

# Introduction

When it comes to expounding the truth of the world, are we to speak of the beings therein in the singular or the plural? If we go one step further and ask our question of the universe, will its cosmogony be colored by constancy or flux? Should we regard the cosmos and the myriad things therein as a constant singularity, a dynamic constancy, or a multiplicity in flux? What is at issue in these questions is a particular form of dialectics, one that involves how we define what *is* and what *is not*. One cannot stop there, however, for said dialectics must also account for how the *is* and the *is not* interact with that which *is beyond*. This last point has been a source of rich debate for philosophers and theologians alike insofar as the issue of absolutism creeps into the picture once we take the *beyond* or Ultimate as an entity whose standing is removed from the *is* and *is not*. Indeed, how we prioritize the *is* and the *is not* in a cosmogony of Ultimacy directly influences the ontological status we assign them.

On this point, common sense would have us believe that what *is* exists while what *is not* does not. Accordingly, to assume that the *is not* has ontological priority over the *is* will lead to a nihilistic consumption of the *is* by the *is not*. Thus the *is* holds priority over the *is not* because it turns the latter into a thing during the act of announcing itself.<sup>1</sup> This line of thinking has been the standard-bearer since the time of ancient Greece and is indicative of what Nicolai Hartmann poignantly labels “old ontology.” Hartmann thus calls for a “new ontology” whereby being is no longer thought of as an immobile opposite to non-being but persists in a state of flux; it is, in other words, an ontology that takes into account the being of becoming.<sup>2</sup> Other calls for a new ontology can be seen in the writings of David Bohm<sup>3</sup> and those who are beholden to an ontology of all beings in light of the destructive domination of human culture.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the division between old and new theories of ontology, the conundrum that belies us is how to envision the ground of the world in

such a way that it is neither elusory (i.e., mystical) nor dependent upon assumptions (i.e., mythical). What is more, if we want to avoid radicalizing the relationship between being as the *is* and non-being as the *is not*, we are either forced to introduce a nihilistic supposition or simply abrogate one term in favor of the other. Western philosophy is the source of this dilemma insofar as it was the ancient Greeks who chose to nominalize the *is not* instead of seeing it as possessing normative value. The result of this decision was to define the *is not* as either an absolute nothingness—a substitute for an existent form—or an estranged otherness. The same cannot be said, however, for the philosophical traditions of Asia and, in the case of this book, ancient Chinese Daoism.

In China's high antiquity, the Shang dynasty (16th–11th centuries BCE) took the world to be under the purview of *shangdi* 上帝, the supreme deity. By the time we reach the Zhou dynasty (11th–3rd centuries BCE), however, this worldview had fallen by the wayside, replaced by a cosmology of heaven (*tian* 天). Heaven (lit. "sky") was a realm of immeasurable power and creativity while earth (*di* 地), the domain of living things, lacked such characteristics. This is why the ethical-political models of ancient China, and the individuals that epitomized them, strove to emulate the way of heaven and not that of earth. The heaven/earth dyad remained the dominant cosmological model throughout the Zhou but toward its end in the Warring States period, Daoism challenged its entrenchment by offering a cosmogonist model based upon Dao 道 (ultimate reality). Given Dao surpasses heaven and earth in terms of its creative potential, a new conceptual dyad was developed to explain this occurrence: non-being and being. Unlike the ancient Greeks, Daoism sees non-being as complimentary to being, not its negating foil; it is a belief that led to furious debates in the Wei-Jin period (3rd–5th centuries CE) over whether things are born from non-being or being.

This book examines the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi 莊子 and his cosmogonist system of Dao, *wu* 無 (nothingness), and *you* 有 (being). Its purpose is to demonstrate wherein nothingness can act as the onto-cosmological fabric of Dao while serving as the medium through which it instantiates itself in the myriad things of the world. Much philosophical ink has been spilt over the nature and limitations of human self-knowing and whether or not these claims to truth are self-derived or the result of a higher, divine source. Knowledge of Dao, however, does not reveal the being of Dao but is rather a metaphorical expression of how Dao sustains and nourishes itself. The problem is that expressions of this nature cannot

be grasped or transmitted using conventional epistemological norms. All we can do is intuit, situate, and resituate them against an ever-changing reality.

