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Zhuangzi, Mysticism, and the Rejection of Distinctions

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Zhuangzi, Mysticism, and the Rejection of Distinctions

1. Introduction.

Many Western interpreters of Zhuangzi treat the author of the inner chapters as a mystic. Some associate his mysticism with antinomianism, and conclude that Zhuangzi's philosophy is "dangerous teaching for the masses."¹ They claim that Zhuangzi abandoned the laws of morality, thought good and evil are the same, and ignored the difference between right and wrong. A few maintain that he dismissed reason itself. Zhuangzi's *moral* antinomianism is a subject for another essay; here, I shall focus only on his alleged *logical* antinomianism.

Henri Maspero claimed that according to Zhuangzi "reasoning itself must be abandoned,"² and A. C. Graham thinks Zhuangzi recommended, "we should abandon reason."³ Graham attributes to Zhuangzi extreme and moderate versions of this advice. Since he thinks Zhuangzi understood that "reasoning depends on making distinctions,"⁴ the kinds of distinctions Zhuangzi sanctioned and abandoned should be a measure of his commitment to rationality. The recommendation that we refuse to make *any* distinctions is clearly extreme. By contrast, the advice to abandon only some distinctions, use others with care, but not allow any to distort our thoughts or interfere with our actions, is relatively moderate.

While it is true that Zhuangzi was suspicious of moral reasoning and disputation, and recommended that we not make moral distinctions, I shall argue that he recognized that we need some distinctions to survive, and that others are essential for a creative and happy life. Maspero and Graham, however, attribute to Zhuangzi an "anti-rationalist" position. Both claim that Zhuangzi thought reason obscures the ineffable truth and that distinctions should be abandoned completely. Graham thinks Zhuangzi not only advised us to reject distinctions since they lead to contradictions and interfere with spontaneous action, he claims that Zhuangzi actually took his own extreme advice.

I shall argue that Zhuangzi neither advocated nor adopted an anti-rationalist position. He did not believe that reason obscures ineffable truth, and he never held that distinctions lead to contradictions or interfere with thought and action. He *did* advise us to abandon *some* distinctions, but he never recommended that we leave them *all* behind. Nor did he seek the sort of mystical understanding that Graham describes as "the immediate experience of an undifferentiated world." Rather, Zhuangzi sought **ming** "clarity" 明, and was willing to make whatever distinctions he needed to achieve it. If I am right, we must be cautious with Graham's translations and explanations of the passages from the inner chapters that he thinks supports an anti-rationalist interpretation of Zhuangzi. We should also beware of problems in the writings

of scholars who incorporate elements of Graham's anti-rationalist interpretation into their own attempts to explain Zhuangzi's philosophy.

2. Maspero's sketch of Lao-Zhuang Daoism.

Maspero conjectured that the Lao-Zhuang school of Daoism held that we must abandon reasoning, since "...it obscures the true knowledge which is intuitive ."⁵ In so far as Maspero's sketch of classical Daoism is part of a broader account of the history of ancient China, he gives only cursory support for this conjecture. He cites a tale from the *Tian Di* "Heaven and Earth" chapter of the Zhuangzi.⁶

When the Yellow Emperor lost the "Dark Pearl," symbol of the mysterious way, he sent Knowledge, Acute Vision, and Debate to look for it. Together they failed to find it. So the Dark Pearl cannot be understood by reason. Only *Xiang Wang* 象罔, who presumably personifies a mystical intuitive approach, was able to find it.

Even if this were Zhuangzi's view⁷, we would not know what alternative to rational inquiry *Xiang Wang* is supposed to personify. Frank Kierman renders Maspero's French translation of "*Xiang Wang*" into English as "Abstraction." James Legge's equivalent for the Chinese is "Purposeless."⁸ Burton Watson tries "Shapeless," and Victor Mair settles on "Amorphous." Perhaps *Xiang Wang*'s search for the Dark Pearl lacked a purpose, or, like

flowing water, took on the contours of whatever it encountered. We cannot be sure.

