

The Question of Freedom

The concept of freedom, both metaphysical and political, is possibly one of the most elusive concepts in the history of philosophy, and it has definitely been a controversial one in relation to China. There is no literal translation for it in classical Chinese, and the Chinese word for it, *zìyóu* 自由 (lit., self-cause), was not treated as a philosophical term until much later when Chinese liberal scholars such as Liang Qichao and Yan Fu promoted it as a political ideal.¹ This fact has thus led to the dominant view that this notion has never really developed in China, at least not until it was imported from the Anglo-European world. We shall go back to that claim later, but for now it is worth pondering this issue in a philological sense. Does it only occur in largely different languages that have different linguistic ancestries, such as English and Chinese? If so, what does that say about the kinds of issues each were concerned with? We will try to answer the latter question in the next section, but the former question recalls the very philosophical French term *jouissance*. In English, the literal translation is “enjoyment,” yet the latter is not really treated as a strongly philosophical term. Why is this so? Unlike in the English world, France had a strong tradition of psychoanalysis, which transformed a word that has now entered conventional language into something philosophical, related to desire, pleasure, sublimation, and even suffering.² That said, do Americans not experience *jouissance* if they have no word for it? This would be a strange argument. Similarly, harmony is a very important concept in Chinese philosophy,³ but it does not really carry much philosophical meaning in Anglo-European languages. This does not mean, however, that exploring what harmony

means—in a philosophical sense—in Anglo-European philosophies is not a worthwhile task. Of course, we could not deny that there is a reason why certain terms are treated philosophically in certain cultures, as each time and place have their own unique concerns. However, this is the same for the concept of freedom, yet there are those who claim that freedom, specifically the freedom that in the liberal sense and as a basis for human rights is a universal value that China should adopt for itself. I do not disagree. Such an understanding of freedom, as we will see in the next section, however, is also a culturally situated one. Nonetheless, we live in an increasingly global world, and “freedom” is something that many global and international institutions seek to protect and/or champion. As such, it is worth having a conversation about, examining, and perhaps reshaping according to our needs, or to everyone’s needs.

Nonetheless, there are those who argue that such a demand is a remnant of “Western” imperialism and chauvinism, because the Chinese have historically developed characteristically distinct traditions that had led to championing other values as more significant than, for instance, democracy. This is not helped by the fact that there are scholars who do say that freedom did not and does not exist as a concept in China, such as contemporary sinologist W. J. F. Jenner, who suggests that—despite its extensive cultural history—“the Chinese world” only came to realize the existence of such a concept as political freedom due to armed intervention by the West.⁴ In the same work, Jenner only builds his claim from here and continues to say that “colonial rules gave many opportunities for new social, economic and political values and institutions to emerge.”⁵ He claims, moreover, that authority had always had a primal importance in the history of China and blames Confucianism for this, saying that “the need to remove an extremely bad ruler or, even more drastically, to overthrow an incurably decadent dynasty is one about which Confucian thinkers from Mencius onwards have felt very uncomfortable.”⁶ Framed this way, it is thus no wonder that an opposing position that comes from the same premise of difference also emerges as pushback from the former view. For instance, Daniel Bell points out that the ideal of harmony, which Confucians value most significantly, is shared among many civilizations including those in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America; that the wider array of world cultures, ethical systems, and religions have prioritized the value of harmony above values like freedom, which the West supposes as universal, and that since Western societies are the outliers in terms of assuming freedom as a universal value, their

devaluation of harmony as an ideal is controversial in the rest of the world.⁷ Because of such differences, David Kelly notes that this denial of freedom as a concern in Chinese philosophical traditions is a “wedge issue,” meaning that there can possibly be no point of overlap between what “Westerners” regard as “universal values” and what scholars such as Bell regard as “Chinese values.” Nonetheless, Kelly examines a few modern Chinese thinkers who advocate for freedom in order to highlight “China’s potential contribution to global social theory as a very live and fruitful field of inquiry.”⁸ While I share Kelly’s goal, as well as agree with him when he points out the essentializing tendencies of Bell’s position, I find myself uncomfortable with his enthusiasm for absolute or universal values that are based on liberal standards, as Jenner seems to take for granted. In fact, not only is Jenner wrong in claiming that freedom is something that only “Western” colonialism has brought to China as a sort of gift, but he is also making an erroneous claim when he purports that Confucians, especially Mencius, feel uncomfortable dethroning despots. As Tu Weiming points out:

The significance of the concept of virtue (*te* 德), which features prominently in Confucian political thought, is that since “Heaven sees as the people see and Heaven hears as the people hear,” the real guarantee for the well-being of the rulership lies in its acceptable performance rather than in its preconceived mandate. *The right of the people to rebel against a tyrannical dynasty*, the right of the aristocracy to remove an unjust imperial household, the right of the imperial clansmen to replace an unsuitable king, and the right of the bureaucrats to remonstrate with a negligent ruler are all sanctioned by a deep-rooted conviction that political leadership essentially manifests itself in moral persuasion and the transformative power of a dynasty depends mainly on the ethical quality of those who govern.⁹