Very little is known of Zhuangzi's personal life other than he hailed from the state of Song 宋 and reputedly left behind a work of one-hundred-thousand words in fifty-two chapters. According to the *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 史記), Zhuangzi lived during the time of King Hui of Liang 梁惠王 and King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王. He is also said to have turned down an offer to serve at the court of King Wei of Chu 楚威王. In light of such historical evidence, as well as other indications scattered throughout the *Zhuangzi*, we can conservatively claim that Zhuangzi lived from 375–300 BCE.<sup>5</sup> As for the text itself, much has been made of its redaction from fifty-two to thirty-three chapters by the Jin dynasty commentator Guo Xiang 郭象 (fl. 312 CE). Guo was responsible for collating these chapters into their current sequence, doing so according to the sectional designators of Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous chapters in place since the Han dynasty. This, however, does not testify to the state of the *Zhuangzi* before his editorship, a period in which the text varied in terms of sectional classification and actual number of chapters.<sup>6</sup>

Two of the earliest known commentators to the *Zhuangzi*—Cui Zhuan 崔譔 (fl. 290 CE) and Xiang Xiu 向秀 (ca. 227–272 CE)—used a version of the text containing twenty-seven chapters, divided into Inner and Outer sections; what is more, both men differed in their opinion as to which chapters should be classified as Inner and which Outer. All of this testifies to a text whose structural framework was fluid at the time and subject to debate. And yet, many of the *Zhuangzi* commentaries referred to in this book use Guo Xiang's redacted text, not the fifty-two chapter text of Sima Biao 司馬彪 (ca. 227–272 CE), or the truncated text adopted by Cui Zhuan and Xiang Xiu. Bearing in mind such intratextual fluidity, I will refrain from making explicit references to the categories of Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous chapters. To this end, passages and concepts attributable to Zhuangzi will not be differentiated from those written by his disciples or persons imitating his philosophical spirit; rather, I will refer to Zhuangzi and his text interchangeably.

Although only one Chinese character is translatable into non-being and nothingness (*wu* 無), this book argues that they have separate but co-dependent functions: non-being denotes the cessation of ontic being (i.e., death) while nothingness symbolizes “absentia” forms of existence (e.g., trace, shadow, void, hollow, etc.) on the one hand, and the abode of Dao on the other hand. *Wu* thus plays a pivotal role in giving the myriad

things of the world their ontic and ontological value. That is, we cannot know what *is* unless we also know what *is not*, nor can we discuss the nature of being while excluding non-being. Given this, the Western definition of ontology is suddenly problematic. By rejecting human being as the authoritative form of existence, Daoism proffers a philosophy that speaks to non-being and being collectively. However, since Dao *qua* ultimate reality is neither non-being nor being but that which allows for the possibility of both, its creative potential must be actualized in a realm that permeates the universe through and through—nothingness.

Where Western philosophy sees nothingness as either an absolute negation or a path to nihilism, Daoism takes it as an integral aspect of existence as such. Using nothingness to investigate Dao *qua* ultimate reality not only articulates the metamorphosis of nothingness into being, it allows us to overcome the desire to refer to such movement as *creatio ex-nihilo* by viewing it as trans-ontological. In other words, the nothingness of Daoism is not an absolute void out of which things magically appear but is the substratum around which life is constructed. Our interpretation of nothingness thus entails viewing it not as a thing of autonomous essence but as the primal and inseparable core of being, and it is for this reason that I have taken to speaking of Daoism as a tradition of meontology.

Given that Zhuangzi lived two and a half millennia ago, the concepts and terminology he uses will at times appear unconventional. Furthermore, the topics covered in his text are not dissimilar from those seen in Western philosophy (e.g., death, time, ethics, knowledge, freedom, etc.); it is his approaching them via nothingness which makes establishing analogies of comparison less than straightforward. There are, of course, Western philosophers and theologians for whom nothingness has a role to play; however, our goal in reading the *Zhuangzi* is to illuminate the Chinese rendition of nothingness and ask whether or not it can stand as an ontological entity in its own right. No matter which tradition one aligns with, the content of this book transgresses intellectual and cultural borders, revealing the ways in which nothingness is able to extend beyond the realm of human being to that of the world at large. Only when we are willing to abandon our self-imposed status of superiority and embrace the humbleness of being one within the multitude can humanity see the profundity of the world in which we live.

To this end, chapter 1 is devoted to explicating the *Zhuangzi*'s definition and implementation of nothingness. Additionally, it is responsible for delving into the connection that binds nothingness and being to that which makes their reality possible—Dao. From this emerges a relationship

in which non-being underlies being and Dao is supported by nothingness. This trio of terms is not hierarchical in the traditional sense, for they align themselves in such a way that there is movement up and down, and comingling in-between. Where this activity occurs is in the primordial One, a state of undifferentiated wholeness in which things in their original, natural state lack names and other defining attributes. The One is thus a realm from which being emerges and to which non-being returns. Without the discovery of this interweaving penetration in what is otherwise known as chaos (*hundun* 渾沌), Daoist cosmology would appear incoherent and contradictory.

