

**(2) What role does the idea of *wúwéi* (無為) play in the skill stories in the *Zhuangzi*, and what do you think this tells us about Daoism?**

One of Albert Einstein's famous attributed quote compares human life to bicycling: "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."<sup>1</sup> This idea of something apparently so effortless like riding a bike confronted with the necessity of movement encapsulates a bit of *wúwéi*. This essay will explain how *wúwéi* appears in two skill stories of the *Zhuangzi* and how they give us a sharper view of Daoism. *Wúwéi* translates into nonaction or effortless action. Like the bicycle quote already suggests, this does not mean *doing nothing* or being a blissful couch potato. However, it means that the action is unforced; it is the state when one does not practice the piano but *plays* the piano: there is no struggle to find the right keys, to read the music sheet, the music just *flows*. In the *Zhuangzi*, the book named after the thinker, which is one of the key figures of Daoism, the skill stories exemplify each in their way *wúwéi*. The *Zhuangzi*, with all its skill stories and its many layers, seems to aim for challenging other philosophers, like Kongzi or Mozi, rather than delivering a prescriptive doctrine. However, it also challenges more deeply anchored beliefs, like learning through thinking. The know-that indeed seems less pre-eminent than know-how. These skill stories each sheds a different light on aspects of Daoism. When reading them together, one has indeed contemplated Daoism from many viewpoints, which is necessary to illustrate Daoism and its associated perspectivism. The story Butcher Ding highlights different aspects and states of knowing how, through the mastery of carving an ox with a tool, the knife. The story of the Cicada catcher highlights how you can constantly adapt perfectly to your environment – almost blending in –, adapting one's particularities through practice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/06/28/bicycle/> [accessed 27 April 2021]

The Butcher story mentions the interaction between Lord Wenhui, a noble person, and the butcher, who is working. Lord Wenhui comments on the level of skill of the butcher since his movements and cuts were so precise and harmonious. Wenhui exclaims: 'Ah, excellent, that technique can reach such heights!' (Ivanhoe, *Readings*, p. 224) and the butcher answers that what he values is the Dao 'which goes beyond technique' (Idem). He then explains his process of mastering butchery: at first he saw the whole piece and could not see anything other than the piece as a whole. But then later, he began to see only the components without being able to see the ox as a whole. But now, the butcher 'encounter[s] them with sprit and do[es not] look with [his] eyes.' (Ivanhoe, *Readings*, p.225) The butcher shifts perspective, and now with the skill resulting from his practice, carving up an ox is not about cutting one big thing into pieces but follows the line, putting his blade in 'the big gaps, [...] guided by the large fissures' (Idem). He follows the natural structures that are already there. The blade itself testifies of the mastery of the butcher since he did not blunt the knife like other less skilled butchers would, since he is not cutting but 'us[ing] what has no thickness to go where there is space' (Idem). In other words, he puts the very edge of the sharp blade in the empty space between joints, and because there is space, the blade does not blunten, and this since nineteen years. When encountering a difficulty, he slows down, not just his movements but as a whole: 'My gaze settles! My movements slow!'(Idem). This slowing down lets him work subtly, but with extreme efficiency. This impresses Wenhui a lot, who by learning how to carve an ox did learn: 'how to care for life' (idem). The butcher relies on the heavenly patterns of the world to carve the ox. He masters carving so well that he doesn't need to sharpen his knife. Everything in the process has become effortless, even when some difficulty arises, concentration is a spontaneous response, just as the solution that arises, as if from itself. This story highlights that *wúwéi* requires practice: like the German saying mentions 'es ist noch

kein Meister vom Himmel gefallen' (No Master ever fell from the sky). So, one needs to cultivate those skills and then can dwell in effortless action. Additionally, it is interesting to note that in this story, *wúwéi* is not the absence of challenges, or new situations (which a pessimist might call problems), but when such arise the solution comes naturally because cultivating *wúwéi* is cultivating adaptability. It could also be a reminder of modesty, since 'the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly reminds us not to abandon epistemic modesty when we make epistemic progress.' (Hansen, 2014) In other words, the butcher story, as many other stories, illustrate humility and an awareness of lifelong learning.

The Cicada catcher is a story about Confucius travelling through the woods when he bumped into a hunchback catching cicadas. He remarks how skilful the cicada catcher is to what the latter replies that he has a dao, and then explains becoming the cicada catcher he is today: he started with for several months piling pellets, which made him skilled and more and more able to catch cicadas. The more pellets he was able to balance, the more cicadas he was able to catch to the point of doing it 'as if plucking them up with [his] hand.' (Ziporyn, 2020, p.151). His body fitting perfectly in his environment, he is one with his surroundings, entirely focused on nothing but the cicada, which makes him infallible. Confucius summarises this in 'using his will undividedly, the imponderable spirit in him converges and solidifies — that would perhaps describe our hunchback gentleman here' (idem). The cicada catcher story shows Confucius learning from someone not usually considered a shunzi, and yet, Confucius learns from the cicada catcher. Indeed, 'Zhuangzi clearly recommends open-minded flexibility [...] He models such openness in his conversations with cripples (righteously shunned by Confucians), freaks, thieves, strange creatures, the wind, a shadow and a skull.' (Hansen, 2017) The cicada catcher is a self-made man who did learn his art by himself, by his own method, as

indeed the link between piling pellets and catching cicadas is not explicit to the twenty-first-century reader. He also adapts to his environment, using his unique physical features to his advantage. The mention of the term *dao* highlights that the man does not pretend to have the *Dao* but *a dao*, which links to the idea of specificity, of *his* perspective. The learning process here is independent; there is no teacher involved, and the means to which the cicada catcher become skilful are his own, for his specific situation. He is skilful in that he becomes one with nature as he 'settle[s his] body like a twisted old stump, [his] arm as still as the branch of a withered tree' (idem). The hunchback establishes pluralism inside perspectivism: the hunchback is the hunchback but also one with nature; he practices *wúwéi* without pursuing it.