3. Did Zhuangzi recommend that we abandon all distinctions?

A. C. Graham made his claim that Zhuangzi wanted us to abandon reason an integral part of his account of classical Chinese philosophy. His major works all defend the view that Daoist thinkers, especially Zhuangzi, should be read as responding to their "rationalist" counterparts. Zhuangzi, he thought, was reacting to the deliberations of the followers of Kongzi and Modi, and was even convinced by some of the paradoxes of the sophist logicians.

Graham thinks Zhuangzi believed not only that sophists can prove contradictions but that it is possible to prove a contradiction whenever one tries to make a "distinction which is basic to analytic thought."⁹ Zhuangzi discussed different sets of contrary terms that are basic to his analysis and resolution of certain philosophical problems. Among them are the sets: **shi** "it" or "this" 是 and **bi** "other" or "that" 彼, **shi** "that's it" 是 and **fei** "that's not it" 非, **shi** "this" 是 and **bu shi** "not this" 不是, as well as **ran** "so" 然 and **bu ran** "not so" 不然. **Shi** and **fei** also have pragmatic and moral uses that can be captured in English by contraries such as "suitable" and "unsuitable," "correct" and "incorrect," or "right" and "wrong." Graham thinks Zhuangzi believed the use of any of these terms to make a distinction results in a contradiction. On

these grounds, he attributes to Zhuangzi the extreme recommendation that “...we should avoid contradiction by *refusing* [my italics] to make this distinction.”¹⁰

If we cannot distinguish **shi** “what is” from **fei** “what is not” without contradicting ourselves, we would be unable to make any distinction, ordinary or profound, without embracing a logical absurdity. Graham apparently thinks Zhuangzi illustrates this point by drawing a contradictory conclusion from his consideration of “the moment of death.” He says,

Chuang-tzu once takes up Hui Shih’s observation that at the moment of death a thing is simultaneously alive, and draws the conclusion that both ‘It is alive’ and ‘It is dead’ may be simultaneously admissible.¹¹

The conclusion Graham attributes to Zhuangzi would have been truly astonishing had he drawn it about two English sentences. He did borrow Hui Shi’s claim **fang sheng fang si** “Simultaneously with being alive one dies,” 方生方死, and conjoined it to its reversal **fang si fang sheng** “and simultaneously with dying one is alive” 方死方生¹². Did he think **sheng** 生 and **si** 死 function like contrary terms, such as our English words “alive” and “dead?” “Alive” and “dies,” and “alive” and “dying,” are clearly not contraries. So if Zhuangzi thought of **sheng** and **si** as contraries, Graham’s translation

would be inaccurate, and if he did not, his assertion that Zhuangzi drew a contradictory conclusion from them would be false.

If Graham's translation is accurate, Zhuangzi was using **sheng** and **si** to refer to the *processes* of living and dying. In other places, he seems to use them to refer to the *states* of life and death,

How do I know that love of life [**sheng**] is not a delusion? How do I know that fear of death [**si**] is not like being a homeless waif who does not know the way home?¹³

Life is a state of being alive, and death a state of being dead. Death is not the same as dying, and life is not the same as living. We are all alive and dying, but no one is alive and dead. Zhuangzi understood the differences among these processes and states, even though his words for expressing them, **sheng** and **si**, might have been inadequate for capturing these nuances. Although he might have lacked the wherewithal to express them clearly, however, he never questioned the reality of the distinction between living and dying, life and death, and so on. His *question* was what to do about them when we are alive, but refusing to distinguish between them was not one of his *answers*.

Sometimes Graham's translations of important passages are biased in ways that are calculated to suggest that Zhuangzi went to extremes. For

example, he tries to support the claim that Zhuangzi advised us to “leave all distinctions behind”¹⁴ by translating a crucial passage as:

Treat even the not this as this, the not so as so. If this and so are really this and so, there is no difference for argumentation from not this and not so.¹⁵

But his translation of the phrase **shi bu shi, ran bu ran** as “Treat even the not this as this, the not so as so” 是不是然不然 is perplexing. He reverses the order of the English equivalents of **shi** and **bu shi**, **ran** and **bu ran**. Had he followed the original order, his translation would have read “Treat even the this as not this, the so as not so,” rather than “Treat even the not this as this, the not so as so.” Either way, it must be admitted, neither imperative could promote sagehood.¹⁶

Graham’s translation differs significantly not only from Burton Watson’s, but from Victor Mair’s. Watson renders the phrase “Right is not right; so is not so.”¹⁷ Mair’s alternative to Graham is:

“Right may not be right, so may not be so. If right were really right, then right would be distinct from not right, and there would be no dispute. If so were really so, then so would be distinct from not so, and there would be no dispute.”¹⁸

Graham, Watson and Mair all parse the phrase **shi bu shi, ran bu ran** into English as a conjunction of two grammatically complete sentences.

