Aristotle reduces the question "what is being?" to the question "what is substance?"⁸ The way in which Aristotle speaks about essence and primary being clearly indicates that he believes that, for each individual entity (or at least a natural entity), there is only one essence and one primary being.⁹ Because the essence of an entity is (determined by) its form, and presumably one entity has only one form, one entity can have only

one essence.¹⁰ An entity may have secondary being, but only one primary being.

From this follow several interrelated Aristotelian claims in regard to an entity's whatness. First of all, viewing an entity as a collection of its constituent parts does not reveal the entity's reality. The essence belongs to the entity as a whole, not to its constituent parts. Since the primary being of an entity is determined by its essence, which its constituent parts do not possess, the primary being of an entity cannot be revealed by an analysis into its parts. In other words, an entity is a particular *this*, but not only a *this*; it is also a definite *such*, that is, a *this-such*. It cannot be a *this* without being also a *such*.¹¹ Second, for Aristotle, because there is only one essence in an entity, there is only one primary being in it, and therefore there is a single objectively right answer to the question of what an entity is primarily. The right answer is one that reveals the entity's essence and primary substance. Third, Aristotle maintains that the essence of an entity is linked to its species, and the species to which an entity belongs has a hold on the entity's primary being. Hence, a withdrawal of its membership from the species means losing the entity's primary being and hence its destruction. These views represent a substantial part of the Aristotelian metaphysics; further philosophical observations are based on them.

The metaphysics of Zhuang Zi, a near contemporary of Aristotle, may be viewed at two levels. At the fundamental level, every thing belongs to the Tao, or the Way. The Tao is the ultimate truth of the universe. Every thing in the world has its root in the Tao. In this sense, all are One; the differences between things are negligible from the viewpoint of the Tao. At the entity level, each individual entity can be both a "this" and a "that." An entity's being a "this" does not exclude its also being a "that." The two levels are linked: an individual's being a "this" and being a "that" are ways of the Tao's presenting itself. In the following I will focus on the second level, on the issue of an entity's whatness.

For Aristotle, to be a primary substance is to be a member of its lowest-level substance-kind;¹² for example, being an ox is a primary being.¹³ Accordingly, ceasing to be an ox means losing its primary being, and our recognizing the entity as the individual ox is the only right way for us to recognize its primary being. Interestingly, Zhuang Zi also used the ox to make his point. But he has a different

account of what an ox is. In his story about Cook Ding 庖丁, the cook says:

When I first began to cut oxen, what I saw was nothing but whole oxen. After three years, I no longer saw whole oxen. . . . In accord with the natural grain, I slice at the great crevices, lead the blade through the great cavities. Following its inherent structure, I never encounter the slightest obstacle even where the veins and arteries come together or where the ligaments and tendons join, much less from obvious big bones. A good cook changes his cleaver once a year because he chops. An ordinary cook changes his cleaver once a month because he hacks. Now I've been using my cleaver for nineteen years and have cut up thousands of oxen with it, but the blade is still as fresh as though it had just come from the grindstone. Between the joints there are spaces, but the edge of the blade has no thickness. Since I am inserting something without any thickness into an empty space, there will certainly be lots of room for the blade to play around in. That's why the blade is still as fresh as though it had just come from the grindstone.¹⁴

The main purpose of Zhuang Zi's story is to tell us how to find our way in the world. He suggests that it can be done by properly recognizing and using things in the world. After three years of fine training, Cook Ding saw an ox no longer as a whole thing but as a pack of flesh and bones.

For Zhuang Zi, Cook Ding was not mistaken. What the cook saw was real. The entity was certainly also an ox. What this shows is that an ox can be recognized not only as an individual ox, but also as a pack of flesh and bones. Thus, in telling the story Zhuang Zi suggests that, as a being, the entity is both an ox and a pack of flesh and bones.

