The Dream of the Butterfly

One day, at about sunset, Dianzhi dozed off...and dreamed that he turned into a butterfly.

He flapped his wings and...sure enough, he was a butterfly! What a joyful feeling! As he flitted about, he completely forgot that he was Dianzhi.

Soon, though, he realized that that real butterfly was in fact Dianzhi! How is it that Dianzhi was dreaming that he turned into a butterfly? Dianzhi was so confused. It was Dianzhi! Dianzhi was dreaming that it was Dianzhi!
Societies may well need rules, standards used to justify those rules, and officials to enforce them. It seems fairly obvious that such restrictions can help minimize some forms of disorder that threatens our tranquility and survival. But too many rules, including rules of etiquette, constrain us, and make us feel suffocated. Our psyches seek out routes of escape. We find release in the mountains, in wine bottles, or in beliefs that undercut the significance of the suffocating rules and standards. This book is about Zhuangzi (369?-286? B.C.), a man who broke a lot of the rules and was irreverent toward all the rest.

Over the centuries, China's gentlemen scholars were educated with classical texts that primarily discussed such rules, standards, and the model officials who embodied them. They believed that those texts—those teachings—came from Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and his disciples. About eighteen centuries after Confucius, starting in 1313, four of the texts and commentaries to them formed the basis for the civil service examinations that constituted the path to privilege. The scholars and government servants considered themselves to be Confucians, or Fuists, as they are known in China, and yet many of them also sought routes of escape. They often simultaneously accepted some of the teachings of Zhuangzi, which inspire this volume. These teachings allow us to stand back and smile at the serious Confucian social rules, and our psyches are freed from their control over us. Although Zhuangzi himself had never heard the Chinese equivalent of our term "Daoist," his teachings, along with others, have been categorized as Daoist since the second century before Christ. Thus, many gentlemen scholars were Confucians and Daoists at the same time. The inconsistencies did not seem to bother them, for they often appealed to the psychological consequences of a belief in supporting it, rather than to its logical validity. It certainly is true that we believe lots of things on grounds other than rational argument.

One of my own tutors, with whom I studied the classics in Taiwan, considered himself to be a good Confucian. He also complained about the number of stifling rules of etiquette that had been instilled in him as a youth—so many, for example, that he tried to avoid having to get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night because of
all the rules about proper robes and belts and things hanging from belts that he had to observe. With that complaint, he would pass approvingly to some point of Zhuangzi. (He was not only an erudite Confucianist, who had also accepted many Daoist teachings, but a Buddhist as well.)

Confucianism and Daoism complement each other in additional ways. If Confucian learning honed an individual’s respect for proper interpersonal relations, Daoism teaches proper respect for other living things. The Dao, as we shall see, is equally present in all of us.

There was no Daoist “school” when Zhuangzi lived. Our term Daoism is a translation of one of three expressions introduced in the second century B.C. to denote such a school: dao jia (school of the Dao), dao de (school of the Dao and de, which is the Dao in a thing), and Huang Lao (the teachings that revered the Yellow Emperor and Laozi). When these designations came into use, two of the principal texts attributed to such schools were the Zhuangzi and the Laozi. No one knows who wrote the latter text, the first record of which is around 250 B.C. Most scholars believe that Zhuangzi himself was the author of the first seven chapters in the book that bears his name, and that later followers with differing perspectives wrote the other chapters. Zhuangzi Speaks draws mainly from those seven original or “inner” chapters.

Two differences between these Daoist texts are worth noting. The Laozi treats politics seriously, whereas the Zhuangzi inner chapters reveal almost no interest in politics or ruling. The texts also differ in the relative emphasis each places on the various traits of the Dao. The Laozi leans toward treating it as the indivisible stuff from which all emerges, an “uncarved block,” as the text says. It refers to the Dao as the Mother, which makes it easy for the reader to infer the Dao’s temporal priority over the myriad individual things that stem from it. The Zhuangzi tends to explain the Dao as either the patterns of orderly change in nature or as the cause of those patterns. It is “the maker and transformer.” The two books agree that the Dao is unitary. Its individuated presence in things is de, sometimes thought of as power or as a life principle. As the Laozi says, “Tao [Dao] produced them (the ten thousand things). Virtue [de] fosters them.”