Indeed, China has had a long history of revolutions,¹⁰ from as early as the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), to the Qin (221–206 BCE), all throughout the dynasties stretching to the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), which had the famous Taiping Rebellion and Boxer Rebellion, up until the recent ones under the Republic of China (1912–1949). Among these rebellions is possibly one of the earliest peasant rebellions in the world,

the Yellow Turban Rebellion or *Huangjin zhi luan* 黃巾之亂 (184–205 CE), which had ties with religious Daoism. In the early Zhou dynasty, moreover, the “Mandate of Heaven,” or the idea that a ruler’s legitimacy is sanctioned by Heaven as manifested by the people, has been used to justify ousting tyrannical rulers, as in the justified overthrow of the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) by the Zhou. More particularly during the Wei through Jin (266–420 AD) dynasties, there had been a unique wave of individualist thinkers,¹¹ as well as the emergence of one whom Étienne Balazs refers to as “China’s first political anarchist,”¹² Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言 (ca. 200–400 CE).¹³

As such, while it is true that there is no direct equivalent in Chinese to the term “freedom” in classical Chinese philosophy, as shall be discussed in more detail later, it would suffice for now to say that it would be strange, if not simply erroneous, to claim that China did not know of political freedom, or at least had some idea of it—even if not corresponding to the liberal idea—before it had any exposure to Anglo-European traditions. Nevertheless, I do not wish to establish here that the Confucian alternative of freedom or a Chinese value of freedom that is similar to a liberal one had existed in ancient China, nor do I wish to claim that there is a singular unique notion of freedom that Chinese philosophy puts forward, because there is a plurality of arsenals from which the concept of freedom—in the basic sense of self-determination—is ripe for interpretation. I will cover such plurality shortly, but for now, it is more important to note that this book demonstrates that, notwithstanding the diachronic evolution of languages and terms, the concept of freedom is hardly a liberal invention, and so perhaps if we are to strive for more inclusive frameworks of freedom, then we need to reexamine and reshape this ideal in order to address the different needs, concerns, and circumstances of different peoples.

In order to achieve such an aim, I examine a specific Chinese philosopher, who may perhaps present us with a fruitful resource to better understanding and evaluating our notions of freedom, both ontological¹⁴ and political. This work thus explores the potential of Guo Xiang, a commentator and philosopher from the Jin dynasty (266–420), and his philosophical enterprise to contribute insights toward a comprehensive account of freedom. More specifically, this book zeroes in on his notion of self-realization (*zide* 自得), using this as an anchor to explore its surrounding concepts of independence, agency, and causality (among others), as well as the implications of these unique ideas for how we understand

the concept of freedom. Emerging at a chaotic but also syncretic time in the development of Chinese philosophy, his philosophical enterprise introduces a unique notion of freedom that is largely ontological and epistemological in nature yet shows considerable potential for deriving social and political aspects to this same concept of freedom. I suggest thus that Guo Xiang's philosophy allows us to conceive of a type of freedom that is as metaphysically necessary as it is contingent, and where freedom, while also having the radical potential to shed light upon the question of freedom in the sociopolitical arena, is both individual and collective. This is because unlike our dominant notions of freedom, Guo Xiang establishes an ontological and epistemological system that places the self as part of the empirical world of radical causality. By "freedom," moreover, I refer here to the basic understanding of it as self-determination and necessity (i.e., uncaused) that, as I shall demonstrate, is inevitably intertwined with freedom as self-realization. From the perspective of a philosopher like Guo Xiang, for whom the self has no fixed metaphysical grounds, what then might self-determination and self-realization look like? This is the question that we are going to pursue.

Moreover, it is important to note that for Guo Xiang, like many other Chinese philosophers, as we shall later discuss, freedom is not a given, as it is in Rousseau, wherein "man is born free."¹⁵ Ideas develop differently in different historical contexts, and it is so with freedom, which does not emerge in identical ways through different traditions of thought. Although there are some dominant overlaps with the conception of freedom as self-determination among differing traditions, there are also differences and debates that are unique within traditions.

While Guo Xiang's notion of freedom can indeed be considered in terms of self-determination, I would like to demarcate his conception of freedom from the mainstream understanding of it in Anglo-European discourse. This is because Anglo-European discourse on freedom is deeply embedded in the problem of free will. While it is true that the free will problem has different concerns than that of political freedom, the concerns of ontological freedom—as this book will demonstrate—permeate the origins of our mainstream ideas on freedom.

In what follows, I show how the free will problem has developed throughout history, its relation to political freedom, and why, even though it cannot be applied to a Chinese philosophical context, that might not be a bad thing nor does it imply that there are no conceptions of freedom in Chinese philosophical discourse. I demonstrate the latter by surveying

different Chinese philosophical conceptions and terms used to conceptualize Chinese notions of freedom, but I ultimately explain why looking at Guo Xiang for a reconstruction of a more holistic and comprehensive account of freedom, built on a different ontology, is likely to prove more fruitful.

A Brief History of the Free Will Problem and Its Metaphysical Foundations

Famous philosopher of freedom Daniel Dennett notes that free will is “an almost exclusively Western preoccupation.”¹⁶ As noted by Wenzel and Marchal later in this section, this is acknowledged by most philosophers. Political freedom, however, that is the absence of oppression, remains to be treated as a universal problem. Philosophers often distinguish metaphysical freedom from political freedom, and even Dennett himself, conceding the existence of free will simply for the fact that nihilistic determinism is a negligible position,¹⁷ tells us: “There are real threats to human freedom, but they are not metaphysical. There is political bondage, coercion, the manipulation inducible by the dissemination of misinformation, and the ‘forced move’ desperation of poverty and hunger.”¹⁸ While this split might be convenient for philosophers, I argue that this is not so simple and the two are, more often than not, not mutually exclusive. In fact, the concept of free will serves a very specific function in the development of Anglo-European philosophy. It is closely tied and inseparable to the problem of moral responsibility. There are different accounts about where the free will “problem” originated, but it was, originally, framed as a question of whether freedom of choice, and therefore moral responsibility, was compatible with fate, and more specifically, the foreknowledge of the gods and their divine providence. Democritus (460–370 BCE), for instance, desired to take control from the gods, and to challenge the idea that it is the gods who define our fate. Instead, he wanted to rest the responsibility of man’s life within himself, saying: “People ask the gods for health in their prayers, but do not realize that the control of their health lies with them; through lack of self-control they act in opposition to it and so themselves betray their health to their desires.”¹⁹ Democritus famously favored the physical world over that of the gods, seeking to assign more responsibility to humans rather than the gods through his materialist philosophy. Even though he never outright denied the gods’ existence,²⁰ Democritus made the first

