The Unskilled Zhuangzi:
Big and Useless and Not So Good at Catching Rats

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Abstract: The mainstream tradition in recent Anglophone Zhuangzi interpretation treats spontaneous skillful responsiveness – similar to the spontaneous responsiveness of a skilled artisan, athlete, or musician – as a, or the, Zhuangzian ideal. However, this interpretation is poorly grounded in the Inner Chapters. On the contrary, in the Inner Chapters, this sort of skillfulness is at least as commonly criticized as celebrated. Even the famous passage about the ox-carving cook might be interpreted more as a celebration of the knife's passivity than as a celebration of the cook's skillfulness.

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1. Introduction.

Zhuangzi – by which I mean the Zhuangzi of the Inner Chapters of the book that is traditionally attributed to him – does not especially value spontaneous, skillful responsiveness. He criticizes skill more than he praises it. He does not see skill as particularly worth aiming for, and he does not particularly admire people who display skillful mastery of their arts.

In saying this, I mean to be disagreeing with the mainstream tradition in Anglophone Zhuangzi interpretation. A.C. Graham portrays Zhuangzi as celebrating the "spontaneous aptitude" of skillful craftsmen, which cannot be conveyed in words. Zhuangzi's "Taoist sage," Graham writes, responds to the world with "unthinking dexterity", and like such artisans in their best moments "is spontaneous from the very centre of his being" (1989, p 191). Chad Hansen characterizes Zhuangzi's "practical advice" to be pursuit of the highest level of skill mastery in any arena, to the point where "skill responses appear to us as natural responses" (1992, p. 302). Philip J. Ivanhoe writes that Zhuangzi's "view of the world takes as its paradigms individuals who *know how* and shuns those who merely *know that*. Most important of all are skillful individuals like [master ox-carver] Cook Ding" (1993, p. 650). Graham, Hansen, and Ivanhoe disagree on important points, but they agree that skilled responsiveness, like that of an expert craftworker, is central to Zhuangzi's positive vision. Many other interpreters follow Graham, Hansen, and Ivanhoe (e.g., Eno 1996; Yearley 1996; Huang 2010; Barrett 2011; Fraser 2014; Kohn 2014).

My main observation is this: Almost all of the celebrations of skill in the *Zhuangzi* are in the Outer Chapters, not the Inner Chapters, and are thus dubiously related to the Zhuangzi

of the Inner Chapters.[1] A close reading of the Inner Chapters finds Zhuangzi criticizing skillfulness at least as often as he celebrates it, and even the famous passage about the ox-carving cook permits an interpretation that does not emphasize the value of skill.

2. Passages Concerning Skill in the Inner Chapters.

Let me attempt a catalog of the passages in the Inner Chapters that most directly concern skill, especially spontaneous skillful responsiveness that seems to go beyond words. It would beg the question in favor of skillfulness interpretations to treat *every* successful action as a result of skill in the intended sense, without clear textual evidence that success requires something analogous to the spontaneous skill of a practiced artisan. It would similarly beg the question to treat wisdom itself, or the magical powers that Zhuangzi sometimes appears to celebrate, as involving skillfulness in the intended sense, without clear textual evidence. Success, wisdom, or magic might, for example, be innate, or based merely on attention to the right things, or due to chance, or due to not being interfered with, or due to avoiding certain sorts of mistakes. I will confine my analysis to passages in which skillfulness is either explicitly discussed or the presence or absence of something like artisanal, athletic, or musical skill is especially striking.[2]

The cicada, the dove, the quail, the giant bird, and Liezi. Flying might be seen as an athletic skill. Three clumsy, limited flyers appear near the beginning of the Inner Chapters: the cicada and the dove, who can't even reliably make the leaps from tree to tree, and the quail who can barely get a few yards before dropping to the ground (p. 4). Zhuangzi contrasts these small creatures with a giant bird who can soar ninety thousand miles and with

[1] On the relation of the Inner Chapters to the rest of the text see Graham 1986/1990; Klein 2011, and notes in Graham's Zhuangzi translation (Chuang Tzu 4th c. BCE/1981).