This differs from Aristotle who writes:

Of the composite of statue the bronze is a part, but not a part of that which is called "the form" of the statue. For what should be stated is the form, or the thing qua having the form, but the material part should never be stated by itself.¹⁵

In a sense, the bronze is a part of the statue as an entity, and flesh and bones are parts of an ox.¹⁶ But these parts are not the elements

of the entity's form. Since Aristotle sometimes seems to believe that an entity's primary being is its form, in a sense these parts are not constituent parts of the entity's primary being. An ox as a whole has the essence of being an ox, while the parts do not possess this essence. Aristotle treats the relation between a pack of flesh and bones on the one hand and an ox on the other as the relation between potentiality and actuality. The pack of flesh and bones is matter that has the potential to be an ox. It is the form that gives the entity actuality and makes it an actual ox.¹⁷ The primary being of the substance is exclusively the ox.

Zhuang Zi, however, believes that the analysis into its constituent parts is a legitimate approach to an entity's reality. On the one hand, its being an ox does not exhaust its entire being. It is an ox, but it is also a pack of flesh and bones. The entity's being a pack of flesh and bones is not merely a potentiality. The pack of flesh and bones is as real as the ox. In Cook Ding's eyes, it is not the case that the pack of flesh and bones are actualized in being an ox, nor is the entity potentially a pack of flesh and bones that will be actualized after the ox is killed. In his eyes, the entity *is* a pack of flesh and bones. On the other hand, Zhuang Zi recognizes no essence or primary being. He does not believe there is such a thing as essence that exclusively determines the entity's being. Therefore, the entity's being an aggregate of parts is no less real than its being an ox.

Thus, conceptually, Zhuang Zi views the entity at a level different from its being an ox or a pack of flesh and bones. While being an ox and being a pack of flesh and bones are not the same way of being, they are the same entity that has both ways of being. Contrary to the Aristotelian view that every particular is a *this-such*, Zhuang Zi states:

Every thing is a "that," and every thing is a "this." You cannot see it as a "this" if you are from the viewpoint of "that"; you see it as a "this" when you are from the viewpoint of "this." "That" comes from "this" and "this" comes from "that." . . . Thus, the sage does not bother with these distinctions but sees all things in the ways they are. "This" is also "that," and "that" is also "this." . . . When there is no more separation between "this" and "that," it is called the pivot of the Tao. At the pivot in the center of the circle one can see the infinite in all things.¹⁸

For Zhuang Zi, we always look at things from a certain point of view. If I begin from where I am and see a thing as I see it, as a “this,” then it may also become possible for me to see it as another sees it, as a “that.” Therefore, seeing it as a “this” and seeing it as a “that” depend on each other and complement each other. It means that, in addition to being a “this” (i.e., an ox), the entity is also a “that” (i.e., a pack of flesh and bones). Although the entity’s being is not confined to being an ox and being a pack of flesh and bones (it is also an aggregate of molecules, etc.), these are ways for it to be a *this* and a *that*.¹⁹ Because being an ox and being a pack of flesh and bones are two ways of the same entity’s being, an individual ox is a pack of flesh and bones, and a particular aggregate of parts is an ox. Only when we see it not merely as an ox, but also as an entity that is both a “this” and a “that,” can we get to the pivot of the Tao.

In Zhuang Zi’s eyes, the fact that the ox lasts longer than the pack of flesh and bones does not necessarily make the entity more of an ox. For him, quantitative measures are always relative. It can be said that the tip of a downy hair is heavy, Mount Tai is small, a child who dies at infancy has a long life, and (the long-lived) Progenitor Peng 彭祖 dies young.²⁰ It all depends on the context. Even though the pack of flesh and bones does not last as long as the ox, it lasts long enough to make it an entity. If we call the ox a “this,” then the pack of flesh and bones is a “that.” The entity can be both a “this” and a “that.”