bold step toward the insistence on acquiring knowledge only through empirical observation. Ironically, however, Democritus instead came up with a theory that is closer to modern-day physical determinism²¹ than being able to ascribe moral responsibility to humans. One of the more well-known claims of the atomists, the school to which Democritus belonged, is perhaps understood in Leucippus's description of fate in *On Mind*, where he says that "no thing happens in vain, but all things happen for a reason and from necessity."²² Nevertheless, Democritus's attempt to ascribe responsibility to humans had, in turn, influenced Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and a generation after, Epicurus (341–270 BCE).

It was Epicurus, according to Pamela Huby,²³ who was finally able to provide a first account of a solution to the free will "problem." Huby says that Epicurus was able to do this because "he took over the atomic theory of Democritus almost unchanged, but introduced one significant new point, the swerve of the atoms, a slight change of direction that could occur without any cause."²⁴ Cicero (106–43 BCE), in his *De Fato*, criticizes this but also gives us our closest account of Epicurus's attempt to salvage free will from the determinism of the atomists. He says:

But Epicurus thinks that the necessity of fate can be avoided by the swerve of an atom. And so a third kind of motion appears, in addition to weight and collision, when an atom swerves by a minimal interval (he calls it an *elachiston* [smallest]); and he is forced to concede, in fact if not in his words, that this swerve is uncaused. For an atom does not swerve because it is struck by another atom. For how can one be struck by another if the atomic bodies are moving, owing to their weight, downward in straight lines, as Epicurus thinks? It follows that, if one atom is never displaced by another, then one atom cannot even contact another.

From which it is also concluded that if an atom exists and it does swerve, it does so without cause. Epicurus introduced this line of reasoning because he was afraid that if an atom always moved by its natural and necessary heaviness, we would have no freedom, since our mind would be moved in such a way that it would be compelled by the motion of atoms. Democritus, the founder of atomism, preferred to accept that all things happened by necessity than to tear from the atomic bodies their natural motions.²⁵

While there is no clear account of how exactly this swerve accounts for free will, we know that Epicurus adopted the materialism of Democritus in order to ascribe responsibility back to man. Cyril Bailey, in his book *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, says that because Democritus wanted to get rid of the notion of divine guidance, his materialistic atomism had to compromise his ethical inclinations in order to make room for the logical uniformity and rigorous science of cause and effect, even if it had to lead to strict determinism. Epicurus, however, was not willing to make the same compromise, but he did not want to abandon his materialism either.²⁶ Epicurus thus saw it as necessary to continue to include the existence of the gods in order to defend the existence of free will and responsibility. He does this by saying that the gods do see our future, but that they simply do not care.²⁷ Thus, we ought to be held responsible for our actions, and our fates depend, to a point, on our own actions. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, he says:

As to [Fate], introduced by some as the mistress of all, “he is scornful, saying rather that some things happen of necessity,” others by chance, and others by our own agency, and that he sees that necessity is not answerable [to anyone], that chance is unstable, while what occurs by our own agency is autonomous, and that it is to this that praise and blame are attached. For it would be better to follow the stories told about the gods than to be a slave to the fate of the natural philosophers. For the former suggests a hope of escaping bad things by honouring the gods, but the latter involves an inescapable and merciless necessity.²⁸

However, Susanne Bobzien²⁹ challenges the claim that Epicurus “discovered” the free will “problem,” and sure enough, there are many other contenders as to where the problem originated. Nonetheless, such early formulations were all still in relation to whether a divine being controls our choices, and if so, to what extent. For instance, Michael Frede claims that it is actually in Epictetus, during the first century CE, that we find the first notion of a free will.³⁰ Meanwhile, Dihle claims that “the notion of will, as it is used as a tool of analysis and description in many philosophical doctrines from the early Scholastics to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, was invented by St. Augustine.”³¹ On one hand, Epictetus says that this ability *to do otherwise* is a faculty shared with us by Zeus. According to Epictetus, Zeus would have said: “We have given thee a

certain portion of ourself, this faculty of choice and refusal, of desire and aversion, or, in a word, the faculty which makes use of external impressions.”³² On the other hand, Dihle tells us that St. Augustine, basing his conception of free will on the belief that man was created according to the image of God, as manifested in the existence of a human soul that was, as it were, “the obvious interpretation of Genesis 1:27 for a Roman or Greek intellectual about A.D. 400.”³³ Either way, the notion of free will as framed by Epictetus and Augustine alike, pushes forward the claim that we are free precisely because we are made in the image of god. This then allows for a singular event that gives birth to our independent will.

