

On Learning What Happiness is

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In this essay I explore through Mengzi and Zhuangzi the question of what happiness is. In choosing to frame my question with the word ‘happiness’, I am guided by the desire to draw some comparative lessons for Western philosophy. “Happiness” has been a central concept in Western ethics, and especially in Aristotelian and utilitarian ethics. Perhaps even more importantly, laypeople across a wide swath of contemporary societies frequently use the term to make sense of what has happened in their lives (e.g., “My marriage has been a happy one”) and to explain why they have made important life decisions (e.g., “I left my job because I was unhappy”).

The kind of happiness to be discussed in relation to the early Chinese thinkers includes but is not necessarily reducible to a subjective state of mind because it may also involve or be intertwined with activity. The relevant kind of happiness also has a normative dimension: it is something we have good reason to aim for, though I want to leave open the question of whether it is the ultimate thing that human beings ought to aim for or whether we have an all-things-considered reason to aim for it. The early Chinese concept most relevant to discussion of Mengzi and Zhuangzi is that of *lè* 樂, which is often translated as happiness or joy but perhaps best rendered as “contentment.” From Mengzi, we learn about the relational dimension of happiness as contentment: it is both implicit within our natures and something we must explore the world to find. We learn from both Mengzi and Zhuangzi that there is the reflexive dimension of happiness: a reflective acceptance of the inevitable transformations of life and death. And from Zhuangzi we learn the importance of living in the present and to question the importance of happiness as a personal goal.

Happiness and the analogical growth of desire in Mengzi

Mengzi, better known in the West by his Latinized name of ‘Mencius’, is most readily identified with his views of the ways that human nature provides a basis for morality and moral development. He is not as readily identified with his views of what human happiness is. Unsurprisingly, he often connects happiness with a commitment to morality. I shall argue that the connection is not as tight as Mengzi makes it out to be, but that we can still learn a lot from him about where human happiness might lie. I begin with a discussion of one of the most famous passages of the text named after him, which shows him in discussion with King Xuan of the Chinese state of Qi, trying to persuade this king to adopt the Confucian *dao* 道 or way.

In 1A7, when King Xuan asks Mengzi whether he could become the sort of king Mengzi is asking him to be, one who could bring peace to his people, Mengzi asks the king whether it is true that he had spared an ox being led to ritual slaughter. In recalling the event, the king professes some uncertainty as to what his motives were, but is persuaded by Mengzi that he was moved by compassion for the ox. Its trembling reminded him, the king recalls, of an innocent man going to execution. Mengzi concludes that all that the king has to do is to take this mind of compassion he has applied to the ox and apply it to his own people.

The analogies appearing in this passage—the suffering of an innocent man about to be executed with the terror of an ox being led to slaughter, and in turn the ox’s terror with the suffering of the king’s people—appear crucial for what Mengzi is trying to do. It is clear that he is trying to get the king to *care* about his people’s suffering, but how does he expect to accomplish

that? This question has received much discussion, by others and me, but rather than rehearsing the controversy, here I simply want to advance some of my latest thinking on this question, especially as it relates to the nature of happiness in Mengzi. It is doubtful that Mengzi is trying to motivate the king to treat his subjects better simply because that would be more consistent with his compassion for the ox, he has not chosen a very promising strategy. Feelings are compelled by logic only if one has a feeling for being logical. Nor is Mengzi even trying to get the king to acknowledge that he has a moral reason to spare his people suffering. The king probably knows that already, or if he doesn't, he is beyond helping.¹

The psychologists Clore and Ortony (2000) have identified a way in which an object can acquire emotional meaning for a person. They call this way "reinstatement," which is based on resemblance between features of the past situation that provoked a certain emotion and those of the present situation.² Clore and Ortony primarily focus on cases in which the association is made unconsciously and the point of resemblance does not provide the agent a good reason for having the feeling in the present situation. For example, the curly red hair of one's departmental colleague might unconsciously remind one of a merciless bully in the seventh grade, and that point of resemblance may explain but not justify one's hostility toward the colleague. However, emotionally reacting to the present by analogy to a past situation *can be* warranted and/or a conscious matter. In the case of King Xuan, the analogical point of resemblance between the ox and the innocent man and between the ox and the king's subjects is the suffering of innocents. In the case of his subjects, the suffering of innocent subjects *is* a good reason for the king to feel compassion.

So now the question comes down to *how invoking this analogy* might be effective in getting the king to feel for his people. I suggest that the point was to get the king to *re-live* what it felt like to feel compassion for an innocent who did not deserve to suffer, and in that moment, to transfer the re-lived feeling to his innocent people. A better understanding of how transference of emotion might work in such a case requires a further look into what goes into compassion as an emotion. It has several components,³ but for my purposes here I want to identify two: the cognitive component of recognizing that another is suffering or about to suffer; and a motivational component that consists of concern that readies a person for action. The most basic forms of such concern are liking (*hào* 好), which gives rise to pleasure, and disliking (*wù* 惡), which gives rise to sorrow or anger. The cognitive and motivational components get combined in one's *wù* of another's suffering and *hào* of sparing that other from suffering.

Such basic forms of liking and disliking can extend in directions along the lines of relevant similarity. The scope of the desire or feeling can broaden to include objects it did not include before. When one has wanted something x, and if in getting it one experiences satisfaction, one looks for other things that are like x. And if something y seems sufficiently like x, one may come to want y. The point here is *not* that desire is compelled by logic, even the logic of treating relevantly like cases alike. The point is that *desire itself* tends to grow in analogical directions. The two kinds of analogical inference—the kind among beliefs and the kind among desire—is important in Mengzi. We acquire moral knowledge by analogical inference among beliefs; we acquire new moral motivation by analogical inference among desires. Sometimes the two kinds occur simultaneously, but at other times

motivation must “catch up” with moral knowledge already acquired, as I think is most reasonable to construe the case of King Xuan in 1A7. King Xuan already knows he has a reason to respond to the suffering of his own people (especially if he is partly responsible for it). But Mengzi’s task is to get him to want to act on that reason. He is trying to get the king to proceed by analogy from his desiring to respond to the innocent man’s or ox’s suffering to his people’s suffering.

