

NGN2001J: Assignment 1

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This - That?

The assessment of most mundane things, which we take for granted, can make us realise the surprising complexity behind them. Zhuangzi's *Equal Assessments of Things*¹ does this by tackling dichotomies in various scenarios. He tries to convince us through different short dialogues that our attempt at justifying the existence of dichotomies is in vain, everything is equal and there exists no right or wrong. He motivates us to follow the “Dao” or “the Course”. One of the most eye-catching dialogues is about “this and that”. I was left utterly confused after reading it for the first time, yet a closer look at the argument made me realise the language is not complicated at all. Therefore, I will analyse this argument thematically focusing on why he chooses “this” and “that” for his argument, the subtle personification of “it” as consciousness, and his intentional diction choice to describe the “Course as axis”, to showcase how the complexity in the argument arises.

It would be reasonable for me to suggest we use “this” and “that” very frequently and always take their dichotomy for granted. Zhuangzi argues they are the same and uses them as an analogy for “right” and “wrong”. He appeals to the relative nature of their usage, which means one individual might refer to an object as ‘this’, which another individual would refer to as ‘that’. The object itself remains unchanged, implying ‘this’ and ‘that’ are mere labels or designations and are thus, the same – there is no right or wrong. He repeats this point four times to crystalize his argument and convince the readers, “There is no ... a ‘this’”, “One is oneself

¹ Zhuangzi, “Equalizing Assessments of Things”, *Global Narratives Course Pack*, compiled by Bart Van Wassenhove (National University of Singapore, 2023), p. 14-15. All further references to this text will be to these pages unless specified otherwise in brackets.

... an other”, “‘Thatness’ emerges ... follows from ‘thatness’”, and “For to be a ... also a ‘this’”. Interestingly, he acknowledges “this is not something one can directly see” but follows by “it is...**the** understanding”. I believe this is to urge the readers to try and understand his point of view despite it being difficult. His usage of “**the**”, however, leaves a gap as it implies, we need a specific ‘understanding’. Contextually, this ‘understanding’ could refer to Daoism itself. To prove his argument even further, he capitalises ‘THIS’ and ‘THAT’ and uses them as categories, inside each lies another dichotomy of ‘this’ vs ‘not-this’. The argument is the same as before (‘this’ is equal to ‘not this’) but surprisingly, he does not mention ‘that’ vs ‘not-that’. One potential reason could be given that this statement lies close to the end of his argument, he expects the reader to feel surprised at this omission, but then realise and accept ‘that’ is just ‘this’ so there is no need to repeat it. By doing so, Zhuangzi has made the readers realise his point of view. It is logical to say that we would never think about the above-mentioned analysis in any regular day-to-day scenario. Yet I believe this is exactly why Zhuangzi uses ‘this’ and ‘that’ – to show how even the common dichotomies are fake. This makes us ponder what other common dichotomies we might be taking for granted.

While Zhuangzi was convincing us about the previous paragraph, he suddenly started using ‘it’. “This is **its** theory... **it** can say ... **it** affirms ... **it** goes along...” are few of the many instances where ‘it’ shows up. This is a major gap for the readers, as we are not outright told what ‘it’ refers to. ‘It’ is described as if it is independent of a human being and the use of verbs implies ‘it’ is capable of functioning on its own. If we replace the ‘it’ with ‘we’ or ‘ours’, the meaning and his argument do not change, yet he uses the former. Given this high degree of personification, ‘it’ could be ‘consciousness’. I believe Zhuangzi wanted to imply that human decisions are flawed, as we tend to assign right and wrong. However, ‘consciousness’ can look beyond these dichotomies. That is why ‘it’'s description is very confident, “it can say ... it

affirms either one ...”. Daoism also preaches to attain this state of ‘consciousness’, where we do not have to worry about these dichotomies. Therefore, while convincing the readers of his argument about ‘this’ and ‘that’, he is simultaneously and subtly informing us about Daoism.

Towards the end of his argument, he labels the ‘state of consciousness’ as mentioned in the previous paragraph, to be the ‘Course as axis’. This is a very direct nod to Daoism. The ‘course’ refers to the ‘Dao’ or the teachings of Daoism. ‘Axis’ refers to something about which everything rotates. Thus, the state where we no longer worry about dichotomies and assess everything equally is achieved when everything revolves around Daoism. He then even goes on to call this state ‘Obvious’ – almost a hit at the readers that the most commonsensical thing to achieve or strive for is this state. The readers who feel confused by his argument will try to understand it again because apparently, it is ‘obvious’. However, it is slightly contradictory for Daoism to outright define something as ‘obvious’, for everything obvious is not obvious as well. I believe Zhuangzi stated this just to convince the readers to understand Daoism, maybe it would not be a stretch to say he intentionally did this so the readers can question the dichotomy present here as well.