One may want to object: perhaps instead of one entity, what we have here are really two entities, one ox and one pack of flesh and bones; although they spatially coincide, they are not the same entity. Aristotle, however, does not seem to favor this view. He strives for the unity of an entity. When he speaks of the statue and the bronze, he seems to have treated the bronze merely as matter. Instead of suggesting that there are two entities, one statue and one mass of bronze, he treats it as one entity:

But, as we have stated, the last matter and the form are one and the same, the one exists potentially, the other as actuality. Thus, it is like asking what the cause of unity is and what causes something to be one; for each thing is a kind of unity, and potentiality and actuality taken together exist somehow as one.²¹

He explicitly rejects the suggestion that one individual can be two. He believes that the matter and the form are the same unity; it is not the case that there is a statue *and* a mass of bronze:

In some cases, after the thing has been generated, it is called, when referred to the matter out of which it was generated, not “that” but “that-y” (or “that-en”); for example, the statue is called not “stone” but “stony.” . . . So, just as we do not say of a healthy man, who became so from being sick, that he is a sick man, so of the statue we say not that it is wood but (by varying the word) that it is wooden, not bronze but brazen, not stone but stony, and of the house not bricks but brick-en; for if we look at the situation very carefully, we would not say without qualification that the wood becomes a statue, or the bricks a house, since that which becomes must change and not remain. It is because of this fact that we speak in this manner.²²

Thus, after the bricks become a house, the bricks (as bricks) are no more; after the bronze becomes a statue, the bronze (as bronze) is no more. After they become a house or a statue, they only exist as the properties of something else. So, when one points to the statue and asks, “How many entities are there?” the answer for Aristotle is definitively “one.”

One reason for me to agree with Aristotle in this regard is that the two-entities account inflates the number of entities in the world. It is not the case that there is an ox *plus* a pack of flesh and bones; there is only *one* thing that is both an ox and an aggregate of parts. Suppose two persons dispute over whether the entity is an ox or a pack of flesh and bones. If there were two entities, there would be no dispute at all because they would be talking about two different entities, one ox and one aggregate of parts: while one would hold that an ox is an ox, the other would hold that a pack of flesh and bones is a pack of flesh and bones. But we know the dispute is over the same entity. We may want to say to the disputants that “yes, it is an ox, but it is also a pack of flesh and bones.” Here the two “it’s” must refer to the same entity or the sentence would make no sense. In the story of Cook Ding, the cook sees an aggregate of parts in the same entity in which others see an ox. The entity can only be that which is both an ox and a pack of flesh and bones. At a certain time *t*, the ox *o* and the pack of flesh and bones *p* are one and the same entity.

Some contemporary philosophers want to update Aristotle by saying that an entity is “a four-dimensional spatiotemporal worm.”²³ Accordingly, an entity can only exist over time and it is extended in space and time as a worm is extended in space; only a part of it can exist at a time. Two entities are identical only if they have the same history in time and space. Here again only one story can be told about the entity. Two observations can be made on Zhuang Zi’s behalf. First, it is questionable that an entity has to be a spatiotemporal worm. It appears that our ordinary idea of an entity is something that exists at a certain time. If an entity is a four-dimensional thing, it would itself extend over time; “Johnny” for instance would refer to not the boy playing a computer game now, but his whole four-dimensional movement from birth to death; then it would only make sense to say that a part of him exists now, not the whole Johnny. That does not sound right. Also, if an entity is a four-dimensional worm, one that takes a very different route in space and time would not be the same four-dimensional worm and therefore not the same entity. I think that our ordinary notion is that the same entity might have been at a spatiotemporal spot different from where it actually is. Furthermore, if an entity is a four-dimensional whole, a half of it would be a half entity. Since it is true that if an entity’s “life span” is cut short, the entity is still a whole entity, not a broken one, what we mean by “an entity” is not a “four-dimensional worm,” but something that endures in time.