Notice that an appeal to the analogical growth of desire assumes that satisfying certain kinds of desires will give us pleasure or help us to avoid pain. Mengzi makes this assumption about moral desires. In 6A7, he says that just as meat pleases (*yuè* 悅) people’s mouths, so pattern *lǐ* 理 (in this context a kind of normative order to be found in the world), and rightness *yì* 義 pleases their heart-minds. As is well known, Mengzi held that the beginnings of morality are embedded in our *xìng* 性 or nature. This includes not only the cognitive capabilities to recognize features of situations that give us reason to act morally, but also some inborn, unlearned motivation to act accordingly. This inherent motivation would seem to take the form of tendencies to develop, for example, a *wù* for the suffering of innocents, and a *hào* for sparing them from suffering. Acting on these motivations can give us pleasure and help us avoid pain, because these responses of pleasure and pain are part of our nature. But the beginnings are not the complete tendencies we ought to have as moral agents. We must grow them, and I am suggesting that the most plausible conception of how moral motivations grow is the analogical growth of desire.

An appeal to such analogical growth is implicit in other conversations Mengzi has with kings. In 2A1, he asks King Hui whether it is more

pleasurable to enjoy music by oneself or in the company of others. When the king answers, “With others,” Mengzi asks whether it is more pleasurable to enjoy it in the company of a few or of many, and the king answers, “With many.” Mengzi then asks the king to imagine his people hearing the king enjoy his music and asking themselves why his enjoyment must come at the cost of their families being separated, perhaps because of the wars the king has initiated. Mengzi poses an analogous scenario of the people witnessing the king enjoying a hunt and asking why that should come at such a cost to them. By contrast, Mengzi poses a second set of scenarios in which the king has not separated the families of his people but made it possible for them to share with him what he enjoys. What Mengzi has done is to remind the king of his own experience of having increased his enjoyment of music when he has shared it with others. He asking the king to consider what it would be like if he shared with the enjoyment of being with one’s family. Here again Mengzi is taking advantage of the human tendency to seek things that are similar to what has given us pleasure in the past. He is suggesting to the king that his happiness will not be reduced but magnified in sharing what he finds good with his people.

If the king does engage in this further sharing, Mengzi is confident that he will desire more of what he has experienced as a result. This is what I think he means when he says in 2A6 that knowing how to fill out the beginnings of morality in our nature is like a fire starting up or a spring breaking through a hole in the ground. Once the process really gets going, it accelerates in a feedback loop mechanism: as we act on our moral beginnings and experience the pleasure of doing so, we seek out similar opportunities, which nurtures and extends the beginnings, which yet again rewards us with pleasure.

Mengzi hit upon something important. The idea that we may through analogy grow our desires, in addition to our beliefs, may initially seem unfamiliar. But further reflection ought to persuade us that analogies of desire play a crucial role in human life. To take the most primordial cases, when we seek something to quench our thirst and succeed in finding something that is refreshing, we look for things that are similar. This is one of our most basic dispositions as organisms that must adapt to complex and changing environments. Finding a greater array of resources to satisfy our needs is highly adaptive, and success is more likely if we do not limit ourselves to what is exactly like whatever has satisfied us in the past. It makes sense to be attracted to what is *similar* to what has satisfied us in the past, but the potential points of resemblance are many. Some points of resemblance will turn out to be disappointing. Others may lead to satisfaction. We must explore the world to see which points of similarity bring the relevant satisfaction.

Some recent scientific work provides at least partial confirmation of the broad outlines of another part of Mengzi's picture—that we are endowed with pleasure-providing desires for the welfare of others. There are now hypothesized evolutionary scenarios such as kin selection and group selection under which a genetically based concern for others could conceivably have been selected.⁴ Though these scenarios are all to varying degrees speculative, there is supporting evidence from neuroscience for the existence of something like the pleasure-providing desires Mengzi envisioned. Moll and his colleagues (2006) found that anonymous charitable giving based on ethical beliefs corresponds to activation of reward systems in brain networks that are also activated by food, sex, drugs, and money. Such giving is also linked to networks that control the release of

oxytocin and vasopressin, the neurohormones that are linked to attachment to offspring and mates (Zak 2008) and to increasing trust, reciprocity, and generosity among strangers (Zak 2005; Zak et al 2005; Morhenn et al 2008).

Mengzi's insight into how affective desire expands and grows in its objects points to an alternative way to think about how reflection and emotion and desire interact so as to produce new motivation. The Kantian tradition gives us a version of a reified entity of reason generating its own motivation apart from the inclinations that drive our lives as social animals. Advocates of the Humean tradition have tended to defend an instrumentalist view of how reflection prompts desires to change in their scope or new desires to get generated. On this view, reflection gives us the information that certain things are means to satisfying desires we already have, and this prompts us to grow new desires for these things. Clearly, we sometimes get new desires this way, but it is implausible that it is the only reflective means to growing desire.

Consider someone like King Xuan. His problem is not that he already has compassion for everyone and that he needs to learn that treating his subjects better is a means to satisfying a general desire to spare everyone suffering. It is likely that he has no such general desire. Whatever compassion he has is more likely to take the form of more specific responses to situations, such as Mengzi's 2A6 example of feeling alarm and distress upon seeing a child about to fall into a well. He might have a desire to save that child he sees, or the innocent man about to be executed, or the ox he sees trembling in fear, but the problem is extending those more specific desires to cases where he ought to have analogous desires. Mengzi's

strategy is to remind the king of what it felt like to save the ox, and to suggest that he can feel that again if he does treat his people better.