The person who accepts the unity of the Dao avoids regarding things exclusively in terms of their transitory physical forms, because to do so is to consider what separates one thing from another rather than to think of their shared participation in the Dao. He or she also avoids taking seriously or being controlled by the words that people use to classify or categorize things. Language reinforces the tendency to treat things as discrete units rather than as parts of a unity. By avoiding these pitfalls and instead going spontaneously where the Dao leads, the individual will find that his de is enhanced. Zhuangzi’s followers past and present differ from other people in some basic ways. They do not think much of language as a key to unlocking nature’s secrets, nor do they think much of the evaluative standards that language often communicates when a person passes judgment on something. They think about the nature of nature and how to live a life modeled on nature rather than a life governed by the moral rules written up in books.
Initially somewhat unified around 1122 B.C. under the Zhou dynasty, the territory sometimes known as China Proper was fragmented into a number of increasingly independent states after 771 B.C. These states and successors produced by increasingly violent interstate warfare were agricultural, not maritime, communities. Cut off from other civilizations by mountains and deserts to the north and west, and with only a small ocean perimeter to the east, they were self-contained units. Though culturally advanced, their lords and aristocratic retainers rarely had to submit their ritualized customs and the ideas on which they rested to competition from those of other strong and equally developed societies. The competition came from non-Chinese nomadic peoples in the north whose equestrian skills helped to make them a constant threat, and from peoples in the south who were also Chinese but culturally somewhat different.

Several of these states figure in the text Zhuangzi, which is so charmingly transformed in the drawings, conversational balloons, and translations of Zhuangzi Speaks. These include some of the states that once made up the old Zhou kingdom. One of these was Song (pp. 38, 92, 95). Another was Lu (p. 52), birthplace of Confucius, who belonged to an impoverished branch of its aristocracy. The Lu aristocracy prided itself on perpetuating the rituals and rules of the early Zhou. Jin, once the largest state of all, was fragmented around 403 because of internal bickering among its lords. Its fracture into the three smaller states of Han, Wei, and Zhao (pp. 107, 110) signaled the beginning of the aptly named Warring States Period.

As our text relates on p. 105, villains ravaged the land. When Zhao finally succumbed, the records report that 400,000 of its soldiers were buried alive.

Outside of these core states were two others that figure in this harsh scene. Both were Chinese, but their customs were regarded as different and crude by the elites of the core states. The first, Chu, gradually expanded into the entire Yangtze valley. In 297 B.C. its soldiers, dressed in armor made of sharkskin and rhino hides, rode the core states. The other fringe state was the northwestern state of Qin. It began an eastern expansion in 341 B.C. when it conquered the state of Wei, causing its ruler to flee to the eastern part of his state, to the city of Liang mentioned on p. 93. This occurred during the lifetime of Zhuangzi, who was born around 369 B.C. Qin eventually conquered all of the other states, creating the first unified Chinese empire in 221 B.C.

Our cast of characters begins with Zhuangzi himself. He was a native of Song, though some say that his doctrines show more of the influence of Chu in the south. He enjoyed lively debates with his friend Hui Shi (p. 92), at one time the prime minister of Wei. Hui Shi opposed aggressive warfare, promoted a doctrine of universal love, and left behind some paradoxes ("The heavens are as low as the earth: mountains are on the same level as the marshes"). Famous for his rhetorical skills (p. 28), he shared with Zhuangzi a concern with distinctions between the various levels of naming in words and was interested in the question of the standards according to which we make distinctions. Learning from him, Zhuangzi went beyond
him to the treacherous point where the making of any distinctions potentially confounds us.

Among those considered by Zhuangzi to be obsessed with making distinctions were the Mohists and the Confucians. Taking as their patriarch the philosopher Mozi (c. 479–c. 389 B.C.), the Mohists employed a standard for the acceptability of beliefs that centered on a distinction between the useful and the useless, or that which benefits or does not benefit the people. Benefit might have been defined in terms of increasing wealth, social order, and cooperation without strife.

The Confucians, diverse in doctrinal details, worried about the distinction between ritually proper and improper behavior. Disciples of Confucius codified and transmitted orally extensive rules covering almost every aspect of interpersonal conduct, with particular attention to such activities as funerals and coming-of-age ceremonies. The criteria for determining propriety were, fundamentally, social role relationships (father-son, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, prince-minister, friend-friend) and hierarchy. An individual's very identity was defined in relational terms (as father, husband, minister). Propriety varied as a function of role and hierarchical status. In the modern West we generally think of duties as universal. That is, if something is the right thing for you to do in a certain setting, it is the right thing for everyone everywhere to do in that circumstance. These Confucians, in contrast, treated duties as different for different people in the same setting, as a function of their different social roles or relationships. In a certain situation, I have duties to those with whom I have special relationships, and these are different from the duties that I would have to others in another situation, even when the factual conditions in the two cases are otherwise identical. If I find that my father has stolen a sheep, I have a duty to protect him. If I find someone else with a stolen sheep, my duty may be to the sheep's rightful owner or to the laws of the state.