Second, even if we grant that an entity is a spatiotemporal worm, that will only change the terminology, not the issue at stake. In that case, what we have been calling an entity would be a time stage of an entity. Then the question of whether the time stage is substantially and primarily a time stage of an ox or a time stage of a pack of flesh and bones (which presumably lasts longer than an instant in time) still remains for the Aristotelians. Following Zhuang Zi’s way of thinking one could still say that the same time stage is both the time stage of the ox and the time stage of the aggregate of parts, without one being primary and the other secondary.²⁴

Knowing What There Is

Because Aristotle believes that an entity only has one essence and one primary being, it follows that, for Aristotle, there is a single

objectively right answer to the question of what an entity primarily is. He holds that the question of what a thing is refers essentially to primary being.²⁵ In other words, the “what-it-is” of an entity belongs to primary being, and to other categories merely potentially and derivatively, merely as a quality or a quantity. For example, an entity *o* is a member of the kind *ox*, and that it is an ox is the right answer to the question “what is *o*?” Zhuang Zi denies that there is primary being and that there is a single objectively right answer to the question of what an entity is. He believes that saying the entity is an ox is not the only right way to answer the question of what the entity is; that the entity is a pack of flesh and bones is also an appropriate response.

Zhuang Zi does not think, as Aristotle apparently does, there is an “objective” way of knowing:

Knowing what Heaven does and what humans do would be the utmost in knowledge. . . . However, there is a problem. Knowing depends on conditions that are only matched later. And these conditions are not fixed. How can we ever know what is due to Heaven but not due to humans, or vice versa?²⁶

The Chinese word for “Heaven,” *tian* 天, can also be rendered as “nature” in this context. It is not difficult to figure out Zhuang Zi’s meaning here. For Zhuang Zi, knowing is not like mirroring an objective reality (i.e., what Heaven or nature makes). It is always inevitably situated under some circumstances. These circumstances are not fixed and cannot be separated from the entity (“what is due to Heaven”) and the knower (“what is due to humans”). The way of the Tao, for Zhuang Zi, is not to put the two in opposition, but to see them in unity.

This way of thinking may be called “interactive thinking.” Things are always relational and situational, and should be seen as such. To see things within relations and situations is to see things in a network of various factors that interact with one another, is to see things in context, in perspective.

Then, how is it that the entity is an ox and that the entity is a pack of flesh and bones are both right? In Zhuang Zi’s view, “a way comes into being through walking upon it; a thing is so because people say that it is.”²⁷ Originally there were no ways in the world. A way emerges only after we walk it. “Say” (谓 *wei*), which may

also be translated as “naming” here, can be understood as recognizing.²⁸ A thing is so because we recognize it this way. The individual entity is an ox when we recognize it so; it is a pack of flesh and bones when we recognize it so. This may sound rather subjectivistic. But it should not be taken as meaning that we can view an entity arbitrarily. Zhuang Zi continues the remark by saying, “Why so? By being so. Why not so? By not being so. It is inherent in a thing that from somewhere that’s so of it, from somewhere that’s allowable of it.” Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English translated the last sentence as “Everything has its own nature and its own function.”²⁹ It is not arbitrary for one to recognize an entity as “a something” because an entity has its own nature and its own function. From this it may be said that a thing’s being a *such* is not a pure invention of ours. The Tao has its ways. We have the view that an ox is more an ox than a pack of flesh and bones, or vice versa, because we come to recognize it that way. We can do this because of its “being so.” It is, however, not true that there is only one right way to recognize things.

Zhuang Zi’s view appears even more appealing as we look at artificial entities. In analogy to Aristotle’s bronze statue example, I can ask a similar question: Is my ring a primary substance that has a property of being gold, or is this piece of gold a primary substance that has a property of being a ring? On the one hand, this piece of gold is a primary substance if anything is a primary substance in the Aristotelian sense; on the other hand, there is no reason why my ring should not be a primary substance when other individual entities, such as bricks and statues, are primary substances. If there is only one primary substance in this entity, which is it? Zhuang Zi would have no problem saying that it is both, with neither being more primary than the other without a context. At this point an Aristotelian may want to retreat and hold that only natural entities are substances. If so, at least Zhuang Zi’s ontology would have the advantage of covering both natural entities and artificial entities.