Applied to the question of learning what happiness is, Mengzi's conception of the analogical growth of desire suggests that finding happiness is a matter of exploring both ourselves and our environment—finding a “fit” between ourselves and the environment that confers more happiness. As indicated earlier, we often acquire new desires for what is similar to what has satisfied us in the past through unconscious association. We are also deeply influenced by which sources of pleasure our elders have exposed us to when we are young. If we have been limited in our exposure to pleasures of the “small parts” of ourselves, as Mengzi put it in 6A14, the parts that seek only material gain and sensual satisfaction, we will tend to seek out similar sources of pleasure. But most of us, if we have been raised adequately at all, have had some experience of the pleasures of helping and sharing, and Mengzi seizes upon such past experience in his conversations with kings. He is attempting to intervene in their development as persons at a stage in which they are capable of taking charge of the growth of their desires. The abilities for reflection in adulthood afford us more deliberative ways of growing new desire. We can ask whether the similarity that a present object bears to what has satisfied us in the past is in fact a relevant similarity or merely an accidental one that has nothing to do with what has satisfied us in the past. We can weigh the satisfactions afforded by different new desires and accord them priorities. This is in effect recognizing that there are greater and lesser parts of our selves, which is the thrust of 6A14. But the next question is, “How do we come to recognize these priorities?”

This is where reflection can play another important role not recognized by the Kantian or Humean instrumentalist traditions.

Reflective identification with morality in Mengzi

This reflection appears in Mengzi's discussion of courage in 2A2. He is asked, if he were appointed a high minister of Qi and were able to put the Way into practice, whether his mind be moved or not. Mengzi answers that he would not, and his explanation suggests that he has achieved a kind of tranquility in the face of situations that would agitate and excite most others. In explaining how one achieves it, Mengzi says that he heard from Zengzi that Confucius said, "If, on looking inward, I find that I am not upright, I must be in fear of even a poor fellow in coarse clothing. If, on looking inward, I find that I am upright, I may proceed against thousands and tens of thousands" (translation from Bloom's translation, 2009, p. 29). Tranquility in the face of tumultuous circumstance is highly valued in early Chinese philosophy. The remark attributed to Confucius resonates with *Analects* 4.2, where the Master said, "Those persons who are not human-hearted (*rén* 仁) are neither able to endure hardship for long, nor to enjoy happy circumstances for any period of time. The human-hearted are content in being human-hearted; the wise (*zhì* 知) flourish in it" (translation adapted and modified from Ames and Rosemont, 2010, Kindle location 1729-1731).

As Kwong-loi Shun (2011) has pointed out, Yan Hui's capability for contentment (*lè*) in the face of poverty, as depicted in *Analects* 6.11, is not of the exuberant kind but rather connotes a movement with the ebb and flow of fortune and events beyond one's control. Starting with the correlative links between *le* 樂 as contentment and *yuè* 樂 as music, we might say that Yan

Hui's joy is like moving with the rhythm of whatever music that *tian* 天, the ordering force of the world, is making in the situation. Notice that such contentment involves a reflective element—an inward-looking affirmation that one is aligned with the right. One abides in what is right and with the *dao* because one's most urgent concerns rest in realization of the *dao*. Once one has done one's utmost to realize those concerns, one can simply accept whatever else happens that is beyond one's control. If accorded priority, the desires of the "greater" parts of the self can enable one to "dance" to the music of Heaven even when some of that music means adversity. When one values something larger than the self, one has a perspective within which one can accept this. The desires of the greater parts of the self constitute a source of abiding and robust satisfaction, and that is one way we can come to recognize that they should be accorded priority. In fact, I think Mengzi has something here. His answer as to why he has an unmoved heart resonates with the experience of many who have found peace and freedom from worry over the self within commitment to something beyond their own personal success.

This reflective dimension of Mengzian happiness is appropriate to the kind of creatures we are: vulnerable to being overpowered by forces far larger than ourselves. The consoling thought is that we have done our utmost, and that, insofar as we are vulnerable, we can take comfort in the thought that not everything depends on us. This train of thought leads to the conclusion that one's personal happiness, to the extent that it is separable from realization of the *dao*, is not so important in the end, and it is only if one accepts this that one can move with the rhythm of whatever music *tian* is making. That is, one achieves a kind of happiness by recognizing that it is

not all that important. In 6A16, Mengzi distinguishes between the nobility of *tian* and the nobility of human beings. The nobility of *tian* is human-heartedness, rightness, loyalty, and truthfulness, while the nobility of human beings is the ranks of duke, minister, or high official. Those of antiquity sought the nobility of *tian*, while the deluded of the present day seek after the nobility of human beings and cast aside the nobility of *tian*. In the end, says Mengzi, these deluded of the present day will lose everything.

The different levels of reflection that Mengzi builds into his conception of happiness, I believe, makes his conception genuinely helpful to our own attempts to learn what happiness it. Consider a conception of agency that in one important respect is close to the Mengzian view of human beings: Harry Frankfurt's view (1971) that our actions are only fully our own when we are able to endorse the desires we act on, i.e., when we have second-order desires to act from our first-order desires. On Frankfurt's view, such reflective endorsement is appropriate for the kind of creatures we are. Reflective endorsement is what Mengzi has in mind, and when he spells out what happiness must be for such reflective creatures, he says, in effect, that it cannot be separated from our attempts to find meaning in what we do for the short time we are here. Perhaps happiness for human beings must be something that reflective and incredibly vulnerable creatures find in something that transcends the importance of their individual existences.