Graham’s translation conjoins two imperatives; Watson’s is a conjunction of

self-contradictory claims, and so may be Mair's. But the phrase need not be parsed that way. Gia-Fu Feng treats it as the topic of a topic-comment construction. The topic is "Consider right and wrong, being and non-being." He translates the comment as follows:

If right is indeed right, there need be no argument about how it is different from wrong. If being is really being, there need be no argument about how it is different from non-being.¹⁹

Feng's use of "being" as an equivalent for **ran** 然 is clumsy and unorthodox. "So" seems closer to the mark. But Zhuangzi's intentions emerge through Feng's translation anyway. Mair translates the Chinese into the English subjunctive mood, "If so *were* really so, then so *would* be distinct from not so, and there *would* be no dispute." [my italics] The subjunctive mood hints that Zhuangzi might have harbored anti-rationalist thoughts after all. It suggests that so, in the end, might not be so. For it is easy to find people who will dispute anything, even what is obvious. Feng's translation avoids the suggestion of anti-rationalism by rendering the Chinese into the English present tense, and by translating 亦無辯 as "there *need* be no argument" instead of Mair's "there *would* be no dispute." Rather than allow the possibility that, contrary to fact, so might not be so, Feng's translation suggests that if so really *is* so, arguing about it is a waste of time. The assumption, of course, is that so *is* really so. What

else could it be? The fact that some people are willing to debate anything does not entail that so might not be so. It merely suggests that if people do not understand things fully, they can squander time and energy by arguing. Thus, this passage does not support Graham's claim that Zhaungzi advised us to "leave all distinctions behind."

According to Maspero, Zhuangzi thinks reason obscures the ineffable intuitive truth. Graham thinks Zhuangzi advises us to leave all distinctions behind for this truth. However, his translation of the passage that he thinks supports the claim that Zhuangzi made this extreme recommendation distorts the text.

To divide, then, is to leave something undivided; to [**bian** 辯] argue out alternatives is to have something which is neither alternative. "What?" you ask. The sage keeps it in his breast, common men argue it out to show it to each other. Hence I say, to argue out alternatives is to have something you fail to see.²⁰

Once again, Graham's translation differs considerably from Victor Mair's.

Therefore, wherever there is analysis, something is left unanalyzed. Wherever there is dispute, something is left undisputed. You may ask, "How can this be?" The sages embrace all things, but ordinary people dispute over them to show off to each other. Therefore it is said, wherever there is dispute, something is left unseen.²¹

Mair translates the term *bian* 辯 as "to dispute," while Graham settles on "to argue out alternatives." Either translation will do, but there are problems with Graham's rendering of the sentence *bian ye zhe you bu bian ye* 辯也者有不辯也 as "to argue out alternatives is to have something which is neither alternative." No matter what English equivalent we choose for *bian*, the syntax of the phrase *you bu bian* 有不辯 requires an English sentence modeled on the pattern, "something is not *bian*." For example, "some alternative is not argued out," "some proposition is not debated," "something is left undisputed," and so on. We can read Mair's translation, "Wherever there is dispute, something is left undisputed," as making a simple point about logic, namely: when people argue about the truth of some matter their argument assumes the truth of other matters. Graham's translation, however, requires us to say that there is "something which is neither alternative." By translating the phrase this way, he implies that Zhuangzi understands something unavailable to anyone bound by the law of excluded middle. And when he characterizes Zhuangzi as saying, "The sage keeps it in his breast," he suggests a reference to this "something which is neither alternative," this Dark Pearl. Mair, on the other hand, translates the Chinese as "The sages embrace all things." So while Graham's Zhuangzi grasps a mystical truth lying beyond language and logic, Mair's studies the ten thousand things.