Zhuang Zi opposes dogmatic thinking:

The Tao has never had borders; saying has never had constants. It is by a “That’s it” demarcations are made. Let me say something about demarcations. Left and right, order and propriety, dividing up and discriminating between alternatives, competing over and fighting over: these I call our Eight Powers. . . . To “divide,” then, is to leave something undivided;

to “discriminate between alternatives” is to leave something which is neither alternative. “How can that be?” you may ask. The sage keeps it in his breast, common men argue over alternatives to show it to each other. Hence I say: To “discriminate between alternatives” is to fail to see something.³⁰

The Eight Powers are ways to define the boundaries of things in the world. Some people use the first four powers to delimit the “That’s it” and “That’s not it” in human relations; some others use the last four powers to delimit the “That’s it” and “That’s not it” in our general knowledge of the world.³¹ For Zhuang Zi, they are all fundamentally mistaken. He holds that the Tao has no borders and that the being of an entity has alternatives. When common people ask the question “What is it?” they use the Eight Powers to draw borders, divide things, and discriminate between alternatives in order to show a definite “That’s it” or “That’s not it” of things. But the same thing is both “That’s it” and “That’s not it.” To adhere obstinately to “That’s it” of an entity is to discriminate against alternatives. In doing so, one is obstructed from seeing the reality of the Tao.

What Zhuang Zi says here about the “Eight Powers” is reminiscent of Aristotle’s doctrine of things in *Metaphysics* and *Categories*. Aristotle makes a distinction between substance and qualities, generation and alteration, doing and being-affected, and so forth. For instance, he claims that among many things that can be spoken of an entity’s “what-it-is,” there is only one way we speak of it as a substance, the rest being qualities. For Zhuang Zi, getting deeply involved in such disputes as whether an ox or a pack of flesh and bones is a substance is getting away from the Tao, because one fails to see another side of reality. For example, in distinguishing between an ox as substance and a pack of flesh and bones as a potentiality of the substance, one fails to see that what can be said of an ox as a substance can also be said of the pack of flesh and bones. The aggregate of parts, like the ox, can be treated as a “substance” that has certain properties. To know the Tao is not to discriminate against alternatives, but to be open to them. Therefore, obstinately holding that the entity is only an ox or a pack of flesh and bones is grossly one-sided. Zhuang Zi remarks:

To weary the intelligence by trying to unify things without knowing that they are the same I call “three every morning.”

What do I mean by “three every morning?” A monkey keeper handing out nuts said, “Three every morning and four every evening.” The monkeys were all in a rage. “All right then,” said he, “Four every morning and three every evening.” The monkeys were delighted. Without anything being missed out either in name or in substance, their pleasure and anger were put to use; his too was the “That’s it” that depends on circumstance. This is why the sage smooths things out with his “That’s it, that’s not it,” and stays at the point of rest on the potter’s wheel of Heaven. It is this that is called “letting both alternatives proceed”.³²

Here Zhuang Zi advocates the view that everything belongs to the Tao. He criticizes those who fail to realize this as “[obsessed with] three every morning 朝三.” Zhuang Zi’s criticism also applies to Aristotelians who hold that an individual entity has only one primary being. The Aristotelians are trapped in a hierarchical way of thinking. For them, one has to give a definitive “either/or” type of answer between things like “three every morning and four every evening” and “four every morning and three every evening,” and only one answer can be right.

Zhuang Zi does not deny that there is some difference between “three every morning and four every evening” on the one hand, and “four every morning and three every evening” on the other. But he believes that the difference is not significant enough for one to hold an obstinate adherence to one against the other. From the viewpoint of the Tao, the two are rooted in the same one. The monkeys fail to see that “three every morning and four every evening” and “four every morning and three every evening” amount to the same. Aristotelians are also obsessed with “three every morning” because they hold that only one answer is ultimately right and they fail to see that, from the point of view of the Tao, “being an ox with the property of having the pack of flesh and bones” and “being an aggregate of parts and having the property of being an ox” amount to the same thing. These are two different ways of being the same thing. Disputing which has the absolute primacy is like the monkeys fighting over whether they have three nuts every morning and four every evening or four every morning and three every evening. The sage, understanding the pivot of the Tao, would see the oneness of the two sides and remain flexible.