At this point, it would not be a stretch to say that the origins and emergence of a concept of free will as we know it today in Anglo-European scholarship has always had its roots in theological inquiry, guided by anthropomorphic versions of a god or gods. Most apparently, the concept of free will gets picked up and brought to the fore by monotheistic religions, specifically in theodicy. In Christianity, for instance, God is supposed to be omnipotent and omniscient, but also omnibenevolent. However, we see in the Gospels that God would punish humans to be damned in hell for eternity.³⁴ As such, the only way for God to be omnipotent and omniscient, while being omnibenevolent (and not unjust), even while damning humans—the creation of whom He is solely responsible for—is to create a stopgap for the purpose of ascribing blame to humans instead: free will.³⁵ Without this anthropomorphized God, there would have been much less motivation to problematize the issue of human free will, as well as the need to conceive of it as a denaturalized absolute metaphysical faculty for uncaused agency—for starting a new causal chain *ex nihilo* and thus having full responsibility for it—because only if it is truly uncaused can the blame be kept off of God’s shoulders.

It is perhaps for this reason, as previously mentioned, that Dennett points out the problem of free will as “an almost exclusively Western pre-occupation.”³⁶ Yet ultimately, he also points out that “what we want when we want free will is the power to decide our courses of action, and to decide them wisely, in the light of our expectations and desires. We want to be in control of ourselves, and not under the control of others. We want to be agents, capable of initiating, and taking responsibility for, projects and deeds.”³⁷

This need for power, according to Dennett, is a “natural product of our biological endowment, extended and enhanced by our initiation into society.”³⁸ So whether it is the external pull of something akin to

the Greek *moira*, or even *telos*, when we are caused to move in a certain direction beyond our control, or the push of going back to a Christian god that is the precise cause for our free will—it is the power of that metaphysical or ontological ground zero that allows for free will, or in Dennett's words, for the “elbow room,” that we seek. Dennett repackages this problem as scientific, yet acknowledges that this is an exclusively Anglo-European concern. This repackaging thus reflects how a specific idea, borne from a specific context, and serving a specific purpose, can easily be taken for granted as universal, as Dennett does. Moreover, he is not the first philosopher to do this, as there were countless others before him, replacing God with a different metaphysical *logos spermatikos*.

Immanuel Kant is perhaps not only the most famous but also the most influential example of this substitution. He replaces God, as the primal cause for the soul and will, with Reason, saying that “Reason therefore provides laws which are imperatives, that is, *objective laws of freedom*, which tell us *what ought to happen*, although perhaps it never does happen therein differing from *laws of nature*, which relate only to *that which happens*.”³⁹ In other words, freedom as freedom of the will remains as necessity, that is, a primal cause. Metaphysical freedom, which Kant refers to as transcendental freedom, thus is, in a practical sense, “an unconditioned causality which begins to act of itself,”⁴⁰ or “the will’s independence of coercion through sensuous impulses,”⁴¹ which means that it is a *self-determination* of Reason.

Later after Kant, G. W. F. Hegel disagrees with much of Kant’s claims regarding freedom and its compatibility with Nature, but he retains freedom as the freedom of an inherent will, possessed by a rational agent.⁴² If freedom is necessity, and what is necessary is objective, then freedom is an objective Truth or Rationality. This is why Hegel says that “when we hear it said that freedom in general consists in *being able to do as one pleases*, such an idea [*Vorstellung*] can only be taken to indicate a complete lack of intellectual culture [*Bildung des Gedankens*]; for it shows not the least awareness of what constitutes the will which is free in and for itself, or right, or ethics, etc.”⁴³ He endorses, instead, a freedom of will that is, not unlike that of his predecessors whom we have mentioned here, related to a higher and more universal entity. This line of reasoning thus is what allows Hegel to claim: “Man is free, this is certainly the substantial nature of man; and not only is this liberty not relinquished to the state, but it is actually in the state that it is first realized. The freedom of nature, the gift of freedom, is not anything real;

for the state is the first realization of freedom.”⁴⁴ Nonetheless, this *logos spermatikos* or, to borrow a semiotic term, *final signified*, has had many shapes and forms throughout the history of Anglo-European philosophy. From God, Reason, Will, Soul, they are derived from universals, and are transcendent entities outside the world of causality, because to be free means to necessarily be the primary cause, and that can only be possible through a Soul or Will arisen from God or Reason. What this looks like differs and is a cause of debate for many philosophers after these two and those before them, but as we might guess, this becomes quickly problematic after the advent of totalitarian regimes such as the Nazis, with many postmodern philosophers questioning the objectivity of such a Reason with which to align our individual wills.

It is at this point, in this juncture of the historical development of this idea, that we encounter Isaiah Berlin’s brand of liberalism. For Isaiah Berlin, it is precisely this kind of marriage that metaphysical freedom has with the practical and empirical world, that is a threat to our real and concrete political freedoms. In one of his renowned essays, *Historical Inevitability*, he makes the claim that “one of the deepest human desires is to find a unitary pattern in which the whole of experience, past, present and future, actual, possible and unfulfilled, is symmetrically ordered.”⁴⁵ This kind of metaphysical coherence, the promise of the One and final truth, he says, is “an image which has often appeared in the history of mankind, always at moments of confusion and inner weakness.”⁴⁶ Elaborating its dangers, Berlin continues:

It is one of the great alibis, pleaded by those who cannot or do not wish to face the fact of human responsibility, the existence of a limited but nevertheless real area of human freedom, either because they have been too deeply wounded or frightened to wish to return to the traffic of normal life, or because they are filled with moral indignation against the false values and the, to them, repellent moral codes of their own society, or class, or profession, and take up arms against all ethical codes as such, as a dignified means of casting off a morality which is to them, perhaps justifiably, repulsive. Nevertheless, such views, although they may spring from a natural reaction against too much moral rhetoric, are a desperate remedy; those who hold them use history as a method of escape from a world which has, for some reason, grown odious

to them, into a fantasy where impersonal entities avenge their grievances and set everything right, to the greater or lesser discomfiture of their persecutors, real and imaginary. And in the course of this they describe the normal lives lived by men in terms which fail to mark the most important psychological and moral distinctions known to us. This they do in the service of an imaginary science; and, like the astrologers and soothsayers whom they have succeeded, cast up their eyes to the clouds, and speak in immense, unsubstantiated images and similes, in deeply misleading metaphors and allegories, and make use of hypnotic formulae with little regard for experience, or rational argument, or tests of proven reliability. Thereby they throw dust in their own eyes as well as in ours, obstruct our vision of the real world, and further confuse an already sufficiently bewildered public about the relations of morality to politics, and about the nature and methods of the natural sciences and historical studies alike.⁴⁷

Berlin thus associates this kind of historical and scientific determinism⁴⁸ with the traditional belief in God's providence,⁴⁹ which ultimately allows free will through an uncaused cause, whether it be from being shaped in *Imago Dei*, or replacing God as a final signified with new referents such as Rationality, Absolute Knowledge, or even Emancipation. Berlin would repeatedly criticize this hope and dependence on a remote and distant single narrative, finally culminating in his seminal work, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. In this work, he claims that there are two types of liberty: "1) the 'negative' sense, is involved in the answer to the question 'What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?'"⁵⁰; and 2) the *positive sense*, is involved in the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?'"⁵¹ As in much of his works, he goes to lengths to call out different varieties of positive liberty for their inevitable tendencies toward being oppressive and self-contradictory. Berlin argues that positive liberty divides the self into two, the real one and false one, the rational and irrational, and that according to these theories, we must strive toward the real one, because for someone who subscribes to positive liberty, one is free only if one's will is what influences one's life and principles, for

it is in understanding the necessity of things that one wills things to be so, and so “knowledge liberates not by offering us more open possibilities amongst which we can make our choice, but by preserving us from the frustration of attempting the impossible.”⁵² For those who subscribe to positive liberty, moreover, free will is only free if it wills what is true, what is rational, and hence correct. Berlin says that this comes from an overarching metaphysical principle: “This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution.”⁵³ This theologically charged idea of the freedom of the will consists in aligning our will to that final solution, final truth, which some authority wields. Such is the case, Berlin says, when liberty and authority become mutually interrelated (as in the eighteenth century) despite their supposed incompatibility. Thus, the notion of the “rights of man” and its corresponding outlook on society was thought and spoken of at the time as designed by rational laws brought about by nature, history, or even by the “Supreme Being.”⁵⁴

And so, Berlin suggests that against “the absolute values of our primitive past,”⁵⁵ we ought to follow a definition of freedom as negative liberty instead, that is, the freedom to choose according to our pluralistic values. However, in order to make this possible, Berlin seems to preserve the notion of a transcendental self that is exempt from causality. Indeed, Aileen Kelly, in the introduction to Berlin’s book *Russian Thinkers*, says that the idea that penetrates all of Berlin’s works is simply “that men are morally free and are (more often than the determinists who hold the field believe) able to influence events for good or evil through their freely held ideals and convictions.”⁵⁶ This is a conviction that is central to liberalist conceptions of freedom, but unlike John Locke, from whom we get the now-dominant idea of inalienable rights (including liberty) as given by God, Berlin attempts to get rid of the final signified. Yet he nonetheless preserves the immediate referent: the soul or, as it were, the Self—a floating individual emerged from nowhere, in possession of *freely held* ideals and convictions. He does not, in other words, fully abandon transcendence, nor does he give up faith in the Self as inherently valuable and powerful, able to influence the world around, and external to, it. As Daniel Dennett points out, this Self is leftover from an anthropomorphic god, and that “we can and should replace these sacrosanct but brittle traditions with a more naturalistic foundation. It is scary letting go of

such honored precepts as the imagined conflict between determinism and freedom, and the false security of a miracle-working Self or Soul to be the place where the buck stops.”⁵⁷

While this account of the origins of the free will problem is far from comprehensive, it is sufficient to show that it has strongly theological origins rooted in Western philosophical and religious thinking. Thus, it forms itself in the shape of a problem that shouldn't be expected to appear in entirely different traditions and societies that do not rely heavily on anthropomorphic gods, such as that of the Chinese. Of course, it would be naïve to say that, in Chinese culture, there did not exist any such notions of anthropomorphic gods, or even that the mandating force of the world, Heaven (天 *Tian*), was not itself anthropomorphized,⁵⁸ but it had nowhere near the same sense in which Greek and Abrahamic conceptions of god were seen—as “unmoved mover.”⁵⁹ In Chinese culture, even naturalistic manifestations of divine dissatisfaction are often considered to be caused by human choices that are considered to be problematic, and not because a god had Divine plans that only he was capable of comprehending. From this cosmological viewpoint of the Chinese, the self is thus far from being a soul or a transcendental being shaped in the image of a wholly transcendent Knower. Rather, it is generally a relational self that is always already within a material and social world, existing in the midst of a complex network of interconnections.