Mair and Graham also differ about *why* Zhuangzi thinks people argue. Mair's Zhuangzi thinks they argue "to show off to each other." Graham's thinks they argue about the mystical truth the sages allegedly hold in their breasts in order "to show it to each other." Mair's suggestion is plausible. People will argue about anything to impress each other with their wits. But the idea that people can *show* each other something by arguing about it, be it a peanut or the Dark Pearl, is ridiculous. So Zhuangzi did not think that we should abandon distinctions because they lead to contradictions, or because they obscure the mystical truth. Nor did he think, as we shall see in the next section, that we should abandon them because they interfere with thought and action.

3. Did Zhuangzi make distinctions?

Graham proclaims,

Like all great anti-rationalists, Chuang-tzu has his reasons for not listening to reason. He develops them in the pieces assembled in [chapter two which shows] that Chuang-tzu learned more than one might have expected from his rationalist mentor Hui Shih.²²

He thinks Hui Shi convinced Zhuangzi that attempts to "divide" 分 *fen* space and time with language-based systems of measurement inevitably generate contradictions. He further claims that Hui Shi impugned only spatial and temporal divisions, and adds,

...it will take only one more step to observe that all reasoning depends on making [**bian**] distinctions, and to reach the conclusion that we should *abandon reason* [my italics] for the immediate experience of an undifferentiated world, transforming 'All are one' from a moral into a mystical affirmation. It is in [chapter two] that Chuang-tzu takes this step.²³

Graham describes the taking of this step as a state of "...illumination in which all distinctions lapse, self and other, life and death, and it is no longer I (who) act but Heaven."²⁴ A "lapsed" distinction is presumably a distinction one no longer uses. It is not necessarily a distinction that one forgets, however. Someone's distinction between God and the devil, for example, may have lapsed in that one no longer takes it seriously, even though one acknowledges that others do. But, for obvious reasons, no one could allow *all* distinctions to lapse.

Zhuangzi never took the step Graham claims he took. He never refused to make distinctions or allowed them all to lapse. On the contrary, many of Zhuangzi's parables stress the importance of being mindful of distinctions. Cook Ding's skill, for example, distinguishes the **jian** 間 "spaces" in an ox's carcass from its veins, ligaments, tendons and bones. The importance of distinctions for the successful practice of a craft is further illustrated in the parable of Duke Huan and Wheelwright Bian at the end of the *Tiandao* chapter.

If the spokes are too loose, they'll fit sweet as a whistle but the wheel won't be solid. If they're too tight, you won't be able to insert them no matter how hard you try. To make them neither too loose nor too tight is something you sense in your hand and feel in your heart.²⁵

Even if Bian could not explain to his son the difference between so and not so, “too tight” and “too loose,” his wheels show that he knew how to put the distinction into practice.

The truths discovered by Zhuangzi are worldly and obedient to the laws of logic. So he declares that, “The sages discuss [**lun** 論] what lies within the world, but do not deliberate [**yi** 議] upon it.”²⁶ Deliberation embellishes discussion by seeking to evaluate the worth of people, practices or situations. Debate extends deliberation to a public forum. Discussion, deliberation, and debate all require the ability to **bian** “make distinctions,” express them in language, and defend, as reasonably as we can, our use of them. Zhuangzi discourages deliberation and debate, not because value judgments are *indefensible*, but because *any moral claim can be rationally defended* so long as the appropriate assumptions are granted. Zhuangzi argues that if conflicting moral judgments can be justified, reason has no authority to decide between them, and debate and deliberation serve no purpose. Discussion and analysis,

on the other hand, if it falls short of insisting on moral distinctions, is a way to get more **ming** "clarity."

Graham *is* correct to think that Zhuangzi used logic in discrediting **bian** "disputation,"

[His] purpose is always to discredit **pian** [**bian**]: to show that by distinguishing alternatives, fixing them by names, arguing over which name fits and which course of action is right or wrong or beneficial or harmful, we become imprisoned in the viewpoint from which what fits our arbitrary choice of a name is 'this', and so obscure our vision of the whole.²⁷

Definition and debate cannot be relied upon to settle questions of right and wrong or benefit and harm, especially if the situation is evolving, or the disputants are more concerned with their reputations and with winning than with being fair or understanding the truth. But a philosopher's decision not to argue over contrary moral or pragmatic evaluations is not the same as a butcher's refusing to distinguish the spaces in an ox carcass from the non-spaces, or a wheelwright's allowing the distinction between true and wobbly wheels to lapse.