Recognizing that an entity can be both a “this” and a “that,” Zhuang Zi is willing to judge as better or worse views of what an entity is on the basis of practice. This is what he means by saying that the “that’s it” of things “depends on circumstance.”

In the second chapter of *Zhuang Zi* 庄子, we find a conversation between Nie Que 齧缺 and his master Wang Ni 王倪:

“Would you know something upon which all things agreed

“That’s it?”

“How would I know that?”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . When a human sleeps in the damp his back hurts and he gets stiff in the joints; is that so of the loach? When a human sits in a tree he shivers and shakes; is that so of the monkey? Which of these three knows the right place to live? Humans eat the flesh of hay-fed and grain-fed beasts, deer eat the grass, centipedes relish snakes, owls and crows crave mice; which of the four has a proper sense of taste? Gibbons go for gibbons, buck mates with doe, loaches play with fish. Mao Qiang 毛嫱 and Xi Shi 西施 were beautiful in the eyes of men; but when the fish saw them they plunged deep, when the birds saw them they flew high, when the deer saw them they broke into a run. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world? In my judgment the principles of good will and duty, the paths of “That’s it” and “that’s not it,” are formless; how could I know how to discriminate between them?”³³

Here through Wang Ni’s mouth Zhuang Zi expresses his own view. He is targeting the issue of a universal “That’s it” in a broader sense, extending to the ethical as well as to the aesthetic. It certainly includes the metaphysical. For him, the fact that there is no consensus on a universal “That’s it” shows not only that we cannot reach such a state because each of us is always situated in circumstances, but also because there is no such reality. An entity has its being and functions. How we approach and value it really depends on the practice in which we are involved. Saying that the entity is an ox and saying that it is a pack of flesh and bones are two ways of approaching the same entity. As to which way is right, it really depends on the context in which the entity is recognized. The appropriate way to recognize an entity depends on the purpose we have

for it, and the purpose varies from time to time and from place to place. For example, if we use the entity as farm animal, it is better to recognize it as an ox; for Cook Ding, seeing no whole ox shows that he has found his way in the world. It is very important for Cook Ding that an ox is not only a whole animal, but also an aggregate of parts. For only as a non-whole, as a pack of flesh and bones, is it possible for Cook Ding to find "plenty of room" in between to ply his blade. For him, the entity as a pack of flesh and bones is by no means merely a potentiality as Aristotle holds. It is a real being to deal with. In this way, Zhuang Zi's relativistic metaphysics and his emphasis on practice are linked.

An Aristotelian perhaps would not straightforwardly deny that sometimes it makes more sense to treat the entity as a pack of flesh and bones instead of as a whole ox. She may try in two ways to avoid an obvious contradiction with her metaphysical view that the entity is primarily an ox. First, she may maintain that, there are two entities, one ox and one aggregate of parts; while the ox is primarily an ox, the pack of flesh and bones is primarily an aggregate of parts. As I have pointed out earlier, in this way the Aristotelian not only goes against Aristotle himself but also inflates the number of entities in the world by duplicating entities. Second, she may choose to say that there is only one primary substance; while the primary substance is the ox, sometimes it is useful to focus on its potentialities rather than on primary substance; the case of Cook Ding is such an example.