It must be said, however, that Mengzi's view has some controversial aspects, as would any substantial view about the nature of happiness. One such aspect is his holding that the *only* stable and enduring kind of happiness is to be found in identification with the realization of moral values. While Mengzi does not make this strong claim explicitly, his believing in it fits better than any form of its denial with the other beliefs expressed in the text. Mengzi holds that *tian* has implanted the *duan* 端, the beginnings or sprouts of morality, in human nature. These sprouts, such as the feeling of compassion, constitute the basis of the knowledge of what is morally required and the motivation to act on that knowledge. The "greater" part of the self contains the sprouts and takes pleasure in growing them through the process of self-cultivation. The greater

part indeed takes priority over the “smaller” part that seeks the smaller pleasures of material gain and sensual satisfaction. Mengzi prides himself on the way he can nourish his great and vast *qi* with uprightness so that it “則塞于天地之間 fills the space between *tian* and earth” (2A2).

One may well question whether moral values are the only consoling source of identification with something larger than the self. One can find meaning in the realization of nonmoral values such as beauty in art or scientific knowledge of the world. However, what one can plausibly say on behalf of Mengzi’s view is that identification with moral values can be a source of consoling identification that allows one to accept the buffeting of fortune to one’s personal goals. I think this is right. But it can be a very hard thing to achieve.

Zhuangzi and problems in getting to the Mengzian kind of happiness

First, the kind of contentment Mengzi points to is available only if one could reasonably affirm that one had done one’s utmost on behalf of what the right. One can feel secure in one’s contentment only if one has done as much as one can for the nobility of *tian*. While a *jūnzǐ* 君子 or exemplary person could do this, the rest of us must confront our past and present failures to do our utmost. Second, one must have confidence that one knows the *dao* in order to rest assured that one has put one’s efforts in the right direction. Perhaps an exemplary person could arrive at such confidence, but the rest of us are either beset with uncertainty about difficult moral issues or possess a certitude to which we are not entitled. Third, even assuming that one is rightfully entitled to confidence about such matters, there is a real question as to whether such confidence can secure equanimity in the face of whatever happens. That is because what often happens in the world encourages skepticism as to whether the *dao* will ever prevail. All three of these reasons appear in the *Zhuangzi*.

For the human difficulty of doing one's utmost, consider the fourth "*Renjianshi* 人間世 In the Human World" chapter, featuring Yan Hui telling Confucius that he intends to straighten out a Prince who is heedless of the lives of his own people. Confucius warns him that he will only endanger himself by rushing into the situation. He must look after himself before seeking to help others. Virtue is ruined by people seeking after fame, and knowledge is used to argue. The first point resonates with Kant's point that it is extremely difficult to tell what our true motives are when we act according to duty, especially if nonmoral interests are served by such action.⁵

The second point—that knowledge is used to argue—has recently been defended by Mercier and Sperber (2011) who marshal a wide swath of studies in cognitive psychology to argue that the primary function of reason is to persuade, not to find the truth. The evidence ranges from the well-known phenomenon of confirmation bias—that people mainly look for reasons to support their current views and ignore reasons that undermine those views (for a review of the studies, see Nickerson 1998)—to the finding that people are quite bad at constructing arguments in the abstract but markedly improve when they are in a group discussing and debating with others (e.g., see Thompson et al. 2005). While I have reservations about the way Mercier and Sperber reify reason and its “primary” function, I think they rightly draw attention to the impressive evidence for the prevalence of persuasion rather than truth-seeking as a motivation. This evidence should unseat our confidence in the assumption very common among philosophers that with ever vigorous use of argument we come closer to the truth apart from what we wish to be or what will serve our interests. But undermining

this confidence is of course what the *Zhuangzi* aims to do, especially in the very clever passage of the second *Qiwulun* 齊物論 chapter, “Equalizing All Things,” in which it is asked whether bringing in a third party to adjudicate a dispute between me and you will help, and the answer, in essence, is that all that will do is to bring another debatable point of view into the argument.

Now consider the difficulty of knowing the *dao*. The skepticism of the *Zhuangzi* is well known, and it is not difficult to see how it poses a challenge to Mengzi’s assumption that the *dao* as normative order can be known. Consider the discussion in the *Qiwùlùn* chapter of the “rights and wrongs” of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other negates and negating what the other affirms. The question of whether we have special duties to family that have an independent weight apart from the duties we owe to everyone, and the question of what extent these special duties have priority over other duties, lie at the heart of this disagreement, which remains live and contentious to this day. In fact, confronting this question honestly threatens to disrupt our lives, as demonstrated by the usually strong reaction that many people have to Peter Singer’s argument (1972) for strong duties to aid famine victims. This strong reaction also illustrates the difficulty of telling what our motives are. If one were to judge that our duties are not nearly so strong as Singer makes them out to be, and that, say, one’s strongest duties lie towards our family and others to whom we have special relationships, one must at least question, if one is honest with oneself, whether one’s judgment is being affected by a desire to protect one’s relatively comfortable life.

Let me consider the difficulty of knowing that the *dao* will prevail, where *dao* is conceived along Mengzian lines as a normative order. Even

supposing that one is confident of one's own motives and of one's conception of what the *dao* requires, even if one is confident that one has done one's utmost, one might still reasonably despair of the *dao* ever prevailing. We are still in a world, as noted in the *Dao zhi* 盜跖 chapter, "Robber Zhi," where small robbers are put in prison while great robbers become lords. That certainly has a contemporary ring in a world where the financial institutions are "too big to fail" while small-time drug dealers are put in prison and many people lose their homes, their jobs and their savings.

Let me reinforce these points about the problems for Mengzian contentment in another way. In a chapter of my book *Natural Moralities*, I defended the claim that at least some people can flourish and live lives of strong commitment to morality. All it takes to defend what I thought at the time to be a relatively modest claim is to point to some people who flourish and who have a strong moral commitment. One of the people to whom I pointed was John Sassall, a country doctor who chose to work in a remote and impoverished English community. As described by John Berger in his book, *A Fortunate Man*, Sassall is to be recognized as a good doctor, not because of his cures, but because he met a deep but unformulated expectation of the sick for a sense of fraternity. He sought to know each of his patients as a total person, including the role of unhappiness in their illnesses. In showing his understanding to each patient, his connection to each, he eliminated their isolation. But in doing so, he satisfied a deep need of his own—to know, to experience all that is possible. To cure others, he cured himself, as Berger put it (1967: 77). Thus Sassall was someone whose own flourishing led him to advance the wellbeing of others. His story, as

told by Berger, has been widely used and been an inspiration in the medical education of generations of medical practitioners.