“Freedom” as framed in the free will problem therefore did not exist in classical Chinese philosophical discourse, as some scholars have already noted,⁶⁰ and so neither was there a word equivalent to freedom. In an article entitled “Chinese Perspectives on Free Will,” Christian Helmut Wenzel and Kai Marchal examine the existence of the notion of free will in Chinese philosophy and suggest that there are discussions of concepts that are related to it, such as “fate, predetermination, agency, moral responsibility, choice, and chance.”⁶¹ As such, if we are willing to expand our mode of inquiry to these problems, they might just contribute to contemporary discussions on free will and moral responsibility. Nonetheless, “the [free will] problem seems to be absent in Chinese thought,”⁶² so they conclude their exploratory study with the suggestion that

we cannot exclude the possibility that free will might not be a real problem at all. Then the Daoist or Confucian account might be more appealing. We should also notice that some of

the questions debated by Western philosophers do not appear to be very meaningful to philosophers in East Asia. Broadly speaking, many Chinese and other East Asians do not share the Western belief in free will. But they often still explain, through the language of *xin*, *xing*, and *ming*, and other terms and ideas, why they feel responsible and ascribe responsibility to others.⁶³

Indeed, I have also tried to suggest here—following Daniel Dennett’s criticism of the “sacrosanct but brittle traditions” surrounding the free will problem—that while there is indeed no discussion of free will in Chinese philosophy, that might not be a bad thing at all, and it certainly does not mean, as some might have us believe, that Chinese philosophers were unconcerned with the problem of human freedom.

Be that as it may, these same concepts that hover around the free will problem may well lend themselves to understanding alternative conceptions of freedom in Chinese philosophical discourse. After all, as Wenzel and Marchal point out, “we should open ourselves to the idea that, in a global world, there are very different styles of reasoning, and human freedom is certainly among the problems which should not be discussed in terms of Western traditions alone.”⁶⁴ It is thus in this regard that many studies, including this one, tackle the question of freedom in classical Chinese philosophical discourse, which, while taking into account and considering similar problems such as those of Western philosophical discourse, are not limited by their parameters. This is because as I have shown, the roots of the free will problem (which in turn informs conversations on autonomy and political freedom) as we see it in mainstream philosophical discourse are Abrahamic and theological in nature, and so expecting the same distinctions in Chinese philosophical discourse will be futile. After all, as Hegel says, “each individual is a child of his time; thus, philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts.”⁶⁵ A historical grounding therefore enables us to set aside our preexisting epistemic biases about Chinese philosophy and is an invitation for philosophers to be open to the transformative possibility of considering that there are alternatives of conceiving freedom as autonomy. One of these alternatives is Guo Xiang’s conception of freedom, understood as autonomy (self-rule), but both as self-determination and self-realization, while not being beholden to the same theological roots.

The Problem of Freedom in Classical Chinese Philosophy and Guo Xiang's *Zhuangzi*

Contemporary Eurocentric notions of freedom have proven elusive in Chinese philosophical discourse, since freedom in Chinese philosophy cannot be understood in the same terms as the free will problem in Anglo-European philosophy. How then can we frame our contemporary understanding of freedom in the context of Chinese philosophy?

Whenever there is talk of freedom and individuality, one text/philosopher never fails to crop up: Zhuangzi. Among Chinese philosophical texts, the *Zhuangzi* has enjoyed a relatively privileged position in the Anglophone sphere, as it is often seen as an alternative to the (mistakenly) perceived tyranny of Confucian philosophy. Whereas Confucianism is typically seen as rigid, Daoism, and more specifically Zhuangzi, is often seen as more carefree, more “unfettered.” Whereas Confucianism fits neatly into “positive liberty” given that there are certain rights and wrongs in this framework, Daoism tends to be a bit more vague. As such, many herald the *Zhuangzi* as a guide for preserving one's individuality and personal liberty from external interference within the canon of Chinese philosophy.

Most of the time, however, this takes on a mystical form. Many scholars, both in Anglophone and Sinophone scholarship, interpret Zhuangzi's notion of freedom as something that is spiritual or transcendent. In turn, some scholars have argued that this type of freedom is not political in nature and therefore has little to no social value. A leading Zhuangzi scholar in particular, Jiang Tao, raises a challenge to scholars of the *Zhuangzi* via Isaiah Berlin, arguing that Zhuangzi scholars need to expand their intellectual horizons and explorations, and take into consideration the influential work of Berlin on freedom, to remain relevant in the contemporary world. He says that Berlin's negative freedom on its own would be self-defeating because it would be substantially empty as there is nothing it could strive toward or realize. Meanwhile, what he calls Zhuangzi's spiritual freedom hinders the larger project of pursuing negative, individual, liberty.

This is a shame, Jiang says, because Berlin and Zhuangzi have much in common “with regard to moral monism, social conformity, and political tyranny and share their advocacy of value pluralism and epistemic humility.”⁶⁶ The difference, however, is that “for Berlin, the political should be the ultimate arbiter for any spiritual claim whereas for Zhuangzi the

spiritual should be vigorously pursued whereas the political is to be put up with.”⁶⁷ Jiang uses the story of the fasting of the heart-mind in the *Zhuangzi* and points to the expression “Roaming Free Inside the King’s Cage (*You qi fan* 遊其樊),” where Zhuangzi advocates for a more effective way of engaging with a wayward king but ultimately ends up “accepting the king’s cage as an unalterable, if hopeless, political reality.”⁶⁸ Jiang argues that while Zhuangzi does not actively advocate for a “retreat to the inner citadel” here, it does exhibit some of the aspects of the retreat that Berlin critiques.⁶⁹ This is especially demonstrated in other passages of the text where Zhuangzi outright refuses to engage with politics at all.⁷⁰ As such, Jiang accuses the philosopher of being unquestioning, citing the fasting of the heart passage where Confucius tells Yan Hui to “play within the ruler’s cage (*you qi fan* 遊其樊).”