These two stories each illustrate perspectivism in their own way. Perspectivism supports the idea of a perspective-dependent kind of knowledge: recognising that different views are possible and that even my own knowledge is just a view amongst others. However, this does not imply that all kinds of knowledge are equally good. For example, saying that a rock falls to earth because the rock wants to fall down may be a good view in lack of other explanations, but it would not necessarily – according to Zhuangzi – be as good as explaining the gravitational pull of two bodies of different masses. In the butcher Ding story, the butcher goes through different phases or views of his work: he first sees an ox as a whole, then only the parts of the ox without being able to see it as a whole anymore, and then he moves beyond these two views, seeing it as a whole made of its constituents. However, in the Cicada catcher story, Confucius mentions that he is a hunchback gentleman. This reveals perspectivism because it shows how the cicada catcher developed his skill from his perspective. It was not a method a teacher applied upon the cicada catcher, but the cicada catcher used his unique

bodily features to learn how to catch cicadas. Furthermore, when he masters the skill, he blends in with nature around him: there is not 'him, the nature and the cicada' but the whole together, almost functioning as one thanks to his skill. Finally, the cicada catcher also illustrates perspectivism through the shift of skills, going from piling pellets to catching cicadas; to him, it is not that different.

These two stories show instances of learning, how learning is different for everybody, and how mastering a skill becomes just like second nature. They illustrate 'the tranquil state that accompanies behavior that skillfully follows a natural path. The performances look and feel effortless. The spontaneity of the flow along a natural path gives performers the sense that their behavior is "world-guided" rather than internally controlled. These behaviors become second-nature.' (Hansen, 2017). As they become second nature, they are not processed consciously anymore, 'In the process of getting skills, our distinction between basic and generated actions shifts. Our repertoire of basic actions increases and we forget what we had learned in acquiring them' (Hansen, 2000, p.302). To return to the bicycle example from the beginning, while learning how to ride a bicycle, one has to be aware of many things, and it is not easy; but once we know, it seems so trivial that all those clues one was aware of while learning how to bike are not consciously there anymore. At that moment, we can ride a bike, and think of philosophy and epistemology, without falling off the bike. And hence, 'We can redefine the slogan, wu-wei erh wu pu wei ("no action and yet nothing is undone") in this light. We operate at the level of skill intensity at which our most skilled behavior is basic action' (Idem). This also explains why in the skill stories, mastering a skill pairs often up with the inability to teach the said skill. Once the skill becomes second nature, it becomes hard to explain or teach: 'Mastery is personal and experiential and therefore incommunicable, unlike

doctrine (or words; *yan*), which the other thinkers tried to share, indeed, to impose on others.' (Lai, p.218) Thus, learning a skill is a solitary experience that has to be experienced, making its teaching hard, as shown in the wheelwright story. However, interestingly, while mastery of a skill requires *know-how*, which is greatly valued in the Zhuangzi, in each story, the master can explain how they became masters of a skill, so they do also possess a *know-that*. This tension can be solved when considering 'the *performative* aspect of mastery' rather than the '*possession* of knowledge or skill' (Lai, p.219). This performance of a skill rather than knowledge points us towards the therapeutic aspect of Zhuangzi's thought; indeed, it does not try to 'trade [our] current beliefs for a different set' (Van Norden, p.153), like doctrinal philosophy would but it tries to 'alter [our] behaviour and attitude' (Idem). This is why Zhuangzi can be considered a mystic, someone who 'thinks that there is a kind of knowledge important to human life that cannot be expressed in words' (Van Norden, p.154). Ultimately, *wúwéi* – effortless action or nonaction – is something intrinsically human, highly individual, that can be achieved through, paradoxically, much practice. Transmitting the mastered skill is complicated since mastering a skill is performative and not cognitive. According to the many skill stories, one should try to practice as much as possible to extend our understanding and learning to adapt our skills to new situations, in accord with *wúwéi*.

These skill stories tell us about Daoism that we need to be open-minded and engage wholly as human being. While in today's world, intellectualism is valued and praised, skill stories show another way to become a sage: practice. This concept of becoming a sage through action can be linked to the ancient Greek concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom that Aristotle advocates in *the Nicomachean Ethics*. "Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for

himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1140a–1140b). Thus, for Aristotle, practical wisdom requires knowing, in general, how to live well.' (Ryan, 2020). Similarly, these skill stories exemplify how to live well according to Daoism. The stories are also a reminder of the benefice of roaming: we are open to alternative perspectives; we do not get stuck in our views. The stories are usually about two people meeting, or exchanging thoughts which is opening up to alternative perspectives. This is where the Zhuangzi joins the Confucian Dao: *rén néng hóng dào, fēi dào hóng rén* "Human beings can broaden the Way—it is not the Way that broadens human beings." (15.29) (Ivanhoe, p. 46). In other words, plurality is vital: there is not *one* way of carving an ox, but butcher Ding found *his* way. Just like there is not *one* way to write an essay but *many*; mine also – hopefully – somehow broadens the way, even though I should definitely try not to try, and maybe find some cicadas to catch instead.

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