But in my book I added a reservation in recounting Sassall's story. Sassall had to confront the disquieting contrast between his patients' drastically curtailed expectations of what they could achieve in their lives and what he felt he could have pointed out to them as possibilities for changing their lives. This contrast was tied to his deep depressions, which lasted from one to three months at a time. Having taken responsibility for their lives, he felt inadequate in the face of their suffering and their drastically curtailed expectations of life. This was how I ended my discussion of Sassall in the book. Some years later, I read with great sadness that Sassall had committed suicide. Another doctor who had worked with Sassall said that the kind of personal relationship Sassall had with his patients can in times of crisis draw both doctor and patient into the same vortex of anxiety and despair (Worpole 2005).

Sassall's story illustrates all three difficulties the *Zhuangzi* raises for Mengzian reflective contentment. A person with strong commitment to a cause much greater than the self is vulnerable to despair upon losing hope for the realization of that cause. And Sassall's ambivalence over how much possibility for changing their lives he should reveal to his patients points to the kind of moral ambiguity that can undermine reflective contentment; i.e., one can lose that sense of clarity as to what the cause requires. And one might even suspect a mixture of motives in what made Sassall's career as fulfilling as it was to him. As one reads Berger's book, there is an element of somewhat disquieting self satisfaction that Sassall derives from being the

one who is in command and knows how to reflect back to his patients the larger picture of their situation.

An alternative conception of happiness in the *Zhuangzi*?

None of the difficulties raised for realizing Mengzian reflective contentment constitute a reason to dismiss the ideal. It might be worthy enough to strive for, even if the prospects for realizing it are highly questionable. Indeed, the Confucius who in the fourth chapter calls into question Yan Hui's motives and who warns him not to carry into the situation pre-conceived plans to change the young ruler, is also the Confucius who goes on to give Yan Hui advice if he insists on trying anyway. There is a grudging admiration for Yan Hui expressed in this chapter, and by implication, the ever-hopeful idealism of the historical Confucius.

Even so, we might ask whether the *Zhuangzi* provides an alternative conception of happiness, one that might not be incompatible with the Mengzian conception. The one chapter explicitly directed to happiness as a topic, the “*Zhile* 至樂, Perfect Contentment,” begins with noting what the wide world values: wealth, position, long life, and fame. But the frantic pursuit of these things seems only to wear a person out. Then it is said, “Perfect contentment keeps one alive,”⁶ and “Only *wuwei* 無為 can secure this effect.”⁷ “*Wuwei*” has been variously translated or glossed as “non-action,” “non-purposive action” and “effortless action.” There is much scholarly dispute as to what it means in the *Zhuangzi*, and how important it is in the text, given that the phrase is used only a few times. I won't address the controversy here, but want only to identify one of those meanings I

believe it to have in the text and to explain why I think it is relevant to our search for a constructive alternative conception of happiness.

Consider the claim that perfect contentment keeps one alive. To put forward my suggestion on what “keeping alive” really means, let me quote from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (6.4311): “Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through. If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.” I suggest that to “keep alive” in Zhuangzi’s sense is not keeping breathing for a duration, but very close to living eternally in Wittgenstein’s sense. It is to live in the present, to *fully experience* the present. One way of doing this is to engage in an activity that fully engages one’s attention and that is so satisfying that, whatever external purpose it may serve, it is worth doing for its own sake.

One example of such activity is Cook Ding’s carving of an ox in the third “*Yang sheng zhu* 養生主 chapter Nurturing Life.” The cook is so skilled at sliding his knife through the great hollows and following the great cavities of the ox’s body that it is like he is performing a dance to ancient music. To get to this level of skill, he had to put in a period of apprenticeship in which he saw oxen wherever he looked. After that period, he never saw a whole ox, never even looked with the eye when he cut but was guided by his vital energies, his *qi* 氣.

One feature of skill stories such as Cook Ding’s is the physical nature of the activity. The entire body is involved in the performance of the skill. A revolution that is occurring in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind has turned on the insight that much of our perception and action in the world is not well-understood by conceiving of our brains as information processors

that construct representations of the world based on sensory information and then formulate plans of action based on these representations. Rather, much perception and action flow from the whole of a person's body interacting with the environment. The philosopher of mind Sean Gallagher (2006) has written about the ways in which embodiment shapes our minds. One way is through our "body schemas," the sensory-motor capacities that give us a sense of our bodies in space.

When we close our eyes and raise our arm, our body schemas enable us to know exactly where our arm is located. When we perceive and act, our body schemas become engaged with the environment and with whatever in the environment we can use to help us accomplish our task. When we get good at using these available things, they in effect become part of our body schemas, at least in that context. The psychologist Louise Barrett gives the example of picking up a pencil and using it to poke something (2011:200). When we do that, we feel the object we are poking at, not our fingers clutching the pencil and the pencil encountering resistance. The pencil becomes part of our bodily schema. Or to take another example, when one first learns to ride a bicycle, one does not follow an instruction manual one has memorized and represented in one's mind. Just as we learned as young children to stand upright and walk, coordinating our movements with the proprioceptive feel of moving forward and maintaining balance, we learn to coordinate our movements with the proprioceptive feel of our bodies on the bicycle as we move forward and maintain balance. Our subjective experience in such cases of using things in the environment is not of using our minds to direct our bodies in the manipulation of tools, but closer to our unselfconscious actions as embodied creatures such as poking something

with our fingers or walking or running on our feet. The feeling is one of having enhanced embodied selves through our engagement with parts of our environment.