Other sinologists and philosophers have adopted a similar stance. Renowned scholar of Chinese philosophy Bryan Van Norden finds in Zhuangzi the advocacy for a pluralistic acceptance of others that encompasses lifestyle, social class, gender, and physical deformity. However, he also concludes that Zhuangzi’s metaphysical stance is “the night in which all cows are black,” meaning that it eventually undermines all ethical and political values. Van Norden claims that this undermining contradicts Zhuangzi’s supposed pluralism, noting: “Zhuangzi’s advice seems to be to avoid political engagement if possible, and to avoid confrontation with authorities and the status quo when political engagement is unavoidable.”⁷¹

This “night in which all cows are black,” that is, the kind of spiritual or even psychological freedom that can fall into what Berlin critiques as a “retreat to the inner citadel,” is not an uncommon interpretation. For many, there is merit to this kind of freedom. For instance, in his book *Liberation as Affirmation*, Ge Ling Shang compares Zhuangzi with Nietzsche, and says that both of them are neither nihilistic nor antireligion. On the contrary, the affirmation of life is central to Zhuangzi’s philosophy, that this affirmation of secular life as religiously sacred is the ultimate liberation. This, according to Shang, is because “spiritual transcendence is possible by affirming life ‘religiously’ as sacred and divine.”⁷² He claims that Zhuangzi is “a free dancer who was beyond ordinary language, rational knowledge, social norms, and political parties. Without this transcending spirit of liberation, according to Zhuangzi, a complete life of *xiaoyao* would be impossible.”⁷³ What is there to transcend, though? According to Shang, Zhuangzi’s view was that “society is a form of mass manipulation in which morality attempts to fix human life into prescribed

social roles and thereby suppresses human freedom, which flows from the spontaneity of all things.”⁷⁴ Thus, we need to transcend from, and rise above, these norms—abandon societal obligations, even—to be able to wander far-reaching and unfettered (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊), here considered as a state of personal liberty.

Zhao Guoping, incidentally comparing Zhuangzi to Nietzsche’s antipode Levinas, nevertheless takes on a similar interpretation, saying that “Lévinas’ subjectivity and Zhuangzi’s non-being self have shown a radically different notion of freedom, as breaking away from our own confines and going beyond—a freedom located in spirituality, rather than in domination.”⁷⁵ Eske Møllgaard argues that it is the “transcendental life” that is behind Zhuangzi’s conception of *you* (wandering), and that this transcendence is Heaven’s “act of pure grace. To be released into transcendental life is a second birth. As the *Zhuangzi* says, once we have left human life behind and are no longer entangled in its misery.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Alan Fox argues that Zhuangzi advocates for *wuwei* (nondoing), which ultimately “takes the path of least resistance and does not rush or confront.”⁷⁷ Fox claims that Zhuangzi shows us the image of a sage as “someone who is perfectly at *ease* in all situations.”⁷⁸ Franklin Perkins argues that the goal of the *Zhuangzi* is to teach us to be “*beyond* the human,” that is, to instruct us on “how we can alter our desires in order to enjoy the world as it is. In place of a prudential concern for following nature, we have free and easy wandering, *xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊 (carefree wandering, wandering far and unfettered, going rambling without a destination).”⁷⁹ Like many others, Perkins says that “Zhuangzi points toward a radical transcendence of being human and a total alignment with heaven and the myriad things.”⁸⁰ This radical transcendence, Perkins then ultimately points out, “presents human beings as distinctive in having something like freedom in our ability to change perspectives and alter our reactions and emotions, this freedom is just what makes it possible to overcome tragedy, allowing us to accept the world as it is.”⁸¹

This is not to say that the aforementioned interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* are all the same. Simply, they are all versions of interpreting Zhuangzi’s notion of freedom as a kind of spiritual, albeit sometimes immanent, transcendence. This is to say that these interpretations are none other than what Jiang refers to as “spiritual freedom,” or Berlin’s “retreat to the inner citadel.” Recognizing this, Liu Xiaogan yields and argues for the validity of the “retreat to the inner citadel” as a type of freedom that should be valued like any other. He says that according to Zhuangzi, “detaching from common society and going to a realm beyond

it is a radical and ultimate way to deal with unavoidable troubles of the lived world.”⁸² He refers to this view as “Zhuangzian transcendent freedom.”⁸³ More specifically, in an article describing the notions of freedom in Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang, Liu Xiaogan tells us that their notions of becoming far-reaching and unfettered (*xiaoyao*) share the same form as what Isaiah Berlin criticizes as the “retreat to the inner citadel.” Although Liu says there are key differences between Zhuangzi’s and Guo Xiang’s notions of becoming far-reaching and unfettered (*xiaoyao*), he nonetheless admits that they are both “only an adaptation, acceptance or escape from reality.”⁸⁴ In other words it does not have the power for social change and transformation. Nonetheless, he argues that “this is in fact a question of choice and preference in values, not a question of whether spiritual and mental freedom is [philosophically] sensible.”⁸⁵ Liu thus points to the possibility that if an agent is consciously and fully aware of her motivations and actions, with values freely internalized, would it really be unfree to retreat into an inner citadel when social resistance proves to be futile? After all, the reality is that “if modern people cannot completely avoid fixed circumstances that cannot be changed, then they must reflect on how to live better, with more ease, and nobler, in this unpleasant but fixed circumstance.” As such, he makes a plea toward the philosophers of freedom of our time, saying that “the pursuit of pure personal spiritual satisfaction should gain understanding or sympathy, or at the least, should not receive condemnation.”⁸⁶ This is an affirmation of the kind of pluralism that Isaiah Berlin ultimately advocates for.