This latter view, however, has two disadvantages in comparison with Zhuang Zi's view. First, for Aristotle, matter cannot exist without form and potentiality cannot exist without actuality. If the pack of flesh and bones is merely a potentiality, it cannot exist actually. This is obviously untrue. It is not the case that the pack of flesh and bones is actualized as flesh and bones only after the ox is killed. It is a pack of flesh and bones even while the ox is still alive. For we would say that after the ox is killed, it is the *same* pack of flesh and bones that remains. For Cook Ding, the aggregate of parts is a real being that does not depend on anything else. Zhuang Zi's account, therefore, works better here. Second and more important, treating the pack of flesh and bones merely as potentiality by the Aristotelian account, we can only approach the aggregate of parts through the ox. It is an indirect approach. In contrast, Zhuang Zi's account enables us to directly approach the entity as the aggregate

of parts. Because the entity is really a pack of flesh and bones, instead of taking the entity *as* a pack of flesh and bones for convenience, we take the entity as the entity in its real being. In other words, we treat it as a pack of flesh and bones because it itself is an aggregate of parts. Thus, Zhuang Zi's metaphysics provides a suitable foundation for his practical philosophy, and the latter reinforces the plausibility of his metaphysics.

Transformation of the Butterfly

The third contrast between Aristotle and Zhuang Zi on the matter of "being" is found in their views as to whether the same entity can survive a substance sortal concept change. Substance sortal concepts are such concepts as "ox" and "horse." Such concepts designate Aristotelian substances. Going through a substance sortal concept change would mean becoming a different kind of substance. The question here is whether an entity can retain its identity through such a change.

Aristotle links an entity's essence to its species: "Essence, then, will belong to nothing which is not a species of a genus, but only to a species of a genus."³⁴ For an entity, to maintain what it is, to possess its essence, is to belong to the species to which it actually belongs. Therefore, ceasing to belong to its species amounts to ceasing to possess its essence, which amounts to the destruction of the entity. This means that no entity can survive a substance sortal concept change.

This Aristotelian view is very influential in contemporary debates over the issue of identity. For instance, David Wiggins, a contemporary Aristotelian, holds that the substance sortal or kind concept into which an entity falls is essential for the entity's identity. Namely, for an x and any kind f , if f is a substance kind, then if x belongs to f , x always belongs to f , in other words, "to be, for such a thing just is to comply with this ultimate or near ultimate concept f ."³⁵ For example, the entity is an ox. It is the same entity as long as it is an ox and thereby falls under that same substance sortal concept of "ox." Accordingly, when an entity no longer falls under the same substance sortal concept, the entity is no longer the same entity. In this way, the concepts of primary substance, essence, and necessity are linked. The entity is primarily an ox, it is essentially

an ox, and it is necessarily an ox. As a primary substance, the entity cannot be the same entity without being an ox.

Zhuang Zi again disagrees. In *Zhuang Zi* we have a story of his butterfly dream:

Last night Zhuang Zhou 庄周 dreamt he was a butterfly. Spirits soaring, he was a butterfly, and did not know about Zhou. When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Zhou with all his wits about him. He does not know whether he is Zhou who dreams he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some difference; this is what is meant by the transformations of things 物化.³⁶

Here Zhuang Zi suggests that it could be that he is Zhuang Zi (Zhou) who dreams he is a butterfly or that he is a butterfly that dreams he is Zhuang Zi. He might never know which but, in either case, he would be the same individual. Losing his species status as a human does not mean destruction, but a different way of the being of the same individual. That is, it is not necessary that he is a man but not a butterfly. He might be a butterfly and still maintain his identity as the same individual.

If an entity can survive a substance category change and remain the same individual as Zhuang Zi believes, one might want to press further by asking “the same what?” To this question neither “the same man” nor “the same butterfly” can be the right answer. Even “the same animal” would not do it, because we normally do not consider a man and a butterfly the same animal. Zhuang Zi, however, does not follow this way of thinking. He does not deny that there is some difference between being a human and being a butterfly. But he believes that, from the viewpoint of the Tao, the difference only shows “the transformation of things.” In Zhuang Zi, the transformation of things takes place when the boundary between “this” and “that” is dissolved and the oneness of the world is revealed.³⁷ In such a state, whether he is a human or a butterfly does not matter much not only because from the viewpoint of the Tao, everything in the world belongs to the oneness of the Tao, but also because this could be two ways of being the same self. The notion of the transformation of things becomes more plausible in the light of Zhuang Zi’s view on the unity of the “that” and the “this” of the same entity. He would reject that there is essence and that the identity of

an entity is determined by anything like essence. Accordingly, to say an entity is essentially or primarily a man or a butterfly is already to be misled. For him an entity can be both a “this” and a “that”; it may remain the same entity while transforming from one category into another.