Let us turn back to Cook Ding's feats of cutting. In terms of what we have come to understand about embodied action in the world, he has made his knife part of his body schema in such a way that he cuts in the unself-conscious way one can write with a pencil or a pen or ride a bicycle. Keeping in mind that on the early Chinese conception, *qi* is the animating energy-stuff of the body, there is a genuine sense in which, as Cook Ding intimates, that we perform skillful activity through our *qi* and not just with the part that composes the brain.

Note, however, that performing a skill without self-consciousness is consistent with paying full attention. In fact, the Cook's attention is exquisitely sensitive, such that when he reaches a difficult place in the ox, he gathers himself, slows down, and in a stroke the tangle becomes unraveled. Not only is performing skill without self-consciousness consistent with paying full attention, it allows full attention to focus on the critical features of the situation that make it *skilled* activity. It is precisely because the Cook can use his body schema to engage with the knife as he uses it that he can pay full attention to how the knife feels as it is sliding through the ox, as if the knife were part of him. If he had to pay attention to how his hand was holding the knife, manipulating it as if it were *not* part of him, then his attention would be divided between the task of holding the knife just so and feeling it slide through the ox.

All these features of the cook's story are also present in the story of the cicada catcher of the nineteenth *Dasheng* 達生 chapter, "Grasping Life."

His skill in using a pole to catch cicadas is such that he is using the pole as if it were his hand. Moreover, he describes his path to his skill, which lay in learning to balance an increasing number of balls on the top of his pole. One might say that he is learning to incorporate the pole into his body schemas. He does not have to pay attention to how he is holding and manipulating the pole. He can pay full attention to the cicadas. And indeed, when he describes his experience of catching cicadas, he says he is aware of nothing but cicadas.

Previous discussions of the skill activities in the *Zhuangzi* have compared them to the “flow” activities studied by the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (see, e.g., 1990). Flow activities as described by Csíkszentmihályi possess a number of characteristics that are plausibly attributed to the *Zhuangzi*'s skill activities: focused concentration on what one is presently doing; a sense of merging with the activity such that one has lost a sense of self as separate from what one is doing; a sense that the activity is its own reward, and loss of the sense that time is passing. The last two characteristics in particular are pertinent to the way in which Zhuangist skill activities are ways of living in the present.

Let me clarify what I mean by living in the present. I do not mean that the skill activity draws from nothing that is learned in the past. Clearly the ability to incorporate parts of the environment such as knives or poles into one's body schema is something we acquire over time through learning. This is why apprenticeship is a necessary part of acquiring skill activity. I do mean that the skill activity is deeply satisfying in such a way that it is its own reward. And to clarify further, the fact that an activity can be its own reward does not prevent it from also having an external reward or an

external purpose to be realized in the future. It is part of Cook Ding's job to cut up oxen for ritual sacrifice or food. And surgeons are among those in Csíkszentmihályi's studies who experience flow. Note also that in both kinds of activity, the skill to engage in it is cultivated and improved, typically over lengthy periods of time that can span decades. But the fact that skilled activity can be its own reward means that what one is doing in the present is not living solely for the future. It means that one does not have to do something one would prefer not to do were it not for one's concern about the future. In skilled activity, one is doing something that is worth doing for the sake of the present, whatever its worth for the sake of the future.

A second characteristic of skilled activity that makes it living in the present is that time slows way down. Compared to one's normal sense of the passage of time, it is almost as if time stops for the time one is engaged in skilled activity. This is a subjective phenomenon, but it seems to affect one's satisfaction with an activity. The slowed passage of time is related to the characteristic of immersion in the activity. When one's attention is truly engaged by an activity, one is paying attention to a lot of information. It's as if time stretches out to accommodate all that is occupying one's attention. One's sense of having lived fully is enhanced.

Experiential immersion in an activity is sometimes thought to be incompatible with deliberate self-consciousness. But self-consciousness about what one is doing can be very much part of the training that *leads* to acquisition of the skill. Self-conscious practice at mastering the basic skills of an activity (how to hold the knife or the pole, for example), can lead to the ability to "forget" about these skills upon mastery, and that allows

experiential immersion in aspects of the activity that make for truly skillful performance (how the knife feels as if slides through the ox; focusing on nothing but cicadas, not on how one is holding the pole).

But something even more complicated may be true of the relation between immersion in the activity and self-consciousness about what one is doing. I have argued elsewhere (Wong 2011) that a kind of self-monitoring can go on in the background of consciousness in skill activity, ready to come to the foreground if a difficulty in performance requires it. This is what happens when Cook Ding comes to a difficult spot in the ox, when he must pause and gather himself to make that careful extra effort, different from the ease he experiences during most of the activity. I suggest that experiential immersion is never absolute and total. Some small part of consciousness must monitor how things are going and be ready to assume self-conscious direction in case the going gets a bit rough.

The way in which skilled activity is living in the present helps to explain the compatibility of living in the present with perfectly ordinary and familiar forms of life, with earning a living as the Cook does, with committing oneself to training to perform the activity well. Indeed the kind of immersion in the present activity that is one of the hallmarks of Zhuangist skill activity is clearly as satisfying as it is because it provides one with a sense of accomplishment, of something done well, and this would not be possible without apprenticeship and some external reward that keeps sustenance of the body going.