When Graham claims that Zhuangzi is an anti-rationalist, he is claiming *more* than that he refused to **bian** dispute or **yi** deliberate over moral or pragmatic value distinctions. In some places he is claiming that Zhuangzi recognized that *conscious reflection* or *thinking* about what we do while we are

doing it can interfere with performance.²⁸ The ability to wright wheels, butcher oxen, swim, and so on, can and perhaps should be carried out with minimal conscious reflection on the process. If one simply ceased to make distinctions, however, the result would be disastrous. Yet Graham claims that Zhuangzi thinks we should refuse to make them since they interfere with perfect action.

He says,

...it is precisely when we distinguish alternatives, the right and the wrong, the beneficial and the harmful, self and other, that we cut ourselves off from the world of objectivity, and lose the capacity of the angler, the carpenter and the swimmer to heed his total situation with undivided attention and respond with the immediacy of a shadow to a shape and an echo to a sound.²⁹

To attain perfection in their actions, perhaps artisans and sages *should* stop thinking about the moral and practical worth of what they are doing. Moreover, when performing a task, perhaps we should stop thinking *altogether*, even about the distinctions necessary to complete the task. But swimmers and carpenters, even when acting with undivided attention, do not refuse to distinguish up from down or right from left. And anglers who succeed know the difference between a bite and a snag. Anyone who *stepped beyond*, not only *spatial and temporal* **fen** divisions, but who *refused* to make, allowed to *lapse*, or *left behind* all **bian** dichotomies, would be unable to act, especially with the

consummate skill of a master artisan or a sage, and would be unable to use language for any purpose.³⁰ So Graham's claim that Zhuangzi abandoned distinctions, either for the mystical experience of "an undifferentiated world," or the practical result of having the "undivided attention" of a master artisan or a sage, is simply erroneous.

4. Graham's Legacy.

Most English speaking scholars of the Zhuangzi are familiar with Graham's translation and interpretation of the inner chapters, but not all of them are part of his interpretive legacy. To be a part of Graham's legacy one must incorporate elements of his "anti-rationalist" interpretation into one's own account of what is going on in the inner chapters.

For example, in comparing Zhuangzi to Buddhism's most profound philosopher, Nagarjuna, David Loy claims that both thinkers were "...anti-rationalists who present us with strong arguments for not believing in reason."³¹ In making out his case that Zhuangzi was an "anti-rationalist," however, Loy alludes to both moderate and extreme versions of Zhuangzi's advice to abandon distinctions.

He quotes Graham's claim that Zhuangzi thinks people are mistaken to suppose, "...life presents us with issues that must be formulated in words so that we can envision alternatives and find reasons for preferring one to the other."³²

This relatively moderate advice to abandon moral distinctions, such as the distinction between right and wrong, is supported by Mair's translation of an important passage from chapter two: "Now, the manifestation of right and wrong is what diminishes the Way."³³ But Graham insists that in this passage Zhuangzi is recommending more than moral antinomianism. His translation says, "The lighting up of 'That's it, that's not' is the reason why the Way is flawed."³⁴ Mair's translation suggests that Zhuangzi thought our ability to follow the Daoist path of action is diminished when we become ensnared by the phony distinctions and disputations of moralists. So we should avoid making moral distinctions. Graham, on the other hand, treats the Way like the Dark Pearl. When we try to light it up by distinguishing what is from what is not, our understanding of it is distorted. So we should avoid making distinctions.