This view is probably the most difficult to accept for those who are accustomed to the Aristotelian way of thinking. It is, however, an extension to the temporal or chronological dimension of what Zhuang Zi has said about the simultaneous coincidence of different ways of an entity’s being. The view that a thing may survive a substance category change is grounded in traditions of Chinese thought. In Chinese classic mythology, we are told again and again that an individual maintains its identity after going through substance category changes. For example, the Monkey Sun 孙悟空 in *The Journey to the West* 西游记 is said to come from agate and to be able to change itself into seventy-two varieties. It can be a fish or a temple, an old man or a young girl. Yet it is the same Monkey Sun. Its identity as that individual entity transcends any particular category with which the entity is associated. The hero in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦, Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉, is said to have been transformed from a piece of jade. The heroin of *The Romance of the White Snake* 白蛇传 is said to be in the process of transforming from a white snake into a beautiful woman. This is hardly a real argument for Zhuang Zi and against Aristotle. It suggests, however, that in this culture it is not inconceivable for an entity to maintain its identity through category changes. On the contrary, such kind of transformability is deeply seated in people’s thinking.

Suppose at time t_1 an entity is a member of a species S , and at time t_2 it ceases to be an s and becomes an a . After t_2 we can point to the entity and say “it used to be (or was) an s at t_1 but now it is no longer an s but an a .” This sentence makes perfect sense. In order for the sentence to make sense the two “it’s” must refer to the same thing. What is “it”? Zhuang Zi would say it cannot be an either/or and it has to be both. For example, in the case of the ox, it is that which is both an ox and a pack of flesh and bones. This intuition would support Zhuang Zi when he told his story of the dream, although he did not go further to give an argument for it.

In Zhuang Zi, the question how “this” (substance) and “that” (substance) are identical does not arise. If it is asked how “this” way of being and “that” way of being are identical, the answer is simply

that they are not identical. But the entity that has both ways of being is self-identical. It is the same entity. This view of being fits well into the picture depicted by contemporary physics. At the micro-level of the world, there is no ultimate substance-brick of the world. What are particles are also energy. To ask for the substance or primary being of the world is futile. It is no more particles than energy-packets; nor more energy-packets than particles. It is both. The fact that we are more comfortable with the idea that it is particles is not a legitimate reason for us to take particles as primary substances and energy-packets as secondary.

From the above discussion, we can see that, although Zhuang Zi did not provide a systematic metaphysical theory as Aristotle did, he nevertheless indicated an alternative metaphysics. Perhaps the biggest difference between Zhuang Zi and Aristotle on being is that, while Aristotle sees things as primary being or substances, Zhuang Zi does not accept this notion. For Zhuang Zi, things have their ways of being. A thing can be a "this" and a "that." While being a "this" is a way for it to be, being a "that" is another way of its being. Both "this" and "that" are different ways for the same entity to be. Thus, from his point of view, not only is the world a world of diversity, but also the being of an entity is a diversity. One thing we can learn from Zhuang Zi is to open our mind to the diversity of the being of entities, and allow an entity to have both "this" and "that," and possibly any number of ways, as its real being.

One-Only versus One-Many Identity

Zhuang Zi's ontology of midsized objects thus may be called an aspect/perspective ontology.³⁸ It is the view that the identity of an entity consists in its aspects, namely, in its ways of being in the world, and each of these ways of being is contextually situated and can only be presented in perspective when we approach it. Therefore the identity of any entity always consists in a synthesis of its various ways of being. This ontology is shared by Chinese philosophers of various schools.

Even though the Confucians, largely preoccupied with ethico-political philosophy, have expressed little interest in discussing metaphysics of midsized entities, they do accord with Zhuang Zi in this regard. Confucius was quoted in *The Book of Change* 易经 (*Yi*