However, *wuwei* and, in particular, living in the present is not restricted to skill activities such as Cook Ding's. In the first "*Xiao yao you* 逍遙遊 chapter Going Rambling without a Destination," Zhuangzi chides

Huizi for not being able to find a use for the shells of huge gourds he had grown. Having in mind that they could be used to store or to ladle water, but finding that the shells were too large and unwieldy for that purpose, Huizi smashes them to pieces. Zhuangzi points out that he could have lashed the shells together to make a raft to go floating about on the lakes and rivers, but Huizi had too much underbrush in his head to see that. Our pre-conceptions of the uses of things blind us to how we might engage with them. The story following that of the gourds refers to an ugly gnarled tree that no carpenter would ever think of taking it down to use its wood. Huizi says that Zhuangzi's words are as useless as the tree. Zhuangzi retorts that it is Huizi's problem that he cannot find a use for the tree: he could plant it in the middle of nowhere where he could go to wander or fall asleep under its shade. And the tree's uselessness is certainly of use to itself, since no one will think to cut it down. A feature of both these stories is the common human failing to see beyond the familiar and conventional uses of things. Another feature is the alternative offered: that of activities that are immediate in their enjoyment, experiences that are their own reward.

The latter stories don't celebrate skill. What they have in common with the skill stories is coming into a kind of alignment with things that provides an enriching experience of living in the present. The activity can be its own reward. We often don't see how an activity can be enriching. We impose our preconceptions on things, we are not paying attention to what they are and many possible ways we could engage with them. We are living in the past or the future or both. We are living in the past if we rigidly impose some pattern we have perceived in the past or the present. We are living in the future if we are so focused on trying to make things happen

according to our plan that we do not pay attention to the way things are evolving now, which may not be according to plan. Such a point dovetails well, I maintain, with the lamentation in the *Zhuangzi* about the way people rush about, seeking to assure themselves of happiness in the future by trying to secure wealth and reputation in the present. This is like Huizi being ruled by his preconceptions of what the uses of things are. When he does not get the use he envisions, he blames the things, but not his own imagination and receptiveness to the possibilities that the shape of things gives rise to. Being receptive to such possibilities is common both to the skill stories and the rambling, relaxing and laying-about stories. To live in the present is to be open to engaging with whatever one encounters in life and to live fully in the course of that engagement.

Zhuangist happiness and identification with the whole

Now I want to make a connection between these instances of living in the present and another feature of the Zhuangist conception of happiness, which is identification with the whole. Becoming fully absorbed in something so that one loses one's sense of time and a separate self, setting aside all preconceptions of what is of use and what is not, of what is good and what is not, and being prepared to find in whatever situation one encounters what there is to become fully engaged with, is connected to an emotion one can feel about nature, and that is wonder. Living in the present, in the senses specified, is not the same as identification with the whole. Such living can prepare one to accept and embrace the whole.

in the *Qiwulun* chapter, wonder is the emotion experienced upon contemplating nature as the undifferentiated whole called the *da kuai* 大塊,

or Big Lump. In a haunting image, the Big Lump blows its breath through the ten thousand hollows to give each thing its distinctive life and sound. Identification with the whole allows the four masters in the sixth “*Da zongshi* 大宗師 chapter, The Grand Master,” to accept with perfect equanimity whatever changes illness and death bring to their human forms. One of them rapturously anticipates being turned into a rat’s liver or a fly’s leg. Identification with the whole allows Zhuangzi himself, as depicted in the *Zhile* chapter to accept the death of his wife after initially grieving over her loss. He comes to regard her death as part of the wondrous mystery of change by which she has gone to become a companion to the seasons and to lie down and sleep.

We have here another kind of reflective contentment. It shares with the Mengzian kind the quality of identification with something much greater than the self. It differs from the Mengzian kind in its identification with a whole that goes beyond the moral, beyond the good and evil of human affairs. But like Mengzian contentment, Zhuangist contentment can result in leaving behind one’s personal happiness as a goal. In experiencing wonder about the processes of transformation, one sees one’s own smallness. And that is also how one can come to accept whatever happens. It is a kind of happiness that is achieved precisely when one leaves off concern for one’s happiness.

Reconciling the Mengzian and Zhuangist conceptions of happiness

The human mind is capable of holding many attitudes that are in tension with one another. Sometimes that is to our detriment, but I think it a benefit to hold on to the attitudes constituting both Mengzian and Zhuangist

contentment. I happen to think that the Zhuangist is right about the place of morality in the cosmos. In the end, it is something that matters to human beings, but perhaps only to us and other beings out there who might be constructed similarly. Yet I find it sufficient that it is important for creatures like us. We just have to accept the indifference of the rest of the cosmos. Thus I strive for the kind of Mengzian contentment, knowing that it will be extremely difficult to actually earn it. It is likely that it can only be earned with respect to something one has done at this or that time, not as an enduring achievement in light of one's character. If Confucius only got to such achievement at seventy (*Analects* 2.4), the rest of us can strive for moments and hope that they will be important moments.

Through wonder, Zhuangist reflective contentment can help us accept the indifference of the rest of the cosmos. Zhuangist appreciation of living in the present promotes a loss of self-consciousness and for a time confers a sense of timelessness, and so provides relief from the busy and plan-filled world of human affairs. It can remove the sense of striving, even in the midst of striving. The happiness that comes from living in the present can be difficult to achieve also: precisely for the reasons brought out in the *Zhuangzi*: our minds tend to push into the future with our hopeful planning; or they get stuck in the past, regretting and grieving. But, as in the case of Mengzian reflective contentment there are moments we can realize a sense of timelessness and identification with the whole, and we can try to claim more of them.

Can the Mengzian and Zhuangist kinds of contentment co-exist? Let me begin to address this question by pointing to one area of potential compatibility. Zhuangist embrace of the whole is compatible with

acceptance of sorrow and grief as natural reactions to the loss of those we love, and this is illustrated by Zhuangzi's remark to Huizi that he first grieved like anyone else when his wife died. But Zhuangzi's transition to acceptance illustrates that accepting the whole can include acceptance not only of death but also one's sorrow and grief. After all, in the *Qíwùlùn* the human sounds of sorrow and grief contribute to the chorus of sounds in the world, because that chorus is made up not only by the pipes of Heaven and earth but also by the pipes of people. The Big Lump breathes through us all. If we do not accept the kind of grief and sorrow that a Mengzian would hold to be necessary for a human life, then from a Zhungist perspective we do not accept the whole.