Confucian teachings also centered on the difference between humane or benevolent and non-benevolent conduct. The possibility of a person's benevolence rests in his or her ability to nurture the kinship-love with which all humans are born, and so extend it to other people beyond the family. Benevolence manifests itself in an inability to tolerate suffering and, closer to home, in parental love and in children's filial piety toward their parents. Confucians, then, were known for their standard of ritualized propriety (based on relational roles and hierarchical status), infused with a sense of righteousness, and for their standard of benevolence. Hence on p. 114 someone describes Confucius as being a gentleman from Lu who "teaches people about benevolence and righteousness... His sincere teachings convert the masses to goodness and bring peace to the whole land." This news brings the reply that "if he keeps on like this, he'll only grow farther and farther from the Dao!" Like the Mohists, the Confucians sought employment at the courts of the lords who ruled the states. If the attitudes of Zhuangzi's contemporary, the orthodox Confucian Mencius (372–289 B.C.), can be taken as typical, they were heavily judgmental of the moral failings of the rulers with whom they spoke. They criticized the rulers for not being benevolent, or for ignoring propriety, or for not consulting their inner moral sense. Although Mencius does not appear in the Zhuangzi chapters authored by Zhuangzi himself, it is worth noting the way in which he argued for his doctrines. Zhuangzi would have had plenty of oppor-
tensity to see the Confucians in action, as they debated with thinkers from competing schools such as Mohists, language philosophers like Hui Shi, and advocates of self-preservation as the only moral standard (Yang Zhu, mentioned on p. 99, is an example).

Mencius argued that humans are universally born with such traits as a sense of compassion and a sense of righteousness similar to what we call a conscience. In making this case, and in rebutting opponents, he typically relied on one or more of four types of argument: presenting empirical claims; appealing to a doctrine’s psychological impact or people who accept it; using analogy; and appealing to the authority of various sages or emperors.

Zhuangzi’s approach, relying on parables, anecdotes, and flights of fancy sets him apart from such styles of argument. He had little use for language as a tool for gaining access to knowledge. Instead, he used it with great skill to sensitize the reader to the instability of the standards that all debaters invoke to justify their arguments and the meanings that they assign to words. Like Socrates and his teachers, Zhuangzi used words to point the reader in the right direction rather than to indoctrinate. So parables and tales of the imagination served instead of assertions, claims, and arguments. He used these techniques also to depict the weakness of language as a vehicle for understanding the true nature of the world. This weakness centers on the boundaries that language carves artificially into nature. A preservative culprit is the dualistic categories in which humans often express themselves, such as beautiful/ugly. The values that such words carry are only those of the speaker or of his school of thought, not ones that correspond to any standard present in nature. One style of Zhuangzi’s teaching was especially suited to drive home this point about the mismatch between language and reality: his droll way of putting into the mouths of Confucianists positions that are just the reverse of what they were known to advocate. Confucius’s favorite disciple, for example, learns “to forget benevolence and righteousness.”

Although the Yellow Emperor appears in Zhuangzi’s works (p. 87), as does Laozi (“Old Master”), neither appears in the sections of the Zhuangzi that were written by the historical Zhuangzi but only in chapters written by later followers, who adopted the “Huang-Lao” teachings that became popular in the late Warring States Period. “Huang-Lao,” a former Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 25) expression, combines part of the Chinese name of the Yellow (Huang) Emperor and part of the Old (Lao) Master’s name. The Huang-Lao followers revered Laozi and Zhuangzi as sages who had insight into the nature of the Dao or the principles of change according to which the world works. Whereas the original writings of Zhuangzi show no eschatological interest and are unequivocally anti-Confucian and anti-Mohist, the Huang-Lao writings attempted to synthesize ideas from several schools. As the Han historian Sima Tan (d. 140 B.C.) put it, “they selected the good parts of Confucianism and Mohism and gathered the essentials of the School of Names and Legalists.” And where the chapters authored by the historical Zhuangzi reveal no political interest, those of the Huang-Lao school advocate nonaction by rulers and zealous action by ministers.

Now that we know a little about the places and characters that figure in our work, it is time to turn to the music of nature and other matters that Zhuangzi richly illuminated.
Language. Technically speaking the music of nature is the spontaneous functioning of things, but more loosely it is also the wind (p. 17) and the sound of man-made instruments. Nature is free of emotions and the values that are conveyed in them. So, too, is the earth’s music or the wind free of them. In addition, as the wind blows through all varieties of canyons and other formations on earth, it makes every conceivable sound. When people speak, they are simply making canyons through which wind blows. They may add emotions, evaluation, and meaning to the wind that emerges from their voice boxes, but it is just like the wind in the canyon. The evaluations, the emotions, are nothing once the wind has left the individual’s mouth. Angus Graham, the leading Western interpreter of the Zhuangzi, has noted that Zhuangzi was thinking especially of the arguments made by thinkers of different schools in their debates or preaching. Their arguments are the “pipes of heaven,” not different from the musical sounds made by the wind blowing through differently shaped hollows.

Zhuangzi’s first target, then, was the debates themselves. Some debates involved assumptions that certain things are similar to each other and therefore different from all other things. Mencius was busy arguing, for instance, that all humans are similar in that they possess four psychological traits. As a result, he claimed, they are not only different from other animals but better. Others argued about whether a white horse is a horse, because a horse that is white is no longer just a ‘horse’. The very words that they used in their debates, such as similarity, difference, horse, and white have no permanent meanings. They have only that which the debaters paste on them for the moment. These words have no enduring relation to anything in nature. They are just mere music of nature.