Knowing what nothingness is and how it operates in the world, chapter 2 sets out to uncover the invisible traces of the One by way of discussion of the Thing. The idea behind using the Thing to elucidate the One, is to avoid any connotation of the latter in a theological sense. As the One is a state of indistinguishable unity whereby beings have yet to be divided into their myriad forms via the assignment of defining characteristics, the One acts as a holding ground for all ancestral Things. When ontological being becomes known as such, this is when it leaves the One and enters reality as ontic being. In other words, each Thing is the creational root of all lesser things in its stream and the branching-off of these lesser things is what populates the world. The chapter ends by discussing a few well-known stories in the *Zhuangzi* such as cook Ding, the catcher of cicadas, and the maker of belt-buckles, as practical applications of mastering the art of returning to Dao in order to conjoin in oneness with the world.

Chapter 3 investigates the temporal nature of Dao, arguing against the traditional conception of time as a series of static, measurable points, as well as the notion that time is bound to the being of man. These arguments can be made because the *Zhuangzi* neither subscribes to the notion that death renders time impermanent nor that time is restricted to a so-called lived time of the here and now. For the *Zhuangzi*, Dao exists beyond the realm of temporality, precluding it from the dialectics of infinite and finite, impermanent and eternal. This is not to say that the text defines time as temporally relative; rather, time exists on a multi-dimensional plane in which the oneness of things becomes the ground for temporal experience. The goal is thus not to flee time in light of a supposed nihilism that is our death but to relinquish our need for temporal duration so as to return to the domain of Dao. What we will come to realize, however, is that this domain does not lie with the presence of being but the restfulness of nothingness.

Chapter 4 shifts our attention away from temporal *ekstasis* toward the embracement of a non-temporal praxis of uselessness. Resting in

uselessness is more than just idleness or being non-accountable—it points to self-preservation through life prolongation. Seeing the time of our lives as but an extensional protrusion of the infinite non-time of Dao, to toil away with worry and concern over its beginning and end is to force this protrusion to break free from the substrate of nothingness. To ignore the role of nothingness is to abandon Dao's nourishment and when this happens, our inborn nature becomes corrupt and artificial, leading to injury or premature death. This chapter thus employs Laozi's analogy of the clay vessel and its useless inner-void, together with Zhuangzi's old tree, to demonstrate the inherent use of that which is perceived to be useless. It further argues that such useful uselessness was used by Zhuangzi as a means to criticize humanity's cherishment of calculative thinking. The best way to experience the genuineness of life is hence to follow the natural spontaneity of Dao.

Chapter 5 elucidates how one can emulate the characteristics of Dao (still, empty, quietude) by mastering the art of forgetfulness. All told, three stages of forgetting are present in the *Zhuangzi*: epistemological, phenomenological, and cosmological. For Zhuangzi, forgetting is not so much about the recollection of memories lost and in need of re-finding, but learning how to let things be themselves. Through forgetting the trace of things, one can forget their names and images. By letting-go of things via sitting in forgetfulness and composing the mind, one brings coherency to the world. Thus true forgetting is to let go of heaven and earth such that one enters the realm where even non-being and being cease to exist. In this non-temporal, non-spatial realm, there is only the mystery of Dao and it is here where spiritual freedom abounds. At the time when such transmogrification is complete, all that remains is a spontaneous kernel, one not very different from Dao. Herein we are free in an onto-cosmological sense, a freedom whose similitude with the things of the world results in the most genuinely natural form of existence possible.

Chapter 6 offers a discourse not only on the Daoist idea of freedom but argues that for the *Zhuangzi*, freedom is none other than the meontological harmony of things. There is no such thing as individual freedom because Zhuangzi states that we need to awaken to the fact that within the ultimate reality of Dao, we are but one being amongst a multitude. In order to better convey this reasoning, the text speaks of three capacities of heaven: differentiation, measure, and harmony. These three capacities constitute the perfect virtue of Dao, one sheltered by the mysteriousness of nothingness. Given that the sage takes as his abode the tranquil silence

of nothingness, he knows of neither life nor death, right nor wrong. His freedom is not dependent on any one thing and so it is the freedom of non-freedom. To be free in nothingness is thus to let go of the world and in letting go, the sage attains his returning to the One. Returning to the One is hence to unite with Dao thereby marking the completion of Zhuangzi's cosmological circle.