Loy follows Graham's translation, not Mair's; so his interpretation of Zhuangzi is extreme and anti-rational. He overlooks the possibility that Zhuangzi was speaking of **shi** and **fei** as moral terms, like one of our uses of the English terms "right" and "wrong." That would have allowed for a moderate treatment of the advice to abandon distinctions, namely: "Just abandon the moral ones." Loy is misled by Graham's translation of **shi-fei** as "That's it, that's not." He assumes that by **shi-fei** Zhuangzi understood, "...the discriminations that we have all learned to make in the process of coming to

experience the world in the 'ordinary' way other people do."³⁵ He then concludes that the problem of "That's it, that's not" is that when we make ordinary distinctions, "the Dao is obscured."³⁶ This conclusion brings to mind Maspero's account of the Dark Pearl. Whenever we speak and reason, we lose sight of it. The problem of "that's it, that's not," however, is not that we lose sight of the mystical when we make ordinary distinctions. The problem is that were we to abandon ordinary distinctions, we would be unable to think and function, assuming we were alive at all.

Another of Graham's legatees, Daniel Coyle, claims, "Zhuangzi suggests that we practice 'unlearning distinctions,' for it is precisely in the act of making distinctions that the **dao** is lost."³⁷ The claim that "the **dao** is lost" when we make distinctions alludes, once again, to the myth of the Dark Pearl. The sorry suggestion is that we must abandon language and reason, if we want the real truth. But Coyle borrows the phrase "unlearning distinctions" from Graham, not the Zhuangzi!

Lee Yearly tries to side step the mysticism of the Dark Pearl. He thinks Zhuangzi's philosophical project is to explain and encourage "intra-worldly mysticism." Intra-worldly mystics do not identify with "ultimate reality," but seek instead "a way through the world."³⁸ Apparently they find it, or are aided in their quest for it, when their actions are motivated by "transcendent" drives.

“Dispositional” drives are either learned or innate motives. “Reflective” drives are desires to modulate dispositions. Transcendent drives “dissolve” both dispositional and reflective drives, “cause the normal self to disappear,” and bring a person to “the highest possible spiritual fulfillment.”³⁹

The “ultimate spiritual state” that Yearly thinks Zhuangzi sought is tantamount to the mental state of “undivided attention” that Graham thinks Zhuangzi tried to capture. Graham’s state of “undivided attention” cannot be achieved when we make distinctions, and the “ultimate spiritual state” Yearly thinks Zhuangzi pursued, “...lacks the ‘judging that’s it, that’s not’ that arises from following the discriminating mind manifested in one’s dispositional or reflective drives.”⁴⁰ If Yearly and Graham are correct, Zhuangzian enlightenment is a kind of super-conscious consummately skilled responsiveness that does not require the engagement of the “discriminating mind.” But if this means that the sage refuses to make distinctions, it could not possibly be correct. For a state of mind in which one ceases to judge between what is and is not would be a state of confusion not at all conducive to ordinary, let alone enlightened, practice.

Yearly further claims that the intra-worldly mystic’s “perfected spiritual state” cannot be described in “normal language.” He claims that Zhuangzi created “verbal images” and metaphors “to point to” it. But verbal images and

metaphors must be formulated and stated, whether spoken or written, in a language. So if something really is ineffable, even Zhuangzi's metaphors and "verbal images" would be useless for expressing or pointing to it. In a famous review of Wittgenstein's Tractatus, Frank Ramsey remarked, "If you can't say it, you can't say it, and you can't whistle it either!"⁴¹ Zhuangzi would have appreciated Ramsey's humor. He never recommended that we abandon all distinctions, and his metaphors, images, poems, parables, and stories were invented by him for purposes *other* than trying to say what cannot be said. Broadly speaking, he created them to instruct the sages, and among those instructions is the following, "The sages set aside without discussion what lies beyond the world."⁴²

Robert Eno, another of Graham's legatees, like Yearly, also avoids allusions to the Dark Pearl, even though he thinks Zhuangzi draws upon an ancient Chinese tradition that "rejects reason as privileged" and prefers "practical knowing as the principle means of obtaining certain understanding of the world."⁴³ Eno's Zhuangzi celebrates "know how," but since the "...natural world is too protean to be known through theory-based assertions of what is so and what is not"⁴⁴ he is suspicious of "theoretical or fact knowing." Eno apparently thinks that for Zhuangzi theoretical and factual knowledge require language and distinctions, but know how or practical knowing does not. He is

forced into this position, since he wants to accommodate Graham's dogma that Zhuangzi rejected reason, language and distinctions. So he emphasizes the importance for Zhuangzi of practical knowledge, and concludes that Zhuangzi thought, "...practice can yield authentic knowledge, [but] speech cannot."⁴⁵