What Zhuangzi was rejecting as futile was not simply verbal argumentation but also the distinctions on which it is based. His progress toward this insight was probably eased, ironically, by what he learned from his own intellectual sparring partner, Hui Shi. Zhuangzi learned from Hui’s paradoxes that all of our spatial and temporal distinctions are relative to the perspective of the person making them. That is one of the points of Hui Shi’s statement that the mountains are on the same level as the marshes, so they are, from the standpoint of the bird in flight. Hui made the same point when he said, “The sun at noon is the sea declining; the creature born is the creature dying.” The rise of the sun and of every creature born is to be part of a process of change with a beginning and an end. From the standpoint of the end, each is already on its way there an instant after noon or after birth. From the standpoint of today’s actuarial specialist in an insurance office, a baby is already a statistic in terms of its progress toward death.

As Graham pointed out, Zhuangzi went beyond Hui Shi to maintain that all distinctions that humans make with language depend on the perspective of the viewer or speaker. In part this was a message directed at the debaters and preachers, but it was also directed at all humans. Not only were the Confucians or the Mohists narrow-minded but so also was the person who thought that the perspective of this or that species accurately portrays reality. This is the significance
of the exchange (pp. 65–67) between the frog, who thinks that the well where he lives is incredibly large, and the tortoise, who had crawled up from the ocean. The only body of water known to the frog was the well, and he naively used it as his standard of big and small. The tortoise knew the size of the Eastern Sea. He had a rather different standard.

Thus, although one audience for many of the critiques of dualistic distinctions may be people associated with certain schools of thought, the broader audience includes every person. Zhuangzi loved to tweak his readers about the distinction between the useful and the useless. He may have offended Moral utilitarians in particular with this assault, but he simultaneously challenged widespread standards of what is useful. The "useless" tree is a good example. Its trunk is all lumps and bumps, and a curves this way and that. Most people would say that a tree, to be useful, would provide material for houses, food, and other items involved in human survival. In the carpenter's perspective, only straight trees are useful because they produce planks that align nicely with the plumb line. But the useless tree lived on and on. No logger cut it down, so the "useless" tree lived longer than the useful ones. This is one of many times when we encounter Zhuangzi's own hidden standards. One is to price all things equally in which the Dao is present. So the tree's interest in staying out of human's way counts for as much as the carpenter's interest in turning it into a roof. Further, if the carpenter will simply broaden his standard of the useful, he will discover that he can use the gnarled old tree after all, for shade during his afternoon snooze. But just when readers thought that they finally had an insight into what "useful" really is, Zhuangzi nudged them to another insight (pp. 77–78): it is best not to think in terms of useful and useless at all, but rather to transcendent these categories.

Language reflects one's arbitrarily selected standards of worth, according to Zhuangzi. "Although a duck's legs are very short, it certainly wouldn't want them lengthened," we learn on p. 48. Similarly, moralists categorize people as good (allowing the sagely way) or as evil. But moral standards can also be used to justify great harm. Almost any teaching can be used for a variety of ends. So, when on p. 51, someone suggests that "principles do more harm than good," the message is directed both to the Confucian moralist and to his popular audience.

Analysis and dualistic verbal categories generally go hand in hand. Among the problems with them is the damage they can do. The moralist provides the tyrant with justifications for his acts. The false sense that analysis provides us with an understanding of objective reality motivates humans to tamper with reality accordingly. They think that, having figured out the laws of nature or read up on them in books, they can insinuate into the process of life from birth to death, or into the way in which rivers spontaneously flow, with their dams and ditches. On p. 53 a wise and enlightened master tells us the result: "You say you want to use the visibility of the Dao to enhance the natural processes? This will only destroy them. Don't you understand that to use one intellect to change things only makes matters worse?" The problem is not simply that the Confucian or Moist is fooled into thinking that he is saying something about reality. It is also that he is stimulated by such evaluation to desire or try to possess the object categorized in a certain way, and this leads to conflict with other persons. Further, such lan-
Skilled categories inhabit individuals from both experiencing nonverbally the whole and from treating things in the world in a manner that reflects this sense of harmony. The following concludes an exchange between three delightfully named persons on p. 67: “The man named Knowledge was of the realm of words, while Absurd was of the realm of language without words, and Can’t Say was of the realm of no mind, no words. The Dao cannot be understood through words alone.”

Skills. There are alternatives to manipulating words; one is practicing a skill in the manner of a master craftsman. The clue to this fact lies in Zhuangzi’s exemplary models, people such as the skilled cook (p. 79). He does not consult a textbook on butchery but intuitively moves about the skeletal structure of the cow. “You see, when I butcher a cow, it’s not skill that I use. It’s the Dao,” he says. He continues by describing the difference between his knife and that of the average cook: “The average cook goes through a knife every month, because he hacks and chops. . . . Because I neither hack nor chop, I’ve used this same knife for nineteen years, and it’s still like new.”