[2] Quotes and references will be to the Ziporyn (2009) translation, except where indicated. Where details of translation are relevant, I will also cite the original Chinese and/or translations by Watson (1968), Graham (1981), and Kjellberg (2005).

the sage Liezi, who "rode forth upon the wind, weightlessly graceful" (p. 5, cf. "Spirit-Man" p. 7). The small animals laugh at the giant bird, absurdly insisting that their own way of flying is better. Although Zhuangzi appears to be portraying the cicada, dove, and quail as in some way inferior to Liezi and the giant bird, a straightforward skill interpretation of the passage isn't especially natural. Zhuangzi does not appear to be urging the cicada, dove, and quail to improve their flying techniques so that they can respond spontaneously without thought, as a great athlete might. Instead, Zhuangzi's emphasis is the absurdity of the small laughing at the big – their lack of perspective, their failure to appreciate the huge and marvelous. Regarding Liezi, the focus appears to be on how chasing merit, good fortune, and good name leads one to "depend on" things – and that even graceful Liezi, who did not anxiously aim at good fortune, still fell short of the ideal because he had to depend on the wind (p. 5-6).

The skilled balm-maker and Huizi smashing gourds. Zhuangzi describes a man who is "skilled at making balm to keep the hands from chapping" (p. 7).[3] His family never earns more than a few pieces of gold from this, so they sell the formula to a customer who finds a military use for it and earns a fiefdom. In this passage, Zhuangzi appears to be criticizing the use of skill in a small, conventional purpose, compared to creative "thinking outside of the box". This interpretation harmonizes with the broader context of this passage in which Zhuangzi is criticizing his friend Huizi for smashing giant gourds because he couldn't find a conventional use for them.

The yak and the weasel. Chapter One ends with Zhuangzi contrasting a yak and a weasel. The weasel leaps high and low, dashes east and west, catching mice – and dies in a trap. The yak, however, is "good at being big – but of course it cannot catch so much as a

[3] 宋人有善為不龜手之藥者. Watson has "skilled at making" (1968, p. 34). Graham has "expert in making" (1981, p. 47). Kjellberg has "were good at making" (2005, p. 212).

single mouse" (p. 8). Likewise, Zhuangzi says, a giant useless tree will "never be cut down by ax or saw" and "you can loaf and wander there, doing lots of nothing there at its side, and take yourself a nap" (cf. p. 30-31). In broader context, Huizi has just criticized Zhuangzi for his "big but useless" words, and the parable of the yak and weasel is Zhuangzi's defense against Huizi's complaint. To be big and useless, Zhuangzi seems to be saying, has some benefits. Arguably, the weasel is a paradigm of spontaneous skillful activity. It is talented at dashing around, catching rodents! What Zhuangzi appears to celebrate instead is loafing, lazy bigness and *lack* of skills – "doing nothing" in the commonsense understanding of that phrase. Similarly, later, Zhuangzi points out that a dog's ability to catch rats is liable to "bring on leashes that bind" it (p. 51).

Zither playing, baton waving, and desk slumping. Zhuangzi describes two masters of music and one of logic – the master of logic being his "desk slumping" friend Huizi (p. 15). He says that "the understanding these three had of their arts flourished richly" and they wanted to share their delight with others. However, because they could not successfully share their delights they ended up debating obscurities and unsuccessfully attempting to force others into their practices. Presumably, this bad result derives from their evangelism rather than the skills themselves. However, it can hardly be said that this passage is a celebration of the benefits of skillfulness.

The cook and the ox. This passage (p. 22-23) is the most famous skill passage in the Inner Chapters. I defer its treatment until Section 3.

People testing skills against each other. Zhuangzi writes, "when two people test their skills against each other, it starts out brightly enough, but usually ends darkly; when it really gets extreme, they end up engaging in all sorts of outrageous tactics to defeat each other" (p.

28).[4] As with the zither-playing passage, probably it is not skill per se that is to blame. Nonetheless, skill is again associated with something negative rather than celebrated.

The mantis flaunting its talents. Zhuangzi describes a mantis with such high opinion of its talents that it attempts to stop a carriage. Analogously, he suggests, if you irritate powerful people by flaunting your talents, you risk being killed (p. 29-30, cf. 25). If what is being flaunted or counted upon here is skill of the relevant sort (it's not clear whether it is), then again Zhuangzi is associating skill with something negative rather than celebrating it.[5] In this passage, Zhuangzi appears to be suggesting that instead of parading your talents you merely follow along with the behavior and preferences of the powerful.