Eno is understandably nervous about the claim that Zhuangzi made the extreme recommendation to dismisses speech and distinctions altogether, so he ultimately falls back on a modified version of it:

Zhuangzi does not maintain that we should not speak, but that we should not abuse speech by using it to assert: that words should not be subject to judgments of true and false.⁴⁶

Zhuangzi *did* think we should not abuse speech, but where in the text does he assert that assertions are abuses of speech? The idea is not only groundless, it is a recipe for disaster. Suppose, for example, that the pot is hot, and you are about to grab it. Would someone's assertion that it is hot be an abuse of speech, even if it keeps you from burning yourself? And if Daoists never subject words to judgments of true or false, they could never know if others are lying or telling the truth. They could not even be certain about the truth of their own words! If this is "authentic knowledge," the sage might as well cut out his tongue and burn out his eyes!

5. Conclusion

The claim that Zhuangzi was an anti-rationalist can be traced to Henri Maspero, but its modern currency is attributable to Angus Charles Graham. Graham's anti-rationalist interpretation of Zhuangzi has deeply influenced how contemporary Western scholars think about Daoism. It has even been enshrined in The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy by Philip J. Ivanhoe who claims that Zhuangzi "...is a kind of anti-rationalist who sees wisdom as 'knowing how' rather than 'knowing that.'"⁴⁷

The present essay refutes Graham's anti-rationalist interpretation of Zhuangzi. Graham and his legatees claim that Zhuangzi recommended that our ordinary, rational, discriminating, assertive mind should be jettisoned to allow us to intuit the mystical unity of all things or to enable the consummate operation of our spontaneous transcendent spirit. Graham's anti-rationalist account of Zhuangzi claims that he made no distinctions, and that he advised others not to make them either. As we have seen, however, his case for these claims is a house of cards fabricated out of question-begging ways of translating and explaining the text, and it rests on the absurd assumption that a person who ceased to make distinctions could nevertheless act in skillful and creative ways.

A more moderate interpretation of Zhuangzi's philosophy allows that he abandoned only moral distinctions, especially the distinction between right and wrong, and that he urged others to do the same. He held that moral distinctions have no basis in reality; so making them encumbers our practical deliberations and decisions. Zhuangzi also advised that once we begin to act, we should stop *thinking* about the non-moral distinctions necessary to complete the action. But he himself never stopped *making* those distinctions, nor did he advise others to leave them behind. On the contrary, he argued that distinctions are important. He urged that we be precise when making them, and advised that we not talk or think about them in reckless ways. In short, Zhuangzi thought we should avoid making moral distinctions, and that we should not obsess about the non-moral ones we need to make, if we want to speak and act with consummate skill. But the way he prescribed is not easy to follow; so he emphasized that it is not for everyone. Some who attempt to follow it, like the child from Shouling who tried to learn the Handan walk, become hopelessly confused.

Before he had acquired this new skill, he had forgotten how he used to walk, so all he could do was come crawling home on all fours.⁴⁸

But at least this child was able to find its way home. Had it forgotten, not just how to walk, but how to make distinctions, who knows where it would have ended up?

Notes

1. Aubrey Moore, "Note on the Philosophy of Chapters i-vii," in Herbert A. Giles, translator, Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist and Social Reformer. (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889). Second Edition, (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1926), reprint by AMS Press, 1974, p. xxv.
2. Henri Maspero, China in Antiquity. Translated by Frank A. Kierman Jr., (University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), p. 307.
3. A. C. Graham, Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters. (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), p. 9.
4. ibid.
5. Maspero, op. cit.
6. HY (Harvard Yenching Index for the Chuang Tzu), 29/12/18-19.
7. According to Graham, only the inner chapters and chapters 17-22 "...need to be accepted as belonging consistently to Chuang-tzu's own branch of Taoism." In "How much of Chuang Tzu Did Chuang Tzu Write?" from A. C. Graham, Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature. (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1990), p. 283. Liu Xiaogan is even more specific. He claims that, "...it is impossible that 'Tiandi' be

earlier than the Inner Chapters,” and that “only the Inner Chapters could have been written by Zhuangzi.” In Liu Xiaogan, Classifying the Zhuangzi Capters. Translated by William E. Savage. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1994), pp. 25-26.