There is an elderly wheelwright who appears on pp. 55–56, making the point that skills cannot be passed on through books. Sages may have had skills, but the words attributed to them in books are “merely the dregs of a dead man.” The words are traces, shadows, having nothing of substance in common with those who left them behind. The wheelwright was unable to pass his skill on to his own son.

To practice a skill in the manner of a master is not to grasp the Dao, but it is to grasp one aspect of the Dao. It is to understand how to accord with natural patterns in cows or pieces of wood as one applies a knife or chisel. There are many different skills, so a comprehensive understanding of the Dao is probably beyond the scope of what most people can hope for. It is a prize for the perfect person.

There is something in the traits of Zhuangzi’s skilled craftsman that was shared by the Confucian sage. This is an action that is perfectly appropriate for the circumstances, though it emerges without analysis of the situation or planning. The Analects of Confucius was compiled in the early Warring States Period; it is an edited text of sayings and conversations of Confucius with disciples and others, compiled on the basis of records made by disciples and their disciples, or later Confucians who thought they knew what the Master would have said. It includes a statement by Confucius depicting his long progress to the most desirable condition, one that he attained only at the age of seventy. Confucius described the condition as one in which his desires and the dictates of the ritual rules of conduct were entirely convergent. The right thing to do and what he desires to do are the same. Only years of training in the practice of the rules can produce this result, a process that social scientists today would call socialization. But this state is one in which proper conduct for each situation is effortless. Moral acts are spontaneous. Spontaneity is the trait shared by the desirous cook and by the elderly Confucius.

Unlike their counterparts in classical Greece (the Golden Age of which lasted from 461 to 431 B.C.), these Chinese thinkers did not portray the highest form of self-development as an ability to use reason. For those Greeks, reason was used either to deduce what principle to follow or, practically, how to implement it. For our Chinese figures, however, human cognitive functions need play no
direct role in the sage’s actions. Thoughtlessness, not thought, was prized. But there remains a cruci-
dial difference between the spontaneity advocated by Confucius and by Zhuangzi. Confucian spen-
taneity is always goal-directed. A person practices the ritual forms of conduct for the purpose, now
immediately, of having all acts conform to the moral rules; now distantly, for the goal of becom-
ing a morally superior person; and ultimately, to transform all the world into a Confucian moral
utopia. An attitude of commitment to these goals informs every spontaneous act, as a person effort-
lessly does the right thing. Psychologically it is a
powerfully practical response to the alienation that
people might feel when there is a gap between
what they want to do and what somebody tells
them to do.

Having rejected both verbal rules and moral be-
straints, Zhuangzi prizes spontaneity of a differ-
et kind: the ability to adapt immediately to what-
ever circumstance presents itself. Spontaneity is
also found in skill mastery. Some of Zhuangzi’s fa-
vourite examples of the former concern the accep-
tance of death.

Suddenly Master Lai grew ill. Coughing and wheezing,
he lay at the point of death. His wife and children per-
ched round in a circle and began to cry. Master Lai, who
had come to ask how he was, said, “Shoo! Get back!
Don’t disturb the process of change!”

Then he turned against the doorways, and talked to
Master Lai. “How marvellous the Coelest Dao! What
is he going to make out of you next? Where is he going
to spend you? Will he make you into a rat’s life? Will he
make you into a mug’s aunt?”

Master Lai said, “A child, obeying his father and
mother, goes where he is told, east or west, south or
north.” And the sun and yang—how much more are
they to a man than father or mother! Now that they
have brought me to the verge of death, I should refuse
to obey them, how perverse I would eat!

Spontaneity. The spontaneously adaptive re-
sponse is characteristic of the person in whom the
True Ruler of the body is not the evaluating or
knowing mind, but the Dao itself. Such a person
flows with nature’s changes, as the Ruler turns his
mind into a mirror. “The Perfect Man sees his
mind like a mirror—going after nothing, welcom-
ing nothing, responding but not storing.” “The
mirror suggests both immediate responsiveness to
any circumstance and the absence of evaluation, the
mirror reflects everything, what turban may
call the beautiful and the ugly alike. Our present
test has an episode in which Confucius went to
see Laozi. He reported that he “saw a dragon,
flowing with the Yin and Yang, cosmically chang-
ing” (p. 59). Although the chapters in the Zhuangzi-
text by Zhuangzi himself do not refer to Laozi, this
characterization fits Zhuangzi’s model of a person
with the mirrorki ne mind.

Angus Graham has written convincingly that to
mirror things means “to lose facts” and to “deal
with things the way they objectively are, not as
one would like them to be.” This means that
Zhuangzi was not advocating that the individual
come solely a passive respondent with no con-
tribution to a given situation. Rather, the mirror
mind is one devoid of prejudicial attachment to
the degree of any particular school or way of
thinking. Those prejudices would interfere with
the ability to grasp the objective facts and respond
as those facts demand. Attaining such a state takes
considerable practice in “forgetting” the standards
and language habits with which a person is daily,

socialized. To have a mirror mind is to have a clear
mind. clear about the objective situation and sweet clean of previous ideas that would impede the absorption of new faces.