Horsehead Humpback. On p. 35-36, Zhuangzi describes a man who seems to lack any skills, Horsehead Humpback. Horsehead Humpback "has never been heard to initiate anything of his own", has "no position of power", no "stash of wealth", is "ugly enough to astonish all the world", and "achieves nothing". Despite this, women would rather be his concubine than another man's wife, people crowd around him, and Duke Ai of Lu asks him to be prime minister of the state (from which obligation Horsehead Humpback flees). One might argue that Horsehead Humpback has some artisan-like spontaneous skillfulness that is hard to describe in words and remains implicit in the passage. But a more straightforward interpretation is that Horsehead lacks any artisan-like skills at all. Instead, Zhuangzi says, he has kept his "innate powers whole and intact".

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[4] 且以巧鬥力者，始乎陽，常卒乎陰. Qiao (巧), here "skill", is also translated with a negative valence as "tactics" and "cunning" later in the passage. Watson and Kjellberg both have "pit their strength in games of skill" (1968, p. 60; 2005, p. 230). Graham has "competitors in a game of skill" (1981, p. 71).

[5] Watson also interprets the passage as about "parading your store of talents" (1968, p. 62-64). Graham interprets it as pride in your nobility (1981, p. 72). Kjellberg omits the passage.

Skill is merely salesmanship. Zhuangzi writes that for the sage, "understanding is merely a bastard son, obligations and agreements merely glue, virtue[6] a mere continuation of something received, skill[7] mere salesmanship…. He is not for sale as a commodity, so what use would he have for salesmanship?" (p. 38).

My teacher supports heaven and earth without being skillful. Xuyou says of "my teacher" that "He covers and supports heaven and earth and carves out all forms, but without being skillful.[8] It is all the play of his wandering, nothing more" (p. 48-49).

If we take these passages at face value, it seems that, overall, Zhuangzi rejects the value of artisanal, athletic, and musical skill. He does not celebrate such skills, much less privilege them as his ideal. His ideal appears instead to be something like lazing about, doing nothing, mastering nothing, and serving no purpose. I have not cherry-picked these passages to make my point. They are something close to a complete list of the explicit discussions of artisan-like skill in the Inner Chapters, excepting the passage about the ox-carving cook, to which I now turn.

3. The Cook Who Teaches the King to "Nourish Life".

Friends of skill interpretations rely heavily upon this passage from the Inner Chapters:

> The cook was carving up an ox for King Hui of Liang. Wherever his hand smacked it, wherever his shoulder leaned into it, wherever his foot braced it, wherever his knee pressed it, the thwacking tones of flesh falling from bone would echo, the knife would whiz through with its resonant thwing, each

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[6] I have replaced Ziporyn's translation of *de* (德) as "Virtuosity" with the more standard "virtue".

[7] *Gong* (工) is translated here as "skill" by Ziporyn as well as by Watson (1968, p. 75). However, Kjellberg (2005) translates it as "effort" and Graham as "deeds" (1981, p. 82).

[8] Again *qiao* (巧) is translated as "skill". Watson has "he doesn't think himself skilled" (1968, p. 90). Graham has "it is not skill" (1981, p. 91). Kjellberg says he "is not handy" (2005, p. 241).

stroke ringing out the perfect note, attuned to the "Dance of the Mulberry Grove" or the "Jingshou Chorus" of the ancient sage-kings.

The king said, "Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!"

The cook put down his knife and said, "What I love is the Way, something that advances beyond mere skill….[9] When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet I was still unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit instead of scrutinizing it with my eyes…. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all….

"Nonetheless, whenever I come to a clustered tangle, realizing that it is difficult to *do* anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt. My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then all at once, I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground….

The king said, "Wonderful! From hearing the cook's words I have learned how to nourish life!" (p. 22-23).

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[9] I have replaced Ziporyn's translation of *dao* (道) as "Course" with the more standard "Way". Although Zhuangzi here says that the Way goes "beyond mere skill" (進乎技矣), I see this phrase as ambiguous between devaluing skill or ability (技) and claiming skill so much beyond ordinary skill that to call it mere skill is to underappreciate it. (Compare reacting to a great concert by saying, "That is not mere music, it's the very turning of the heavens!")