As seen by the analysis in the paragraphs above, Zhuangzi convinces the readers to give up dichotomies as there is no right or wrong and strive to achieve Dao. Even when writing this essay, I underlined ‘this’ and ‘that’ every time I used them and looking back, I can interchange every ‘this’ with ‘that’ and vice versa with slight grammatical alterations and the meaning of my sentences will still hold. This is a strong case for Daoism. One common theme I noticed across all the paragraphs is that the complexity arose due to language itself. This shows that language itself has limitations – it is impossible to express everything through language, for

language could be the reason dichotomies are created in the first place. Keeping this in mind, I wonder, to what extent is it even possible for us to achieve the 'Course as axis' and become a Daoist given that we continue to communicate using language? Is it easier for other living creatures to achieve Dao, such as plants? Or only inanimate objects can achieve Dao as they do not need to communicate? Maybe only after answering these questions, we could fully appreciate Zhuangzi's beliefs.

Word Count - 1117

Annotations

Someone desperately trying to explain something but language is a limitation

course thus being present there? (Where could any speaking be present without that speech thus being deemed acceptable there?)

"But courses qua courses get concealed behind the small formations that they themselves succeed in shaping,¹¹ and speech qua speech gets concealed behind the garlands of honor it itself brings on.¹² Hence we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other denies and denying what the other affirms. But if you want to affirm what they deny and deny what they affirm, nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious:¹³

"There is no thing that is not a 'that.' There is no thing that is not a 'this.' One is oneself also a 'that,' an other, but this is not something one can directly see. Rather, it is known through the understanding,¹³ which thus says¹⁴ 'Thatness' emerges from 'thisness,' and 'thisness' follows from 'thatness.' This is its theory of the simultaneous generation of the 'this' and the 'that.' However, by the very same token, it can say that their simultaneous generation means also their simultaneous demise, and vice versa.¹⁵ When it¹⁶ affirms either one, it simultaneously finds it has denied it; when it denies either one, it simultaneously finds it has affirmed it.¹⁷ By going along with the affirmation it goes along with the denial; by going along with the denial it goes along with the affirmation.¹⁸

"Thus the Sage does not proceed from any one of these alone but instead lets them all bask in the broad daylight of Heaven.¹ That is also a way of going along with the rightness of each 'this,' going along with 'thisness' itself. For to be a 'this' is in fact also to be a 'that,' and every 'that' is also a 'this.' 'THAT' is then itself already both 'this' and 'not-this,' both a right and a wrong. But 'THIS' is also itself already both 'this' and 'not-this,' both a right and a wrong. So is there really any 'this' as opposed to 'not-this,' any right as opposed to wrong? Or is there really no 'this' as opposed to 'not-this,' no right as opposed to 'wrong'? A state where 'this' and 'not-this'—right and wrong—are no longer coupled as opposites is called

Same idea: oneself & an other: Analogy for right or wrong

Intentional act: to show creation something is only right, if there exists something wrong

rather interesting obvious interpretation: > when our consciousness says one is right, they it is also saying one is wrong?

GAP I think this implies subconsciously or for someone else, we have affirmed that it is right.

Everything can be called 'this' or 'that' since it's relative various use of its

Initially it was 'a' (common) then it is alone a 'the'

This is as if accepting something is wrong is also denying

this = that "I think god sees all and thus he knows every right is wrong"

A curious change to they are says caps to show two new categories why this sudden change? is that = not-this

- 11. Cheng. See Glossary.
- 12. Ming 明. See Glossary.
- 13. Both "known" and "the understanding" here are translations of Zhi. See Glossary.
- 14. Alternately, "But one cannot be seeing from the perspective of an other. It is from one's own understanding, from knowing oneself, that one knows this [i.e., that every 'this,' including oneself, is also a 'that,' an 'other']. The presence of others is manifested right in the knowledge of self, as the awareness that there is something other than the self.
- 15. This phrase is attributed to Hui Shi, said of things in general, in which context it means that as soon as things are born, they simultaneously are dying. See Chapter 33, p. 273.
- 16. I.e., the faculty of conscious understanding.
- 17. Or: "And this simultaneous affirmability [of their generation and demise] is the simultaneous negatability [of their generation and demise], and vice versa."
- 18. Alternately, and more simply: "It goes along with the affirmation, it goes along with the denial. It goes along with the denial, it goes along with the affirmation." Or: "What is right only according to circumstance is also wrong according to circumstance; what is circumstantially wrong is also circumstantially right." "Whenever it goes along with any affirmation it also goes along with the negation, and when it goes along with the negation it also goes along with the affirmation."

→ How though?
if nothing is right/
if nothing is wrong
why is there
a need to
respond?

Course as axis, the axis of all courses.¹⁹ When this axis finds its place in the center, it responds to all the endless things it confronts, thwarted by none. For it has an endless supply of 'rights,' and an endless supply of 'wrongs.' Thus I say, nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious. → Once you realise right = wrong.



"For you can use the act of indication as an illustration of the unindicated that belongs to all indication, but that is no match for using the unindicated itself as an illustration of the unindicated that belongs to all indication."