Nature and the Dao. To flow with the changes, as Laozi was said to have done, is to avoid the purposeful pursuit of goods or goals evaluated as more worthy than other things. To be this way is to emulate a trait of Heaven (nature) and the Dao. Both are devoid of purpose or any differences of value. Hence is a fascinating tale of how Zhuangzi’s ideas fit in with other developments in China before and shortly after he lived.

The term Dao in the Zhuangzi has several meanings. One refers to that which simultaneously causes the ceaseless changes in nature and also somehow integrates or unifies all things that participate in those changes. Zhuangzi used the expression “maker and transformer” to convey this point. There is another meaning that the outside analyst can distinguish as separate from the one just given, though it would not have been separated by Zhuangzi. That is the orderly process or pattern of change itself. This meaning is present when our current text encourages us on p. 47 to “follow the laws of nature, or the Dao.” This is also “flowing with the Yin and Yang” (p. 59). In neither of these two senses is the Dao purposeful. To attribute purpose to the Dao is to give it a human trait, and that Zhuangzi did not do.

The Confucians, however, did. As early as the Analects there is reference to the fact that the pole star, being superior, receives obedience from the other stars, which are inferior to it. There is a statement in the Mencius that Heaven has the property of integrity or being true to itself. This property suggests that all natural processes are disposed to complete themselves, or it may mean that something possesses all of the qualities of which it is capable, or is fully in accord with its nature. Xunzi (c. 310–c. 210 B.C.), a Confucian who was born near the end of Zhuangzi’s life, developed a full-fledged teleological view of nature. That is, he claimed that nature exhibits not simply order but order with a purpose. Things were described by him as either incomplete, on their way to completion, or complete. The collective purpose of things, he held, is the avoidance of chaos and the maintenance of hierarchy and proper relations between things. Heaven is high in status, earth is lower. Chaos is avoided when things keep to their places and fulfill their natural courses of development. The language was similar to the Aristotelian teleology that dominated medieval Europe. “Each thing should gain its proper place,” and the condition to prize was “completeness,” as Xunzi put it. He said that humans can avoid chaos by taking Heaven as a model through the establishment of hierarchically ranked social-role distinctions and by ensuring that people take as their individual goals the fulfillment of sole duties.

In contrast to the Confucians, Zhuangzi was remarkable in refusing to attribute any of these human traits to the Dao (the patterns of change). It was, he held, devoid of purpose. Zhuangzi’s view of nature also opposed that of Mozi, who taught that Heaven was an anthropomorphic deity who willed sanctions to reward and punish people according to whether they followed or disobeyed principles of universal love and utility.

The historical significance of Zhuangzi’s view of nature is apparent when we realize that in the West ‘2 was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that people such as Copernicus and Descartes began to wipe nature clean of these human traits. In rejecting the geocentric view of
In addition to reading human moral traits into nature, the Confucians also recognized the importance of models and the imitation of appropriate exemplars. Some of his models are those skilled craftsmen who spontaneously, without reference to textbooks, use their bodies in a way that is consistent with the requirements of the materials they use, and so make the movements necessary to their craft. The skilled cook is an example. Other models, such as Toless Shu (p. 43) and the Fawk (p. 48) are just the opposites of those examples of human perfection that were idealized by the Greeks, such as Adonis and Venus. One who does not put in appearance in the present text is Ms. Lame-Hunchback-No-Lips. Obviously, Zhuangzi was making a statement about the impertinence of transitory human form when, in a moment of cosmic time, the stuff of which we are made will decompose and perhaps reappear as rats' livers. If these tricks are to be our models, we clearly should not copy contemporary ideas about physical beauty. Instead, we are to emulate the wisdom of these models.

The greatest model of all for Confucians, Mohists, and Zhuangzi was Heaven itself. Confucians were likely to advocate that humans should imitate the traits of Heaven: hierarchy, integrity, purpose, and propriety in relationships. In contrast, Zhuangzi's nature (Heaven) or its patterns (Dao)
is devoid of all of these traits. To imitate the Dao, then, involves forgetting all of these traits.

Modifying on nature has an immediate impact on the use of language. Both the Confucians and Zhuangzi advocated using language that somehow corresponds to the Dao or to Heaven, but this meant entirely different things for each of them. For Confucians, language that corresponds to Heaven is language that promotes hierarchy and the other traits of nature. Proper language both reveals the speaker’s correct standard and persuades other people to evaluate a situation the same way the speaker does. Choice of words combines facts and values. It describes and evaluates. To call a person “king” is not only to describe his position but also to affirm that he is acting in the manner in which an ideal king should act. Use of such a title also helps to maintain social hierarchies. In the case of Zhuangzi, the only use of language that corresponds to nature is language that the speaker does not take seriously. Language, with its hidden value standards embedded in words does not correspond to any pattern is nature. Zhuangzi did not advocate remaining silent, but he did say that the way to imitate the Dao is not to be controlled by language or by those embedded customary standards.