This is a beautiful passage – one of the most striking passages of the Inner Chapters. It is easy to see the temptation to build one's interpretation of Zhuangzi around it.

The passage clearly celebrates someone with impressive artisanal skill. And his skill is in some way connected with "nourishing life". Yet I see four reasons not to stand this passage at the center of one's Zhuangzi interpretation.

First: As I argued in the previous section, high levels of artisanal, athletic, and musical skill do not earn Zhuangzi's praise elsewhere in the Inner Chapters and indeed seem to be targets of criticism.

Second: The Inner Chapters are full of contradictions. Indeed, self-contradiction is central to Zhuangzi's style. Elsewhere I've argued that if Zhuangzi's aim is to jar us out of dogmatism, without installing a new dogma in place of the old dogmas, then embracing contradictory standards in different portions of the text might be an effective technique that he intentionally employs (Schwitzgebel 1996, forthcoming). If this is correct, it would be bad interpretative policy to accept any one passage at face value without checking to see whether it is contradicted elsewhere in Inner Chapters. This passage, to the extent we read it as a celebration of artisanal or athletic skill, is among those that do appear to be contradicted. Skill is mere salesmanship (p. 38). The sage covers heaven and earth without being skillful (p. 49). It's better to be a useless, unskilled yak than a skilled catcher of rodents (the weasel p. 8, the dog p. 51). (Zhuangzi does not contradict himself on all points. He never seems to say that the small is better than the big, for example, nor that it's a good idea to ruin one's health in pursuit of fame and accomplishment.)

Third: It is plausible to read Zhuangzi as dubious about the types of ideals that philosophers articulate and defend, whether those are ideals of Confucian virtue, of Mohist virtue, of "usefulness", wealth, reputation, political power, or even the Yangist ideal of achieving a long, healthy life. The ideal of developing artisan-like skills – or even

developing one's ability to react with spontaneous artisan-like skillfulness to whatever arises in one's life situation – is another ideal of which Zhuangzi, at least in his skeptical moments, might be similarly dubious.

Fourth: It's not clear that the cook's skill is the thing that teaches King Hui how to nourish life. It might be the knife's passivity instead. I do not insist on this interpretation. It is perhaps not the most natural one. However, I think this interpretation has something to be said for it. Consider, first, that there's another obvious way that the cook's knife could have remained as "sharp as the day it came off the whetstone": The cook might have done nothing with it. He might have carved no oxen at all. He might have laid the knife in a drawer, or lazed around with it beneath a giant tree in the field of the bright and boundless. The yak survives by (approximately) doing nothing, the trees by doing nothing. If one is good at something, one gets yanked into service like a dog on a leash (p. 51) or like an able-bodied man facing military conscription (p. 31). Maybe what's good about the knife, or at least what leads to its healthy longevity, is that it simply follows along through empty spaces, rather than hacking and slicing. The knife itself has no skills. It does as little as possible. In contrast, the cook is displaying his talents before a king – a worrisome thing if one values one's life, to judge from the parable of the mantis in Chapter Four.

Zhuangzi is presenting the cook's skill for our admiration, celebrating that skill and associating it, in some way, with nourishing life. I don't mean to deny that obvious interpretation of this passage. But in the context of the Inner Chapters as a whole, this passage is an outlier. Considering what Zhuangzi says elsewhere, we might do better to take the knife as our model rather than the cook.

4. Conclusion.

If we base our understanding of Zhuangzi on the Inner Chapters, we should reject the commonly held view that Zhuangzi especially valued spontaneous skillful activity of the sort that is characteristic of highly skilled artisans and athletes. Most discussions of skill in the Inner Chapters are neutral or even negative about the value of skills of this sort.

I suspect that skill interpretations are partly motivated by passages from the Outer Chapters, partly by the vivid beauty of the passage about the ox-carving cook, partly by how Zhuangzi was received by the later Daoist tradition, and partly because it gives an appealingly simple answer to the question of what Zhuangzi wants people to aim for, given that Zhuangzi is undeniably suspicious of fixed words and doctrines. However, at best, this interpretation is poorly grounded in the Inner Chapters. At worst, seeking spontaneous wordless skill as the highest goal becomes exactly the sort of driving dogma that Zhuangzi was at pains to resist. He might rather laze around incompetently beneath a tree than become a skillful master at catching rats.[10]

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