8. James Legge, “The Writings of Kwang-Tze,” Volume I. Edited by F. Max Muller, The Sacred Books of China, The Texts of Taoism, Volume XXXIX. (London: Oxford University Press, 1891). Reprinted in The Texts of Taoism: The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu, and The Writings of Chuang Tzu, Part I. (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 312.
9. A. C. Graham, “Chuang-Tzu’s Essay on Seeing Things as Equal.” In History of Religion, Volume 9 (2 & 3). November 1969 and February 1970, p. 141.
10. ibid.
11. A. C. Graham, “Rationalism and Anti-Rationalism in Pre-Buddhist China,” in Unreason Within Reason: Essays on The Outskirts of Rationality, (LaSalle: Open Court Publishing, 1992), p. 106.
12. HY, 4/2/28. A. C. Graham, Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 52.
13. Victor H. Mair, translation with introduction and commentary, Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu. (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), p. 22.

14. According to Graham, "Chuang-tzu once recommends us to *leave all distinctions behind* [my italics] and experience everything as both this and so in a gigantic 'Yes!' to the universe." See A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Dao, (LaSalle: Open Court), p. 184.
15. ibid.
16. If this is not a fresh fish, it would be dangerous for the sage to treat it as though it were. And if it is rotten, what wisdom could come from treating it as though it were not?
17. Burton Watson, translator, The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 48.
18. HY, 7/2/90-1. Mair, ibid., p. 23.
19. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, Chuang Tsu: Inner Chapters, (New York: Random House, 1974, p. 46.
20. Graham, Disputers of the Tao, p. 180.
21. Mair, Wandering on the Way, p. 19.
22. Graham, Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters., p. 9.
23. ibid.
24. A. C. Graham, "Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of 'Is' and 'Ought'" in Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu. Edited by Victor H. Mair. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 9.

25. Mair, Wandering on the Way., p. 129.
26. ibid., p. 19.
27. Graham, "Rationalism and Anti-Rationalism in Pre-Buddhist China," p. 107.
28. Graham says: "Chuang-tzu is deeply interested in types of ordinary behavior which thinking inhibits and types of knowledge which cannot be verbally expressed. A player winning while the stakes were low pauses to think when the stakes are raised, and loses his knack; a woman discovers she is beautiful and ceases to be beautiful." In A. C. Graham, "Reason in Chinese Philosophical Tradition," in The Legacy of China, edited by Raymond Dawson, (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1964).
29. A. C. Graham, Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), p. 21.
30. Mair's translation of **lun** as "to discuss" differs from that of Graham who suggests "to sort out," "grade," or "arrange" as its equivalents. But even if grading, sorting and arranging require no language skills, does Graham really think that someone could skillfully perform them while making no distinctions?
31. David Loy, "Zhuangzi and Nagarjuna on the Truth of No Truth," in Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi, edited by Paul

Kjelberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 51.

32. Graham, Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters, p. 6.

33. Mair, Wandering on the Way, p. 17.

34. Graham, Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters, p. 54.

35. Loy, ibid., p. 55.

36. ibid.

37. Daniel Coyle, "On the Zhenren," in Roger T. Ames, editor, Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 200.

38. Lee H. Yearly, "Zhuangzi's Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State," in Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi, edited by Paul Kjelberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 160.

39. ibid., p. 154.

40. ibid., p. 160.

41. Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, Wittgenstein's Vienna, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1973), p. 278.

42. Mair, op. cit., p. 19. **Liu he zhi wai, shengren cun er bulun.** 六合之外聖人存而不論, HY, 5/2/56. "What lies beyond the six directions

(up, down, left, right, front, back), the sage (grants) its existence, but does not discuss it.”

43. Robert Eno, “Cook Ding’s Dao and the Limits of Philosophy,” in Kjelberg and Ivanhoe, op. cit., p. 128.

44. ibid., p. 132.

45. ibid., p. 133.

46. ibid.

47. Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Taoism,” in The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, General Editor, Robert Audi, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 787.

48. Mair, ibid., p p. 163-164.

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