Zhuangzi’s Dao being purposeless, its changes untold in an orderly way but not for the special benefit of humans or anything else. The Chinese expression su-wu describes this trait. That expression originally meant “not to act for the sake of anything.” Hence purposeless spontaneity is conduct that emulates the Dao. It is going in whatever direction natural changes lead a person. More precisely, this is conduct under the control of the individual’s True Ruler, which is the Dao within each individual. To the degree that the individual behaves accordingly, the power (de) grows within him. The term su-wu appears twice in the original Zhuangzi chapters, referring not directly to the Dao but to laid-back, free and easy roaming.

Interestingly, the Zhuangzi and the Lunyi do not have a monopoly on this idea of su-wu. By at least the third century B.C. it was shared by diverse thinkers. One of its most common applications was to the ideal ruler who himself rests in the background, aloof from daily operations, while overseeing officials and institutions that handle administration. Such usage appears in the Confucian Xunzi text many times. Thus, before the end of the Warring States Period, Confucian spontaneity included both the idea of being so perfectly cultivated that one automatically does the morally right thing and also the idea of a nonconstraining style by rulers.

Nature and Society. Zhuangzi was no advocate of the vegetative existence. Nonstriving meant not striving for wealth, status, power, long life, and the other goals that keep people galloping around. But adapting to objective conditions as they are is compatible with having a family and doing ordinary tasks. Zhuangzi himself was said to have had a family. He went along with the customary family obligations of his time, but he dramatically opened the door of legitimacy for a life contrasted with the ideal of official service, as was so strongly tested in the Confucian works. In the Aural of Confucius, Confucius’s disciple Zi Lu says to a hermit’s children concerning the importance of seeking public office: “How can it be right for a man to set aside the duty that kings minister to prince, or in his desire to maintain his own integrity, to subvert the Great Relationship?”
Hermits do appear in the Analects, but they are escaping bad rulers and bad times. One infers that they would have liked to serve under other conditions. Zhuangzi stands as an alternative to official service or other high-status jobs, namely, accepting one’s current situation, seeking solitude, or withdrawing from office. In our current text we read of a king who, on learning of the damage caused by the intellect, leaves the world and lives in a grass hut (p. 53). Confucius goes off to live in the forest and study the Dao, chastened about showing off his learning (p. 80). High positions may be necessary to society, but the wise person does not stick around those who occupy them (p. 70). They are dangerous (p. 12). There is a marvelous exchange in the “Autumn Floods” chapter of the Zhuangzi written by followers of Zhuangzi whose ideas paralleled his own. Mindful that creatures honored at court (including sacrificial tortoises and cows) often lose their lives in the bargain, the author reports that Zhuangzi was once offered a high post in Chu; Zhuangzi replied to the officials sent to make the offer by reminding them of the sacred tortoise stored in the king’s ancestral temple. Zhuangzi asked them if it would rather be alive in the mud or dead and honored. He matched their obvious reply with “Go away! I’ll drag my stall in the mud.”

Later Daoists, inspired by the door that Zhuangzi had opened to an alternative to the Confucian official service ideal, made much of refusal of or withdrawal from public service, whether the reason was benevolence or not. Some praised the solitude of the recluse, but many Daoist hermits lived in groups. To be a recluse did not necessarily mean abandoning family; rather, it meant staying away from political involvement.

The Holistic Perspective. Our present text does not bring out one curious but important feature of Zhuangzi’s writing that is suggested by the very idea that there is a preferred way to lead a life. As an opponent of pursuing goals derived from verbally definable standards, Zhuangzi had no equal. Yet he had his own goals, derived from treating the Dao as a unity that permeates or links together the many things.

One such goal was the achievement of a holistic perspective, the ability to regard something from many different angles. Obviously this ideal arose from the ability to “forget” the categories associated with particular schools of thought. Positively stated, it was the ability to sort freely through countless perspectives, perhaps mindful that each might have a piece of the truth. The following passage of one of the original Zhuangzi chapters uses the terms “this” and “that” to refer to different perspectives and their categories:

To show what such regards as right or wrong or to show that what each regards as wrong in right, there is no better way than to use the light of Nature.

There is nothing that is not the “that” and there is nothing that is not the “this.” Things do not know that they are the “that” of things; they only know what they themselves know. Therefore I say that the “that” is produced by the “this” and the “this” is caused by the “that.” This is the theory of mutual production. Nevertheless, when there is life there is death, and when there is death there is life. When there is possibility there is impossibility, and when there is impossibility there is possibility. Because of the right, there is the wrong, and because of the wrong, there is the right.