There is, however, a very reasonable question to raise about the ultimate compatibility between Mengzian and Zhuangist contentment. Zhuangist living-in-the-present is incompatible with a Mengzian abiding-in-the-morally-important. How can one live in the present while also holding that what is most important goes far beyond the successes and failures of one's own life? But keep in mind that Zhuangist stretches of living-in-the-present are nested within a thoroughly human world of purposes, the realization of which must of necessity extend into the future. As pointed earlier, Cook Ding earns his living through his marvelous carving; and even more importantly, he only possesses his marvelous ability to live in the present by having worked to acquire the relevant abilities. Living in the present is not a default state of human beings. We earn it, as we must earn most other things that are worth having. Of course, what is more important in terms of Mengzian contentment is that we contribute to what is larger than our individual selves. In striving to make the two kinds of contentment

compatible, we can try to find our stretches of living in the present within a set of purposes that include such contribution to what is larger than our selves.

Our skillful activities may not only provide satisfying stretches of living in the present, but also achievements that enrich the lives of others. I have mentioned that the fourth “*Renjianshi* 人間世 In the Human World” chapter warns us about the mixed motives that can lie behind our idealistic endeavors. But that chapter also describes a kind of *wuwei* of dealing with people. Just as the cook must develop his ability to intuitively find with his knife the great hollows and cavities of the ox, so Yan Hui, if he puts aside his ambitions and his pre-conceived plans for changing the young ruler (what Confucius in this chapter calls 心齋 fasting the mind), has a chance of finding his way in the psyche of this ruler. Like the cook, Yan Hui must listen not with his mind but with his *qi* (无聽之以心而聽之以氣). Though no great confidence is held out for effecting great change for the better in the human world, the only hope lies with a kind of *wuwei* that is exercised with one’s fellow human beings. And if one can set aside hopes of success for the self, as Mengzian contentment would have it, one has a better chance of blending one’s efforts with others to accomplish one’s ideals.

Another reasonable worry to have is based on recognizing that the Zhuangist perspective, within which its distinctive kind of contentment can be found, diminishes the importance of morality, and probably *any* project to which a human being could significantly contribute. It definitely conflicts with Mengzian perspective, within which *tian* has implanted the sprouts of morality in human nature so that we may know what is required of us. If we find consolation from abiding in something like the realization of what is

morally important, that is much larger than our own personal success, the Zhuangist perspective diminishes even that sort of thing that is much larger. So if we aim to abide in what is morally important within a Zhuangist perspective, we must do without the kind of cosmic importance that a Mengzian perspective confers upon what is morally important. We must do with what is of *human* importance, in a de-centered world where human beings are simply a kind of creature that has not existed for very long and have an indeterminate but very probably limited future. We must find contentment from abiding in whatever we can contribute to the wellbeing and achievements of our children, their children, and the lives of others on which we manage to have an effect. I must say that this is enough for me, I do not know how to argue for that conclusion. And perhaps that is to reinforce the conclusion that keeps surfacing in this essay: that human happiness is contingent and fragile.

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¹ The basic interpretation I have advanced in a couple of writings (Wong 1991, 2002) has been that Mengzi is trying to promote emotional development in the king and that this emotional development is tied up with reflection of a certain kind. In some respects I have changed and made more specific my interpretation, partly in response to critics such as Ihara (1991), Ivanhoe (2002), and McRae (2011), and partly as a result of research on contemporary psychology and neuro-science that bear on how the psychological processes described in the text are best described. My latest interpretation of Mengzi is in “Growing Virtue: The Theory and Science of Developing Compassion from a Mencian Perspective,” forthcoming in *The Philosophical Challenge from China*, ed. Brian Bruya, MIT Press.

² Clore and Ortony go on to characterize these processes in ways I don’t necessarily think are the most useful. They hold that direct computation of emotional meaning is “theory-based,” i.e., rule-based computation of emotional meaning based on “underlying” aspects of the situation rather than “surface” features that are perceptually accessible. Reinstatement is “prototype” based processing that goes on the similarity of perceptually accessible features (2000: 37) possessed by a present situation to that of a past situation that has triggered an emotion, resulting in reinstatement of that emotion in the present. This categorization neglects the possibility that the similarity between situations that can reinstate an emotion need not be based on surface similarity. This possibility will be explored shortly.

³ For much more discussion of the makeup of compassion, see my forthcoming “Growing Virtue.”

⁴ An accessible formulation of the kin selection hypothesis is in Hamilton 1963. Group selection has received a vigorous defense in Sober and Wilson 1994. My own opinion is that kin selection is insufficient to explain the scope and extent of human concern for others, but that group selection hypotheses are more plausibly combined with the hypothesis that human cultural evolution also partnered with the evolution of biologically based other-concern. See Fehr and Fischbacher 2003, Gintis 2003, and Boyd and Richerson 2009.

⁵ In a very interesting article (2011), Chong Kim-chong develops an interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* as skeptical about the human ability to achieve virtue, based on a conception of the heart-mind as having a joint cognitive and affective nature, such that the cognitive part cannot take charge of the affective part.

His discussion of the Confucius-Yan Hui exchange attributes to the *Zhuangzi* a characterization of Yan Hui as not being able to overcome the motive of seeking after fame or reputation. I would read that exchange differently. Confucius seems primarily concerned with the interpretation that others will put on Yan Hui's words and actions. Moreover, towards the end of the conversation, when Confucius advises Yan Hui to fast his mind, the primary benefit seems to be Yan Hui's being able to see what sort of person the Prince is, apart from preconceptions he might bring to the task, and apart from any pre-conceived plans he might have for changing the Prince.

⁶ *Zhì lè huó shēn* 至樂活身

⁷ *Wéi wúwéi jǐ cún* 唯無為幾存