Like many of Zhuangzi’s leading scholars, Liu seems to believe that this retreat does not harm society and so its adherents should be left alone to pursue their own happiness. For Berlin, however, the “retreat to the inner citadel” is narcissistic at best, because it deprives freedom of its political subversiveness, preventing it from manifesting its powerful ability for social transformation, and hence, ultimately harms everyone. Indeed, turning inward to escape from one’s horrible external state not only distracts from social and political action, but it also splits one’s inner world from that of the external political reality—similar to that of positive liberty as self-realization, which Berlin provides a powerful critique against. However, does the *Zhuangzi* really advocate such self-abnegation? Not according to its leading commentator, Guo Xiang (252–312).⁸⁷ In this work, thus, we will explore how Guo Xiang transforms some of the ideas originally found in the *Zhuangzi*, so as to give rise to a systematized framework for a philosophy of freedom, making the text a political treatise of his own.

There are two related reasons for this choice: 1) the first one is because Guo Xiang provides Zhuangzi a systematic framework for exploring a comprehensive account for both ontological and concretely political freedom, understood and interchangeable here as autonomy; and 2) the second is because of the historical context that has allowed for this to happen—an age of heightened individualism that emerged from the amalgamation of Confucianism and Daoism, a political age.

What this means for us is that Guo Xiang's philosophical enterprise contains a notion of freedom more robust than the simple dichotomy of negative and positive freedom, or *freedom from* and *freedom to*, respectively. Whereas classical Confucian notions of freedom resort to defending certain notions of positive liberty as self-realization,⁸⁸ Daoist notions of freedom are often construed to be positive liberty as self-abnegation, including the aforementioned dominant interpretations of the *Zhuangzi*. Guo Xiang, however, presents us with a third alternative that is not beholden to Berlin's dichotomy of liberties, which are both nonetheless beholden to the pseudo-problem of free will.

That is to say that in Guo Xiang's philosophy of causality, which I call a *logic of convergence*, there is the potential of a philosophy of freedom that has an alternatively more cohesive notion of the self (as opposed to being an atomistic individual or simply being a member of a higher whole), as well as the operations of the world around it, which we shall refer to as a *dependence-based autonomy*—a notion of freedom that is largely ontological and epistemological in nature, while also having the potential to be understood in social and political contexts. Unpacking this promising theory of freedom, therefore, is the task of this work.

The task, however, starts with a radical premise: there is no reading Zhuangzi's notion of freedom without Guo Xiang's commentaries. It just wasn't the core text's main concern. Moreover, given that it was Guo Xiang who edited and compiled the extant text, we may never really know what it was originally. I therefore maintain that the best way to read it systematically is with Guo Xiang's commentaries, and that if we are to expect the text to yield fruitful political and social ideas, we must treat it as mainly Guo Xiang's work, rather than the other way around. Just as we may never know whether Plato tweaked Socrates for his own agenda, the case is hermeneutically the same with Guo Xiang and Zhuangzi. I shall, therefore, treat the *Zhuangzizhu*, which is the *Zhuangzi* with Guo Xiang's comments, as a single whole, and as that of Guo Xiang's.

Although there are questions as to what else in the text Guo Xiang has tweaked, however, we do know that that he did politicize the *Zhuangzi* through his comments. This makes sense, considering the time in which he lived. Guo Xiang is often referred to as a “Neo-Daoist,” and this movement is comprised of scholars from the Wei-Jin 魏晉 period whose study is often referred to as *Xuanxue* 玄學, meaning the study of something that is far and dark, in the sense of being fuzzy, or perhaps more aptly, the profound.⁸⁹ This time is often associated with the height of individuality⁹⁰ and the discussion of abstract concepts, which is perhaps most evident in the practice called *Qingtán* 清談 or “Pure Conversation.” Pure Conversation is a practice of philosophical, often abstract,⁹¹ discussion that was performed in public, making a display of aesthetic and argumentation skills, which brought about a type of “celebrity scholar” culture. Among these scholars was Wang Bi, a prodigy in his early twenties, founder of the *Xuanxue* movement, and responsible for coining the term for what is now understood as “ontology,” *benti* 本體. He was not alone, however. After Wang Bi came many other brilliant scholars who partook in this cultural performance. Among them were He Yan, Wang Bi’s close friend and stepson of the famous general Cao Cao, Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, Pei Wei, among others, most of whom were from noble families.

Guo Xiang, however, was historically described as only “second to Wang Bi”⁹² in his debate or oratory skill. As Richard Mather points out, his work is “probably the most consistent effort to reconcile the opposing claims of activism and quietism,”⁹³ referring to the tension between social order (*mingjiao* 名教) and natural spontaneity (*ziran* 自然), commonly associated with Confucianism and Daoism, respectively, which was a defining feature of the period. The success of his amalgamation⁹⁴ lies at the very heart of his philosophy of freedom, which, if we dare delve further into, shows us a profound image of the individual self who is, at the same time and *on equal levels*, both self-sufficiently independent but also has a unified sense of oneness with the universe through a materially grounded dependence. Guo Xiang thus shows us a logical connection that challenges our preconceived notions of, as William James put it, “whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist,”⁹⁵ or as Berlin put it, whether he is a hedgehog or a fox.⁹⁶

Nonetheless, it is important to stress that it was not only Guo Xiang who had revolutionary ideas. As mentioned earlier, Wang Bi effectively invented metaphysics. Some scholars, such as Jana Rošker, even go as far