The standpoint of the Dao brings all of these arbitrarily acceptable and unacceptable positions into one; gathering the possible insight of each. The
text goes on, "Therefore the sage does not proceed along these lines (of right and wrong, and so forth), but illuminates the matter with Nature. . . . The 'this' is also the 'that.' The 'that' is also the 'this.'" Inspired by this idea, the follower of Zhuangzi who wrote the "Autumn Floods" chapter described Zhuangzi's current situation in this way: "To him there is no north or south—in utter freedom he dissolves himself in the four directions and drowns himself in the unfathomable. To him there is no east or west—he begins in the Dark Obscurity and returns to the Great Thoroughfare."12

The Great Thoroughfare is the Dao. The expression refers to the fact that as the timeless principle of change, it perturbs like a road through all the myriad things that undergo transformation from one physical form to another. Zhuangzi is free in the negative sense of being free from the constraints of a single perspective, the kind that enables the Mohist to understand only through Mohist categories and the Confucian through Confucian categories. He is free in the positive sense in that his mind can roam over most or all perspectives. This is one of the things that makes it possible for him to respond like a mirror to an objective situation in a way that completely reflects the objective situation rather than his own prejudices. Elsewhere in that same chapter, one of the characters remarks, "He who understands the Way is certain to have command of basic principles. He who has command of basic principles is certain to know how to deal with circumstances."13

The other positive value and goal that Zhuangzi derived from his insight about the uninary nature of the Dao was mystical. It was loss of awareness of self, to be replaced by awareness of participating in the Dao. Traditionally mystics in a variety of cultures have described at least two common claims in their writings. The first is that the proper perspective of the world is one that unites the variety of experienced phenomena, and this perspective should inform one's attitude toward those things. Zhuangzi meets this criterion. A well-known passage in his chapter the "Discussion on Making All Things Equal" says 'Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me.' In addition to repeating this position, several of the other chapters speak of the perfected person as "having no self." He described such a condition as attainable through fasting—not the fasting that precedes religious sacrifice, but fasting the mind. This is empyting the mind of the control exercised by the categories through which one school of thought or perspective interprets the world.

Zhuangzi put into the mouth of Confucian's favorite disciple some words that express the idea of union with the Dao. This is the same disciple who told his master that he had been improving by forgetting the Confucian teachings of benevolence, righteousness, rites, and music. He continued: "I stand up by limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything."14 Our delightful cartoons convey this ideal quite nicely. One balloon (p. 54) reminds us that "Only the selfless person can live up to the standards of nature because your body is just one temporary form in nature's constantly changing process." We also find it in the verses on p. 55:

Don't see with your eyes.
Don't hear with your ears.
Don't think with your mind.
Embrace the primal one,
No knowledge, no self.
Go with nature,
Participate in nature, be one with nature.
And a long life will come naturally.

The other claim that mystics traditionally have made is that ordinary language is useless for describing mystical experiences. Zhuangzi's own position on the limitations and obstructions of language are by now well known to the reader. But it is interesting to note that he never discussed language and his own mystical experiences.

The topic of language and mysticism does raise the intriguing question of whether Zhuangzi's understanding of the ability of a person to understand the nature of the Dao involves verbal summarization or intuitive insight. A reader could quite properly assimilate the Dao from the traits that Zhuangzi explicitly attributes to it in language. In the "Discussion on Making All Things Equal" Zhuangzi wrote that "the Way has never known boundaries." This is similar to the description of the Dao in the Laozi as an unscarred block. Individualized things occur objectively as transient possessors of physical forms. Psychologically, individuation is the result of humans categorizing and classifying and attaching labels and evaluations onto those formed objects. The Dao is one. Humans are in part responsible for dividing it up into bounded parts, or for carving up the block. This is something they try to add onto reality. It is not a part of reality itself. From this assertion that the Dao is unbounded, Zhuangzi or a reader could have deduced that we remain part of it, and that the individual should seek to become aware of this fact. The reasoning could continue that he should then treat all equal partners all other things that likewise are part of the Dao.

However, given his distrust for verbal arguments, Zhuangzi would probably prefer the reader to treat his understanding of the Great Thoroughfare as an intuitive insight. That is why the pages so frequently refer to "insight clarity" and why he says that the sage "illuminates the matter with Nature." So, unlike the portrait of the human mind that some Westerners have derived from the Greeks via Descartes, the highest form of mental activity is not reasoning from rationally established axioms or innate truths, but it is simply intuitive insight. That insight is the Dao in turn manifests itself as adaptation to what nature brings ever way. Modeling on nature is automatic.

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Notes

In interpreting the Zhuangzi, I am a transmitter more than an interpreter. I have learned enormously from the works of Jonas C. Graham and Liu Xiaogang, and from my tutor Liu Yuyun. Liu Xiaogang's major work is Zhuangzi shehuo yi qi yanjiu (Zhuangzi's Philosophy and Its Evolutionary Change) (Beijing: