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## The Purely Reflected Self

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# The Purely Reflected Self

A Deconstruction of Self, East & West

By William A. Price

For my good friends,  
who have for so long asked me what I was studying without ever receiving a good  
answer. This is, above all, for you.

And with inexpressible thanks to Jim Behuniak,  
for pushing me to write like my hair was on fire.

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## Introduction

I have spent three years as a philosophy student, writing to the topics and material delegated by the subjects I was studying at the time. Yet now, I am allowed to delegate myself, and write my own paper, and this section is an attempt to start at the beginning. Martin Heidegger finds that the path to knowledge describes a circle, that in attempting to answer a question we will not arrive from query to response, in a linear fashion, but rather that we will find ourselves at the beginning again, that in carrying out the asking of the question we gain instead an explanation of why we asked the question in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

So here we are at the beginning. In my brief time with philosophy I have learned that I distrust both philosophies which claim to reach a higher understanding of the world through logic or argumentation, as well as philosophies which attempt to create a structure of thought which wrestles the universe into comprehensible terms before declaring that nothing exists beyond these terms. I intend to plow forwards without dogmatism, faith, God, the shrugging of shoulders, or deference to authority. I believe the subject is a dingy in a dark ocean, and that an understanding of the vastness of the out-there must be determined on a personal level. To allow another subject to define for us what it means to be is to have wasted the unique being which we are at this moment. Philosophy is not archeology, digging away the erroneous until we have unearthed a dormant, transcendent, and objective truth which we can then defer to for the rest of our days. Rather, I believe philosophy is playing with blocks—we stack different and interlocking structures on top of each other, and can then climb to the top to have a look around, but before long they will slip and tumble beneath us, leaving us on the ground again, surrounded by blocks.

I intend to begin, then, at a personal moment for myself. It is January, 2009 and I am studying abroad in Beijing, China, visiting 雍和宮, a popular Buddhist temple in the city. It is the first Buddhist temple I have ever been to, and as I wander through its halls, examining the multitudes of golden Buddha statues, my breath hanging in the frigid Beijing air, I am aesthetically pleased, but my understanding of Buddhism is disgruntled: Why does a philosophy so devoted to non-attachment to material objects, indeed, non-attachment to anything, find it necessary to construct expensive, ornate edifices to past Buddhas? The very idea of a golden Buddha statue seemed fundamentally oxymoronic.

And then, as I ducked through the thronging Chinese offering up incense and stepped gingerly over the wooden threshold into the final hall, I was awestruck. A statue of Buddha, 6 stories tall, golden and draped in fine cloths and flowers stretched into the darkness of the ceiling. Having foolishly hoped there would be a nice place for the public to meditate in the temple, I had brought a towel and my meditation bench through the subway, and now I placed these to one side and knelt on one of the pads facing the statue, and began to meditate on my breath as Chinese people came, kowtowed, and

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<sup>1</sup> In his search for dasein's manner of being, *Being and Time* 1953.

left to either side of me. When I felt that I could not remain on the pad for another minute without a monk coming to chase me away, I bent my torso forwards in imitation of those around me and placed my hands upon the floor, palms down. In my mind's eye I saw my supplicating, lumpy form kneeling before this impossibly large, implacable, radiantly golden image of the Buddha. In the weeks before this encounter, and, I think it is safe to say, the twenty years before it, I had struggled with the world, attempting to *define* it in terms which would allow me to hold it at a distance and turn it in my hands, as if inspecting an intriguing toy puzzle, but the world had always frustrated these attempts, exploding out beyond my peripheral vision time and again, defying my attempts to circumscribe it. As I knelt before this wooden mock-up of Buddha, this urge to make the world comprehensible, and the corresponding frustration I felt when I had failed, washed through me and seemed to seep into the earth. My academic background immediately framed the phenomena in terms which would allow me to carry it away, to hold it and turn it and frown at it while scratching my chin.

*The physical dimensions of my own body and that of the statue's parallel and are symbolic of the disparity between the dimensions of my Understanding and that of the Buddha's.* I often set goals for myself to meditate every day, and invariably will do so for a handful of months before the routine breaks down and I stop for a period before picking it up again. I never had a very concrete reason for why I ought to meditate every day, beyond what was written in books on the subject which encouraged me to do so. But now, as I sat on my meditation bench in my modest Beijing dormitory room, I had a reason which this large golden Buddha seems to have imparted to me: The reason I should sit everyday is because I do not yet understand why I should sit everyday. And as the alarm on my cheap Chinese cellphone signaled the close of the night's meditation, the bowing at the end of the session which had before been meaningless to me now took on the deepest relevance. As I supplicated I envisioned a massive golden Buddha in front of me, his outturned palm calming the universe, body wreathed in light, and I said to him: "Forgive me, Lord Buddha, for *I know nothing.*"

It is, in hindsight, rather obvious that the next step in the cultivation of my Understanding should be to the practice of acknowledging my lack of complete knowledge. I continued in this manner for two more months, sitting every day and ending the meditation with supplication to an imagined giant Buddha and a heartfelt self-admonition that I knew nothing. During my time studying abroad I read the basic teachings of Buddhism once more, this time in Chinese, and this re-introduction, coupled with an intense vacuum of complex thought created by an environment of all day language classes and a language pledge, caused me to bounce around several concepts daily in my head, furious to determine the whole which I knew these seemingly disparate parts must represent.

These concepts were: The three poisons—ignorance, greed, and anger, which together block us from arriving at Buddha nature; the metaphor comparing the individual to a droplet of sea spray in the ocean of everything; the saying that our human skin is like a bag which contains but does not define our Buddha nature; and finally, the metaphor which compares our unskillful selves to a dusty mirror—that if we

can only clear away our trifling attachments, we would be in perfect harmony with the world around us, like a mirror which reflects all that it receives. I was determined to arrange these things, each of which felt powerfully true on its own, into a tidy order, like the knots on a fisherman's net which would all come up should one intersection be pulled. Finally, I settled upon an answer I was pleased with—all of these things can be hinged upon the conception of the self. The three poisons only exist because we have attachment to ourselves as a self. Likewise, it is the idea of a self which prevents us from understanding that our true nature is like the transitory sea foam of existence. Our 'human nature' only begins to differ from our Buddha nature when we assume that it is natural for one to understand oneself as a self. And finally, he who has successfully cleared away the dust of delusion from himself becomes like a perfectly polished mirror, with nothing to show except for what arises in the world around him.

Another way to formulate this idea is such: Belief in the concept of the self causes suffering. Unfortunately, although conceptual constructions like these may help to define our goal—the casting off of the belief in the self—this is a much more difficult thing to actualize and attain in daily practice. Our building blocks have formed a neat tower, and we have climbed to the top and gazed at the horizon, but they have toppled, and here we are again, over our heads in the hedgerow. Buddha describes his teachings as a raft to ford the river of suffering in order to reach the far off bank of enlightenment: as one does not take the raft after crossing the river, so we must not lean on his teachings to make our way through life. So I intend here to abandon the raft for other accounts of existence written by other thinkers, and in this my purpose is twofold: First, in reading other interpretations we can gain new tools with which to study the architecture of the concept of the self, and second, in studying the history of the concept of self as it progresses through history we can better understand the non-inherentness of this problematic construct.

Let me elaborate on my understanding of conceptions. Humans are tool users, we understand things foremost in their utility, in their ability to be leveraged as a tool. One of our tools is our brain, which subsumes difference into a comprehensible sameness; we observe the world and form abstractions about it, concepts which we can use in our daily lives. We find a berry bush, and are not so much concerned about the individual bush or berry, but more importantly, that we can abstract all berry bushes into a manageable sameness, creating the concept that berry bushes can be utilized as a food source. Language allows for the creation of these symbolic, incorporeal tools, allowing us to disseminate them, receive them, and infer new structures from those already present.

These concepts hold no value beyond their inherent utility as a concept, yet we often do not treat them as such. The concept that all berry bushes have berries which are good to eat has value only to the extent that the conceptualizer recognizes the bareness of the statement, the baselessness of the concept beyond its raw utility. Without this precaution, our ability to conceptualize becomes a hindrance in living without delusion, as our minds generate these concepts incessantly they become addictive, alluring. In the face of unanswered questions, our berry picking



conceptualizer adds new concepts on top of his original concepts. Since the berries are edible by us, they must be made with us in mind, meaning that in this field of bushes, we hold a privileged position, separate from the other animals. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that a plant which feeds us grew randomly, which implies that a more powerful being created these plants for us to eat. When a drought wipes out the berry bushes, our conceptualizer's undue attachment to his conceptions beyond their inherent utility may cause him to act in ways unfitting for the simple concept he began with—perhaps he will feel that he has no recourse but to offer sacrifices upon the altar of his berry-creating God, and wonder what sins he committed which caused him to lose the berries which had been gifted to him. This is an unskillful application of concepts.

As absurd as the fable may sound, we find ourselves committing the fallacy of concept-worship daily. We have forgotten the baselessness-beyond-utility of concepts such as capitalism, citizenship, morality, religion, and race, and instead of calling up these tools only when the need arises, we instead allow them to distort our understanding of the world, encumbering and preceding our thought about new phenomena—they are dust on what is potentially a perfect mirror, hindering our actions and thought from accurately reflecting the state of being around us. When modern man encounters the berry bush, he cannot even see the berries, cannot even begin to form an authentic conception of it, for his perceptions are already laden with the baggage of over-conceptualization—whose berries are they, do they fit into my diet, why did God create them, could I make money from this? Although concepts are generated in order to better utilize the world, we find that the unskillful mind allows concepts to shape and govern the world before we have even encountered what is there.

It is against such enslaving concepts that I employ my prayer of ignorance, in an attempt to un-train such pre-emptive conceptualizing tendencies, recognizing the subjective and baseless nature of the concepts I have engendered throughout the day, seeing the building blocks in the towers I build as such, and allowing them to tumble to the floor. And here I attempt to let fall the most adhesive of all concepts, the pin which holds suffering to my lapel, the great distorter, the idea that I am a self.

It is the night of the New Year celebrations in China, and I am sitting in a dorm room in the middle of Beijing as fireworks detonate throughout the entire city. Catching me in the act of retiring to meditate, a few friends, some new and one old, ask if they can join me, and I comply, of course, for I really enjoy telling other people about Buddhism. It is like telling someone they have something in their teeth, except it has been there for their entire lives, and has always been bothering them, and although I cannot begin to tell them how to get it out, I am at least able to tell them, excuse me, there may be something in your teeth. At the end of our makeshift meditation session, a new friend asks: "What is the purpose of meditation?" To which my old friend responds, "Well, I don't know much about it, but I believe it has something to do with being incredibly, incredibly confident in yourself." At the time, this statement created great discord within me, because although it *felt* correct, in that after meditation I often felt a confidence or ease of demeanor, it seemed conceptually incorrect, that in a practice which emphasized deference and denial of self the end result would be confidence, a

disposition I associate with a violent conceptualizing of the world around oneself to operate on the terms the subject feels comfortable with, and no others.

Now, almost a year later, my designation of the concept of self as the locus of unskillful being sheds light onto the peculiar phenomenon of self confidence after meditation. I believe what we actually experience here is a *no-self confidence*, in which the absence of our generally omnipresent self-awareness causes a feeling of confidence. When one generally operates with a concept of the self, one must constantly cross reference one's conception of the self with the situation arising. Is that something I would say? Should I know the answer to this? I'm the sort of person who would like a thing like this. I believe that the cessation of ourselves trying to act like our *conceptions* of ourselves causes us to feel as if a self-doubt had been lifted, when in fact it is the presence of the concept of a self which inhibits us and prevents us from arising *with* the world, causing us to distort what we truly are, and as a consequence, that which the world truly is.

And now I have raised the most loaded question of all: *what are we truly?* To say that we are naturally, inherently much of anything is wishful, either a romanticization of the mammals we are, or a fallacy of cause and effect. To speak of humans in terms of their potential for good and evil is to have applied value judgments too early—we can speak of good and evil but we will never find a basis for them beyond subjective conceptualization of the world. Humans are, if fundamentally anything, fundamentally tool users, conceptualizing and adapting, inhabiting the world we encounter. It is only after placing man in a society which teaches good and evil that he will know of such things. Raise a human child with a wolf, and he will howl, eat raw meat, and participate in the pack hierarchy. Raise him with a chicken, and he will scratch at the ground and become a part of the pecking order. Raise him with a human, and he will speak, and eat from a dish, and wonder at what is good, and what is evil.

So we must understand that morality is, as all things, simply another conceptual tool, allowing cultures to form and exercise power over the behavior of its members. Indeed, once we have circumscribed all learned things as a part of a cultural inheritance, a collection of conceptual building blocks transmitted from generation to generation, without external value, we can understand culture itself as a tool, and investigate the usefulness of the way of life which was passed down to us. From here we can determine what should be cast aside, and what should be practiced. We can begin to culture ourselves, to condition and practice a daily lifestyle which understands and is not slave to the conceptual building blocks we carry through life.

In terms of nature, then, we have little in the way of predispositions—we are beasts raised into an arbitrary definition of civility, which then allows us to act in a civil manner. We cannot be said to be innately civil, or good, or anything, if all this means is that we *can* adopt to civility, or being good. If this is the definition of an innate trait, then we are simply innately anything we can adapt to, which is a convoluted way of saying we are innately nothing but adapters. As far as organisms go, we are nothing special, except for a distinct faculty to conceptualize, which we have so far—with the

exception of a few gigantic, golden individuals—allowed to control us in ways which we did not intend upon the creation of such conceptualizations.

Recognizing the baselessness of one's current conceptions is one thing, but restructuring our own blocks is another task entirely. We must see that we are adrift, alone in a dark sea, with a multitude of blocks with which to build our structures, but with the new understanding that all of these blocks are empty of inherent value, wire-frame constructions which have utility but no truthfulness beyond this utility. We must move forwards with 'no-self confidence,' a recognition of the arbitrariness of our concepts which creates a lightness in our mental step, an unwillingness to grant a concept anything beyond its limited usefulness. As we approach the practical domain, we encounter a tension between the mirroring no-self who finds parity between all truth and the conceptualizing tool user projecting his dominant structures upon the world. When do we watch? When do we act? And on what grounds do we do either?

## *Chapter 1: The Construction of the European Self*

### *Section 1.1: The Purpose of This Conceptual Structure*

The goal of this chapter is to trace the origins of the western notion of the self as it evolves in the European tradition, through the philosophies of Plato, Augustine, and René Descartes. The objective here is not an exhaustive timeline from the beginning to the present, but merely an inspection of some of the earliest and most influential thinkers, in order to gain an understanding of the general structure of the western notion of self in its early stages, which may give insight as to the nature of our modern western conception of self.

For all three thinkers, I will attempt to show that their philosophies lead them into a general structure, a structure which will transform through time, and from one thinker to the next, yet still remains a plausible and relevant way of understanding even today's western understanding of the self. The structure is laid out as follows: First, the thinker begins with a prioritization of the rational aspect of the self, and of thought in general. This leads to a privileging of language and discourse as the medium of reason. Having established the primacy of reason, the thinker moves on to posit a conceptual structure which utilizes reason to gain access to a higher truth about the world. The presence of a higher order to the world allows the subject to posit that the self also follows a higher order, a rational element which is dominant and makes the self a coherent whole, a unity of intention. This prioritization of the rational aspect of the self and the unity it implies causes the thinker to prioritize his own self's understanding as having access to the true nature of the world. This in turn causes the self to project these values on the world, raising certain aspects as higher or good and simultaneously designating other aspects as lower or negative, as is the nature of such binary judgments. Finally, this has led to the development of the concept of *will* as a fundamental quality of the self—as the self has access to a higher truth, it can therefore go into the world to shape it as that higher truth dictates, backed by the confidence that the dominant and rational element of the self has left nothing out in its formulation of what is best for the world.

The transition of the notion of self over time, as traced in the three thinkers, is a function of this self's agency in the world, the evolution of the idea of the *will* and the meaning this notion has both for how it is we know anything, and what it is we are supposed to do. When we end with Descartes, we will see that the will becomes the definitive element of the self, a positive force which gives us unlimited freedom of choice and becomes the basis of our actions. However, for Augustine the will was a negative element, a freedom of choice which tempts us from God's grace. Prior to Augustine, the notion of a freely determining will in Plato's thought is non-existent—the subject for the Greeks played no part in the acquisition of knowledge or the

determination of the just life. The western self, with a fully-developed notion of free will, becomes a participant in its own perception of the world, and is itself the basis for action.

Another way of understanding this transition is by viewing it as a waning of the power of reason as the power of the will rises. For Plato, reason dominates all other faculties of the self, and to know reason is to love it, and to be against reason is simply to be ignorant of it. The notion of a faculty which could move against the reasonable faculty had not even been formed. For Augustine, reason is still paramount, although it is challenged by a new faculty Augustine develops, the will. At this point, a theistic reason dominates the will and directs it. Finally, in Descartes' philosophy reason is limited while the will is limitless, God-like, able to deny even those things which we know to be true, and likewise to affirm those things which reason tells us we should not.

What I am attempting to prove here is that this is an understanding of the self which has been built over time, not as a fundamental quality of human progress but merely as the production of culture peculiar to Europe in this time period. This is not to say that this is the only way Europeans are able to conceptualize themselves, for there are certainly counter-currents and alternative traditions, but rather that this has been the primary, dominant manner of understanding the self. Because of this privileged position, the will-driven European self is almost always present in any discussion concerning the self in European Philosophy, even if it is only overtly present as the standard against which all other traditions must be measured.

Ultimately, I hope to show that this mode of understanding the self is not intrinsic or necessary to any given human's self conception, but rather it is merely a culturally transmitted understanding of what it means to be a self, and therefore, in terms of utility and understanding our manner of being in the world, it is not necessarily deserving of the prioritization it has received. Furthermore, we can understand the prioritization of the will and the positing of a conceptual structure that privileges rationality as serving ultimately as a means of creating power for the self—they create a system of justification which places the faculties of reason and will in the roles of *permitter* and *permitted*—and I would like to prove that there is no way to justify, rationally at least, this permission to act which the conceptual structure bestows upon the will without already accepting the structure to begin with. The subject must agree with the premises of the structure in order for the structure to convince that it is correct, because the structure follows a circular logic. A skeptic approaching the structure from the exterior has no good reason to accept in it, and it is only by making a 'leap of faith' in order to enter the cyclical argument that we can find it convincing. In the end, we must see the will and reason as capacities of the self, and not dominating aspects which produce imperatives to follow a certain conceptual structure, as the three European philosophers at hand would like to argue.

Once this has all been established, (although a leap of faith may be required to convince the reader of the validity of my own conceptual structure), I hope to be able to show that *any* coherent philosophy, even one that aims at tearing down other coherent philosophies, proposes and aims at something 'higher,' an ideal which should be sought

more than any other. When we see that these structures cannot stand on their own, as they are based in a system of binary valuations which cannot hold without the other, it then follows that the structure of the self itself cannot hold. Therefore, rather than holding one mode of being or conceptual structure as higher than any other, we must attempt to foster a self which is an amalgamation of all these functions simultaneously, as tools for various tasks rather than as doctrines of which there can be only one. Therefore the self is most effective and least contradictory when we do not attempt to posit a coherent synthesis of our self, but instead allow it to “contain multitudes,” as Walt Whitman writes.

But for this chapter, it will be enough if I can show that the western notion of self prioritizes reason, which allows the thinkers to believe they can create a conceptual structure which has access to a higher truth, which creates an epistemology which gives permission for the self to be a rational unity, and flex its will in a justified shaping of the world.

### *Section 1.2: Plato and the Idea of the Good*

Plato’s philosophy in many ways epitomizes the rational, conceptual structure producing manner of thought which is the precursor of so much of European philosophy. He makes no initial argument for the claim that reason is primary of all the aspects of the self, but instead takes it as a truth of the natural world. Here I must note that Charles Taylor has made an extensive analysis of the evolution of the European conception of the self, and I rely on him for much of my understanding of this process. So I begin with his description of Plato’s analogy of the healthy soul and the healthy body, as he writes, “The soul by its nature needs or tends towards a certain kind of order, one where reason is paramount, just like the body needs and tends towards the order we identify as health.”<sup>2</sup> So we see that for Plato, proving the primacy of reason is not a matter of proving its value or worth, but rather simply a matter of stating the obvious. As Plato writes, “Now, it pertains to reflection to rule, because it is wise and exercises forethought in behalf of the whole soul; and to the spirited form to be its servant and ally.”<sup>3</sup>

If for Plato reason is highest, it is understandable that his next move will be to posit a conceptual structure which claims at a higher truth through reasoning. This is his understanding of the forms, general idealizations of the world through which particular things are informed through participation with the form. The forms are ultimately discovered by gaining knowledge of the highest form, the idea of the Good. So Plato ends his famous cave analogy, “In the intelligible place, the Idea of the Good is seen

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*. Trans. R. E. Allen. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. 141.

finally and with difficulty, but once seen, it must be inferred that it is the cause of all things right and beautiful.”<sup>4</sup> To Plato, it is only through seeing the idea of the Good that we can know the Good. It is only through assuming that an entity such as the idea of the Good exists that we can believe in the idea of the Good. For Plato, his formulation of reason as higher has caused him to believe that the world itself must have an element of reason which is higher than everything else, thereby ordering the world. Already caught up in imagining a hierarchy, he must posit some ideal to be higher than all other ideals, which he has then named the idea of the Good.

Although for Plato the idea of the hierarchy of forms and the placement of the idea of the Good at its pinnacle seems acceptable and even natural, for those on the exterior it seems difficult to believe that such things exist. Plato’s reasoning is circular: according to reason, and what is natural, all those below the philosopher-kings—those who should naturally rule by reason—should naturally be subservient to them. These philosopher-kings should rule because they use reason to gain access to an understanding of what is best. Nowhere is there a case for reason itself to be primary, beyond the weak claim that it is what is natural. As Taylor puts it, “One feature of this natural order is the requirement itself that reason should rule; and so there is a self-affirming aspect of reason’s hegemony.”<sup>5</sup> Here we can see the ‘leap of faith’ required to get on board with Plato: the conclusion (the Good exists) is also his premise (we can see the Good). It is only by believing in reason as primary that the argument for believing in reason as primary holds weight.

Having granted reason higher status, the wheels of Plato’s logic have produced a conceptual structure which claims to give him access to a higher truth, which includes the argument that a philosopher-king should rule over the warrior and laboring classes as one with sole access to the higher truth (which seems to have belief in it as a prerequisite to being believed). Backed by this conceptual structure, Plato can begin to postulate an understanding of the self as a coherent whole. Taylor describes the move from conceptual structure to self structure: “So reason can be understood as the perception of the natural or right order, and to be ruled by reason is to be ruled by a vision of this order.”<sup>6</sup>

Plato’s understanding of the self consists of three parts—reason, spirit, and desires. For Plato it is the case that a just self consists in the reason controlling and ruling the spirit and desires. He explains this by recourse to his model of the ideal city, in which the ruling class is reasonable and has access to the idea of the Good, allowing them to correctly guide the warrior and laboring classes. In this model, the warrior and labor classes understand the ruling class’s right to rule, and submits to them willingly. So too should the self be ordered, such that the spirit, which drives us with emotion, and the desires, which hunger after various things, willingly be ruled by reason. So Plato rhetorically asks, “. . . as there were three kinds contained in the city, money makers,

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<sup>4</sup> Plato 231.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor 121.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor 121.

auxiliaries, and advisers, is there thus also this third kind in a soul, the spirited form, by nature an auxiliary to reflection if it is not corrupted by bad upbringing?"<sup>7</sup>

The prioritization of the rational element of the self tips the balance of value away from the other two elements, because valuing the rational implicitly devalues the spirit and desires. Taylor describes a helpful view of Plato's choice, which I will attempt to paraphrase here. Being a self can be described as having various mental states, which could be divided into Plato's three categories: sometimes our minds are wrapped up in grasping desperately for something we want, in lust, or greed; sometimes we are driven by spirited emotions, outrage at an injustice or pride in an accomplishment; and then some other times we are wrapped up in reflection, thinking about this or that, or even one of the other mental states. At the least, these are all various manners in which the average person exists in the world. If we view one of them as the norm, then the other two will be exceptions to what is otherwise standard. Plato argues that because reason can think of spirit and desires, it must necessarily be prior to them, so the other two become slips, moments in which we are not correctly our selves. As Taylor writes,

For a moralist of reason, the privileged condition is not a special state in the sense of being out of communication with all the others, but is on the contrary the one in which all thoughts and feelings are under purview, as we achieve the centering on ourselves that rational hegemony brings. Special, non-communicating states are thus lapses; they are obstacles to reason and represent failure to achieve the heights of reason.<sup>8</sup>

For my argument, what is at stake here is that Plato has divided the self in all its various manners of being into three categories, and, through recourse to a conceptual structure which cannot stand without recourse to circular reasoning, chosen to prioritize one such faculty over the other. What follows is that Plato believes himself to be in charge of his self: he is a unified, coherent whole which knows what is best for the world and acts accordingly. So Plato declares, "The just man does not allow any element in himself to do what properly belongs to another, or the kinds in his soul to meddle and interfere with each other. . . he binds them all together and becomes, from many, completely one."<sup>9</sup> For Plato, his justification for action, and for declaring himself a unified self, does not come from within, but rather through recourse to a structure which he finds beyond himself, in society or the cosmos. Plato's whole basis for action rests on his recourse to a conceptual structure outside of his own intentions, yet this structure was created by him and is only convincingly viable if one already finds it convincingly viable.

Finally, Plato's understanding of himself as a coherent whole allows him to go into the world confident in his own epistemology, his actions given validity and justice by a structuring of the world which he himself has created. This causes him to raise the just life, as outlined by the idea of the Good, as the correct course of action regardless of whether the illusory world of sense experience might suggest otherwise. As Taylor

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<sup>7</sup> Plato 140.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor 119-120.

<sup>9</sup> Plato 144.



describes, “and this is just the doctrine that the *Republic* is meant to establish, that the just life is the most advantageous—even in the absence of success in the world of action and power.”<sup>10</sup>

Having run through Plato’s argument in the form I have outlined in the first section, we can now rehash where Plato seems to be coming from. In prioritizing reason, he generates a conceptual structure which is based not upon the things we experience but upon the need to posit a higher order engendered by the prioritization of reason as something higher. From this creation of the idea of the Good, Plato declares that the self is unified in perceiving this highest order, and from here is able to produce a justification for going into the world as he sees fit—namely, dividing up the people he sees as beneath him into categories which should intrinsically be willingly to submit to people of his class, who happen to be the ones who would rule in a just society. Already, we can see the general form of the western self taking shape—one who believes they are a coherent whole, who appeals to the power of rationality to produce a conceptual structure which justifies the actions they take. However, for Plato there is not yet a recognized element of choice—to truly know the Good is to love it, and to love it is to act it out. Wrongful acts *cannot* be performed in spite of the Good, but only in ignorance of it. It is not until Augustine that the faculty of the western self to assert its will upon the world emerges.

### *Section 1.3: Augustine and God*

Saint Augustine represents an important step from the Greek to the modern western conception of the self, as he carries the Greek’s value of rationality and method into the Christian task of understanding our relationship to God. Plato’s influence is recognizable in Augustine’s proof of God’s existence. Augustine believes that we can create a hierarchical structure based upon the notion that higher things must include the lower within them. This allows him, like Plato, to place reason as highest—because reason considers everything, nothing could be higher.

As there are everyday objects in the world, Augustine believes there are also higher everyday objects, such as number or wisdom. He finds these truths to be self-evident, such that we do not question their validity, but rather use them as a measure of our own understanding of truth. Finally, in understanding that such higher things exist, we can conclude that there is God as well. Augustine’s God and Plato’s Good have many things in common: they are both higher ordering principles which give form to the world; for both to truly know them is to love them; and for both it is the sensory world which distracts us from reaching the higher truth.

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor 120.

However, Augustine makes a critical break from Plato in his formulation of how we discover the transcendent. While for Plato the Good is discovered in studying the myriad forms of the external world, for Augustine God is discovered by turning within, to examine the nature of the soul. In Augustine's own words, "We reach him, in truth, not when we become altogether what he is, but rather when we become nearest to him, touching him in a marvelous and intelligible way, inwardly illumined and seized by his truth and holiness."<sup>11</sup> Although Augustine posits the inner as the site of discovering the transcendent, his structure is otherwise very similar to Plato's—he prioritizes reason as that which encompasses other things, and is then driven to carry this claim out to the fullest extent: there must be a thing which encompasses all things, God.

This distinction between the avenues to higher truth—the move from accessing it in the outer to accessing it from within—carries greater implications than are first visible. Firstly, this means that the subject becomes critical in understanding the truth. Whereas for Plato finding the truth was a matter of turning our attention to the correct objects of the world, for Augustine the truth can only be found within. Albrecht Dihle writes extensively on the theory of will as it develops in Augustine's time. Dihle observed that Augustine's inward turn is also the first in western philosophy's history to attempt to turn the understanding upon understanding itself, to try to comprehend the way the subject encounters the phenomenon of the world. So Dihle writes, "St. Augustine. . . concentrated on the problem of what is going on in the human mind during the act of cognition."<sup>12</sup>

It is further the case for Augustine that the subject played a larger role in things than simply being the access to truth. Plato's conceptual structure was supposedly so transcendent and so inherently Good that to know it was immediately to love it, and consequently the only way one could possibly go against the Good was simply by being ignorant of it. However, for Augustine, we must not only know God but *agree* to follow his will. As Augustine writes, "Not all, therefore, will to live blessedly, indeed few will this, if there is no way to live blessedly except by living in accord with excellence of soul, which many do not will."<sup>13</sup>

Augustine sees this faculty for assent as the *will*, the ability to determine our own actions despite knowledge of the order of the world. Etienne Gilson writes, "everything depends on the decision man will or will not make to allow the order he sees imposed by God on nature to reign within himself."<sup>14</sup> For Augustine, the will is a fundamental aspect of man. In his analysis, he finds that even the senses and our search for knowledge are directed by the will. This is because the will directs the attention of our sense organs, such that without the presence of the will to perceive, the sense organs may as well not be perceiving at all, and inversely, when the will is strong, the

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *On the Ways of the Catholic Church and of the Manichaeans*, 1.11.18-21.

<sup>12</sup> Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982. 126.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 13.4.7-13.6.9.

<sup>14</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. Trans. L. E. M. Lynch. New York: Random House, 1960. 132.

perceptions grow in importance and feeling.<sup>15</sup> Equally, the will determines our attainment of knowledge, directing our interests. As Gilson writes, “but whatever the degree of knowledge we attain, it is always determined by an impulse to investigate which has its origins in the will.”<sup>16</sup>

The positing of the will as participating in perception is another important break from earlier traditions. While thinkers like Plato believed perception was simply a matter of ideas correlating to real forms, a process independent from the subject, for Augustine perception is complicated and shaped by the subject himself. As Albrecht Dihle writes, “intellectual activity would be impossible without the potential of objects of cognition offered by the memory, without the faculty of reasoning, and without the moving force of will.”<sup>17</sup>

Not only is the will powerful in guiding the man, but, because of this faculty for control, also incredibly dangerous without proper checks. The direction of the will is the determining factor in man’s choice of right and wrong, and whether or not it is conditioned with the understanding of God is the difference between good and evil. This view is represented in Augustine’s biblical interpretations, as it is the difference in will which differentiates the fallen angels from the good. As Dihle describes, “the will of the fallen angels has been perverted by their attempt to be and to act independently of their Creator, whereas the good angels never changed the direction of their will.”<sup>18</sup> Satan transmits this freedom of will to Adam in the garden, which Augustine sees as the root of our tendencies towards evil. Again in Dihle’s words, “the will of man has been transformed, in consequence of the fall of Adam, from love in concupiscence, i.e. self-centeredness, from *humilitas* into *superbia*.”<sup>19</sup>

Taylor describes this action of the will against God’s guidance as a ‘perversity,’ causing us to act contrary to our insight. As he writes, “this perversity can be described as a drive to make ourselves the centre of our world, to relate everything to ourselves, to dominate and possess the things around us.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, without the guidance of the conceptual structure of the goodness of God, Augustine sees that the will drives us to understand the world in terms of its use for us, finding nothing but means to better realize what we desire. Augustine describes the will’s turn away from God,

For in that more excellent nature which is God, it sees certain intrinsically beautiful things. And, although it ought to stand fast to enjoy them, it wills to assign those things to itself and wills not to be like God by God’s doing but by its own doing to be what God is. Thus the soul is turned from God, set in motion, and slips into less and less, which it supposes to be more and more. For it is not

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<sup>15</sup> Gilson 133.

<sup>16</sup> Gilson 134.

<sup>17</sup> Dihle 125.

<sup>18</sup> Dihle 128.

<sup>19</sup> Dihle 130-131.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor 138-139.

sufficient for itself, nor is anything sufficient for one who withdraws from him who alone suffices.<sup>21</sup>

The end of this paragraph highlights what for Augustine is the solution to the misguidance of the will—to return to an understanding that although the will might move the soul, God is prior to the soul and necessary for its being. Taylor formulates the danger of the unchecked will as the consequence of the reflexive turn closing on itself, that in looking inwards to find reason, we do not find God but only our own volitions. The antidote, then, is to acknowledge that we are not the source of our soul, that there is something prior to and transcendent above our self understanding. In Taylor's words, "evil is when reflexivity is enclosed on itself. Healing comes when it is broken open, not in order to be abandoned, but in order to acknowledge its dependence on God."<sup>22</sup> What is important is that we do not place undue confidence in our will, but instead are constantly humbled in our recollection of God's primacy. As Dihle frames it, "this belief is the background of St. Augustine's famous paradox that sin or vice combined with humility are far better than virtue together with pride. Accordingly, humility is the root of all virtues, as is pride of all vices."<sup>23</sup>

Once again, we find in Augustine as in Plato the basic order which I outlined in the first section. A positing of the rational as something higher causes the belief that there must be something ultimately highest, a conceptual structure which in turn allows Augustine to see himself as a coherent unity, ordered by God and driven by the will. The will, however, becomes a troublesome concept indeed. The idea that we can know the transcendent and yet choose not to adhere to it, that we could, like Milton's Satan, decide it is better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven, raises obvious questions. Our will, even in these early stages, drives how we perceive the world, shapes our search for truth, and if left unchecked, causes us to be self-centered, manipulative creatures. René Descartes will further complicate things by positing that the presence of the will is also the source of error. What is the western self then left with if it should choose to abandon the conceptual structure which checks this faculty of will, if, as we may discover in later chapters, God is dead—is it possible to create our own conceptual structures to regulate our will, if the will controls us so fundamentally as to effect our very sense perceptions and search for knowledge?

#### *Section 1.4: Descartes and Himself*

As Augustine turned the search for a higher ideal from the Good of the exterior world to the God of the inner soul, Descartes will take this move a step further by positing that truth can only be constructed through the subject. Descartes continues to

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<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 10.5.7.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor 139.

<sup>23</sup> Dihle 131.

uphold reason as one of the fundamental ordering properties of man, as he writes, “There is only one soul in man, the rational soul; for no actions can be reckoned human unless they depend on reason.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore method is paramount—we must follow reason in constructing a series of inferences which we build towards the truth. So he begins with his famous line, “I think, therefore I am,” a statement which he believes cannot be refuted, for in order for the phrase to be issued the speaker must exist, must be exerting its will. As Descartes explains, “. . . remarking that this truth ‘*I think, therefore I am*’ was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I came to the conclusion that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the Philosophy for which I was seeking.”<sup>25</sup>

Through rational analysis Descartes has determined that his ego is at least existent, and furthermore has shown his prioritization of reason as the means to attaining truth. Descartes then follows in the footsteps of Plato and Augustine, compelled to posit a higher order because he believes that things must fall into a hierarchy, and that therefore there must be something at the top. So he generates a proof of God’s existence, arguing that for him to have the understanding that he is a less than perfect being requires that there must be a more perfect being than him in order for this notion to exist. In his words, “In this way it could but follow that it had been placed in me by a Nature which was really more perfect than mine could be, and which even had within itself all the perfections of which I could form any idea – that is to say, to put it in a word, which was God.”<sup>26</sup>

Although similar to Plato and Augustine in his need to posit a hierarchy due to his prioritization of reason, Descartes’ epistemology is much closer to the modern view held today. In Plato’s understanding, the faculties of perception correspond to the object being perceived, so the faculty of knowledge is highest because it can grasp the forms, while the senses are lower because they can only grasp the changing world of phenomena. Despite this devaluing of the senses, for Plato it is still the case that the senses cannot deceive, for it is not that the senses are faulty but simply that they perceive something changing and ephemeral. Descartes, however, believes the senses can indeed be wrong, for they are inherently limited. Descartes’ move in stating that the only truth which can initially be relied upon is his existence as a thinking thing leads him to discount the entire world of sense experience and the precedent of what he has learned, for even the existence of his body is under question. So, while for Plato the Good was out there in the world, and for Augustine God is equally ‘out there,’ even if discoverable initially only through the innerness of the soul, for Descartes the ‘out there’ bears no relation to his process of discovering the truth. In the thought of Plato and Augustine the ‘out there’ held the answers to questions such as the meaning of life and the nature of truth, but for Descartes the ‘out there’ is merely a giant mechanical clock, simply continuing with whatever actions are set upon it, holding no more truth than

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<sup>24</sup> Descartes in Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part IV.

<sup>26</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part IV.

that which we can generate for ourselves. As Taylor describes this distinction, “we demystify the cosmos as a setter of ends by grasping it mechanistically and functionally as a domain of possible means.”<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, we are no longer putting together the pieces of an order already in the world, like Plato’s Good or Augustine’s God, but rather generating our own order based upon our own findings. In Taylor’s words, “a representation of reality now has to be constructed. . . . so the order of ideas ceases to be something we *find* and becomes something we *build*.”<sup>28</sup> Descartes, then, in terms of the conceptual structure I am attempting to put together, has done what his predecessors did not, he has recognized the nature of his ideals as put together by the subject himself. The consequence of this shift is that we are no longer willful, reasoning beings governed and shaped by an order already eminent in the world, but rather we are willful, reasoning beings governing, shaping and applying order to a world where no such things are present.

This being is still governed by reason, but it is a reason which constructs truth instead of discovering it. In Descartes’ philosophy, self-mastery is to subsume ourselves once again under the hegemony of reason. As for Plato, for Descartes the desires and passions are subservient to the domination of reason. However, this is not due to their natural tendencies, but rather to the all-encompassing power which Descartes believes thought possesses.

Equally important for Descartes is the faculty of will. While for Augustine it represented a dangerous divide between faith and sin, for Descartes the will is important for just this reason. As Descartes writes, “Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects; and so its rightful use is the greatest of all the goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us.”<sup>29</sup>

For Descartes the powers of reason and will no longer take their direction from something higher, instead it is the subject himself which drives his own actions. This can be seen in his use of the proof of God’s existence—although it is an important step, Descartes’ positing of the existence of God is one step in a logical progression which aims at something beyond simply conceptualizing the transcendent. God is no longer the foundation of our existence, as He was for Augustine, but is now simply another step in Descartes’ rational proof of the superiority of the will.<sup>30</sup> By restructuring the sequence of authority, from the subject being shaped by the higher to the subject shaping the higher, Descartes has given the western self a new sense of agency.

In the absence of the orders imposed by the transcendent structures of his predecessors, for Descartes the impetus for action is this self-sufficiency itself. Taylor elaborates, “If rational control is a matter of mind dominating a disenchanted world of matter, then the sense of the superiority of the good life, and the inspiration to attain it,

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor 149.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor 144.

<sup>29</sup> Descartes in Kenny 228.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor 157.

must come from the agent's sense of his own dignity as a rational being."<sup>31</sup> This brings the will to the forefront of the self's activity, and for Descartes it is of central importance in the just life.

Descartes has also taken another great step towards the modern notion of the self. By beginning in absolute skepticism, Descartes has touched upon the idea that rationality is still subjective, that it reveals not an objective world but more tellingly the subjective world of the perceiver. Although the faculties of reason and will have given the subject a new level of agency, Descartes also argues that these freedoms bring with them the potential for error, because our knowledge is limited while our will remains unlimited. As Descartes writes, "since the will is much wider in its range and compass than the understanding, I do not restrain it within the same bounds, but extend it also to things which I do not understand; and as the will is of itself indifferent to these, it easily falls into error and sin. . . ."<sup>32</sup>

In this way, although our will is unlimited, we must restrain it with what understanding we have or it will lead us into error. Descartes believes that when we restrain our will in this way, it cannot lead us astray. As he puts it, when he exercises this sort of restraint he cannot be deceived, "for every clear and distinct conception is without doubt something, and hence cannot derive its origin from what is nought, but must of necessity have God as its author – God, I say, who being supremely perfect, cannot be the cause of any error, and consequently we must conclude that such a conception is true."<sup>33</sup>

In the end, although Descartes finds the will to be paramount to the good life, he is unwilling to free it from the binds Augustine laid out for it. As Descartes writes, "But, as knowledge of the existence of God must not keep us from being assured of our free will in that we experience it and feel it ourselves, so also the knowledge of our free will must not make us doubt the existence of God."<sup>34</sup> Still for Descartes God is present, a higher truth which tempers the freedom of the will.

### *Section 1.5: Conclusion*

Plato's elevation of the rational and Augustine's development of the notion of will allows Descartes to generate a structure in which free will not only exists, but is a positive rather than a negative quality in man. If we can bracket criticism involving the actual possibility of the existence of a transcendent and infinitely perfect being and its subsequent influence on the works of philosophers throughout time, Descartes leaves

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor 152.

<sup>32</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation IV.

<sup>33</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation IV.

<sup>34</sup> Descartes in Andrea Nye, *The Princess and the Philosopher: Letters of Elisabeth of the Palatine to René Descartes*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999. 74.

us with a self which has in the will an unlimited potential to choose, and the justification to pursue this choice through a knowledge which is itself created and shaped by the will. Descartes describes the effects of such a self-conception:

In place of understanding the perfections which are truly in us, [man] attributes to other creatures imperfections which they do not have and puts himself above them, and so enters on an impertinent presumption: he wishes to be of the council of God, and to take on with God the charge of running the world, which causes an infinity of vain iniquities and falsehoods.<sup>35</sup>

I argue that Descartes' structure generates an ideal—God, perfection, infallibility—then attributes this quality to the faculty of the will. He postulates that as long as we are mindful of our dependence upon God, and make certain to bound our will within the limits of our understanding, that we cannot be deceived or do wrong unintentionally.

But of what nature are these checks? If the will shapes how we perceive everything but the most basic observations, then it is tenuous to argue that we can ever know when our understanding is insufficient enough to restrict the projection of will, if the projection of will itself shapes our knowing. Descartes writes, “. . . understanding is the passivity of the mind and willing is its activity. . .”<sup>36</sup> When the will has the power to shape even that which is meant to control it, then nothing controls it. This understanding of the self creates something which has a great capacity to shape the world to its ideals, subsuming all things, even understanding itself, as a means to its end.

In the following chapter, I will examine the Confucian understanding of the self in an attempt to both understand what it is the Confucian model makes of the self, but also in order to contrast the two conceptualizations, highlighting their differences as a way to show the non-essential nature of either or any self-conception. For example, Chinese thought was generally much less dualistic, so binaries such as body and soul, sensible and rational, or reason and desire were never prominent in Eastern thought.

Next, Chapter 3 will return to the European self, using the thought of Nietzsche and Derrida to deconstruct this problematic conceptual construction. I hope to reveal this structure as based in the western self's fundamental drive to accumulate influence, material wealth, and control: *the will to power*. I begin with Nietzsche's deconstruction of the European self, which draws us into an analysis of culture's power relationship with the individual self. Next, Derrida will demonstrate a similar deconstruction, the end goal of which is not to posit a new hierarchy, like Nietzsche, but rather to leave the dominant tradition deconstructed.

Chapter 4 will attempt to apply a similar criticism to the Confucian self, this time using the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi. His approach is based on the notion that all things are becoming, in flux, and therefore language cannot have a fixed referent in the sensible world. His critique of value judgments echoes the critiques presented by Derrida, in that he argues for a relativity of meaning which negates any attempts to posit absolute truths or higher ideals.

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<sup>35</sup> Descartes in Nye 61.

<sup>36</sup> Descartes in Kenny 102.



Finally, I hope to show that, given the destabilized nature of such structures which aim at the higher, we should instead posit that all of these manners of conceiving the self have equal value—in other words, we should array the various manners of being a self on the horizontal axis of value rather than on the vertical axis, because none are more correct, as they are all equally plausible. Their value should actually be found not through reference to the arguments laid out in the conceptual structures which support them, for these are not necessarily objective arguments, as they are wrapped up in the aims of the structure. Instead, we should approach them in their uses to us. As a self driven by the will to power we have an incredible capacity to achieve abstract goals using all the means at our disposal, while a Daoist model allows for an ability to understand the world as it is, attempting to have no end to create means for.

## *Chapter 2: The Construction of the Chinese Self*

### *Section 2.1: The Purpose of This Conceptual Structure*

The objective of this second chapter is to explore the construction of the self as it appears in China, specifically in the tradition of Confucius and his modern commentators. The analysis of the Chinese self will be comparative with the European construction of the self outlined in the previous chapter, not because the European is somehow prior to or more truthful than the Chinese construction, but simply because to the European or American self, myself included, the European construction will seem more familiar, while the Chinese will feel foreign. Again, like the European chapter, this chapter on the Confucian construction of self will not be an exhaustive timeline from the beginning of the Confucian tradition to the present, but merely an overview stressing certain points which I find relevant in constructing my own analysis.

Despite China's incredibly long history of what westerners call philosophy, and despite the various efforts to purge 'traditional values' from the thought of the Chinese people during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—even specifically targeting such 'feudal values' as Confucianism itself—I believe a study of Confucian thought can still provide valuable insight into the workings of the Chinese self as it is constructed today. This may be the case even when the Chinese themselves feel otherwise, as illustrated in what I consider my first encounter with Confucian values.

While I was living in Harbin, China, almost exactly a year ago from the time of this writing, I was joking around lewdly with my Chinese roommate, a young man from inner Mongolia named Zhou Rui. Zhou had described his thought as entirely westernized, with no traces of traditional Chinese or even Marxist values. To him, the biggest difference between our worldviews was the way we brushed our teeth (He used a cup, while I simply stuck my head under the faucet, to his great surprise). Yet here we were, trading simple profanities to the best of my Mandarin language skills, when I said to him, "I'm smelly? Zhou Rui, your mom is the smelly one!" He turned from his computer screen to look at me with an uncharacteristically serious expression on his face. "Huang (my family name), you absolutely should not say things like that about my mother." He stared at me for a moment longer, clearly shocked. "Do you understand what I mean? You're talking about my mother." Of course, I apologized profusely and that was that. In all of our joking around, I was for the first time seriously concerned I had hurt my good friend's feelings.

To me, this small exchange illustrates the pervasiveness of the culturally transmitted constructions of self we inherit, the vast yet subtle differences between them, and their roots in the earliest philosophies of our respective civilizations. In the same way a European might believe there is a distinct separation between mind and body while not consciously acknowledging that such a thought is informed by Descartes'

philosophy, my friend Zhou Rui holds a deep reverence for his mother's name and societal respect without being conscious of Confucius' influence upon his values.

This chapter continues from the introduction in the second section by arguing that familial order is the basis of Confucian thought. This is expanded upon to show that the Chinese self is inextricably social, meaning that each person's self-definition is intrinsically tied up with their inter-personal relationships, as father, son, or countryman. Thinkers like Descartes, egoists who turn away from the world and into their own consciousness to declare that they are certain only of themselves, are not present in Chinese thought. Further, Confucian thought argues that the self is a process, a narrative across time, not a conceptual unity which can be isolated and inspected through systematic analysis.

The third section argues that for Confucius the cultivation of the self is achieved through the reformation of our natural tendencies. This reformation is enacted through *ritual*, societal traditions which provide the framework for the progress of the self. In Confucian thought, ritual is the essential humanizing condition, what separates us from animals. This opens the way to understanding the self as a *focus-field*, a point at the center of a field which both defines and is defined by the field itself. As the family is the fundamental focus-field structure, the father orders the family around him, ensuring proper harmony between mother, sons, and daughters. When the father cultivates himself, the family is in turn cultivated. Yet it is only through being within the field that the focus has the opportunity to become cultivated, so it is equally true that the man is cultivated by his position as father and husband.

In the fourth and final section of this chapter, I attempt to provide clear distinctions between the European and Chinese constructions of self. First I will outline the differences between the understanding of order evident within both traditions. Then, I will show that, although the Chinese self is inextricably interdependent with society, individual autonomy still exists and is considered important for properly interfacing with ritual culture. That total immersion of the self in society and autonomy of the self seem incompatible may speak more to the disposition of our European selves than any fault in Chinese thought.

Next, I will attempt to contrast the concept of will so pervasive and problematic in European thought to the Confucian equivalent. Although the idea of the faculty of will is present in the Chinese construction of self, it lacks much of the conceptual systematizing applied to the European self. Specifically, the Chinese will, represented by the *xin* or heart-mind, is thinking, feeling, and judging—in other words, the Chinese will makes no distinction between reason, spirit, and desire, as Plato's tripartite soul does. Further, for the Chinese there is no distinction between idea and action, meaning that the will and willing are inseparable. While Descartes found the will to be dominant over all other elements of the self because of its capacity to will beyond the realm of possibility, for the Chinese there is little use for applying the will to what cannot actually be accomplished.

Finally, the Chinese have no history of Cartesian dualism, Descartes' pervasive claim that the mind must exist, even if the body may not, thereby defining body and

mind as independent entities. In the Chinese formulation, it is instead the case that even the will is not entirely mental, as they believe that all elements of the interior self will manifest in the exterior, not only through posture, dress, and action, but even in a sort of aura of authority and civility which a particularly exemplary person might radiate from their very being.

## *Section 2.2: The Confucian Self As Narrative and Inextricably Social*

Confucius sees order in the world as constituents arrayed around an organizing center—the cosmos around heaven, the barbarian tribes around the Middle Kingdom (as China refers to itself), the state around the Emperor, the family around the father. In Confucian thought, the family is the basis of all such fields of relationship, serving as the basic unit of interdependence which provides the foundation for more expansive fields. In the *Analects of Confucius* it is asked of Confucius, “Why are you not employed in governing?” To which he replies, “It is all in filial conduct! Just being filial to your parents and befriending your brothers is carrying out the work of government. In doing this I am employed in governing. Why must I be ‘employed in governing’?”<sup>37</sup> For Confucius, a proper family structure is a prerequisite for further development, and the foundation of society. So he claims that when he performs familial order, he is participating in the correct functioning of the government. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, advocates of the focus-field interpretation, argue that “Familial order is fundamental in determining at least the Confucian sense of self. And the bureaucratic structure and the state itself are extensions of familial order. The other fields by which the individual is contextualized are continuous with the family model.”<sup>38</sup>

The Confucian emphasis on familial relations illustrates a key difference between the European and Chinese manners of conceptualizing the world. Although it is a broad generalization, there is value in stating that Europeans tend to conceptualize things as independent of each other, while the Chinese view the world in a correlative fashion, such that the definition of one particular thing depends upon the things it is associated with. In practical terms, for the European when the relationship between two things is removed, they simply remain the two things they were, as they were already defined independently of each other. For the Chinese, however, when the relationship between two things is removed, the definition of each thing is changed, because their correlation was a definitive element of their definition.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Confucius. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. Trans. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. New York: Ballantine Books, 1998. Print. 80-81.

<sup>38</sup> Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. Print. 37.

<sup>39</sup> Ames, introduction to *The Analects*, 24. Ames provides a useful visual aid: Chinese correlative understanding is like a Venn diagram, such that the two things have overlapping fields of definition. In contrast, the European independent

This distinction between the European and Chinese modes of perception can be detected in the child's relationship to his or her parents. While in European or American society, children begin to view themselves as independent of their parents at an early age—leading to the rebellious character of youth western societies perceive as natural—for the Chinese one's relationship with one's parents is generally highly respectful and obedient. The European child defines themselves on their own terms, excluding from their nascent self-conception their deep social and economic dependence on their parents. On the other hand, the Chinese child's self-conception is interdependent with that of the parents. Tu Wei-Ming writes, "the Confucian approach takes as its point of departure that the father-son relationship is absolutely binding. . . . The trite and commonplace observation that one cannot choose one's father is here maintained as a core value."<sup>40</sup>

For the Chinese, it is not the case that father, mother and son are placed in a relationship which further informs their sense of selves, but rather that these relationships serve as the starting point for the very creation of a sense of self—there is no son without a father and mother, so there is no self without the other. Therefore we can say that the Confucian self is inextricably social, with nothing considered prior. As Mark A. Berkson argues, "there is not the sense that there is a 'true self' underneath all of these roles that we 'play,' but rather that selfhood is manifested only in these relational roles."<sup>41</sup> Hall and Ames compare the relationship of self and other to that of yin and yang or day and night—one cannot be understood without the other, and furthermore, one is constantly becoming the other, such that we cannot objectively declare what is night and what is day, but only state relative truths, that day is becoming night.<sup>42</sup>

As I have noted, this fundamental inclusion of the other in the conception of the self means that the development of Chinese thought has occurred without the European emphasis on the independent individual as the sole access to truth. While Descartes strives to remove all external influences in an attempt to isolate what is fundamental within him, Confucius turns to external influences to define his sense of self, yet turns to them in a way which does not consider them external. For Confucius, this distinction does not even represent a choice, for to the Chinese to be social is to be human, such that what is in us prior to our participation in the traditions of culture is merely animal. As Kwong-loi Shun writes, "the hypothetical figure of the egoist does not play a role in Chinese ethical thought and Chinese thinkers see their audience as concrete individuals who already share to some extent the concerns and perspectives

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understanding is like two independent circles with a line between them, such that when the line is removed nothing in the two thing's definition is lost.

<sup>40</sup> Wei-Ming, Tu. "Selfhood and Otherness in Confucian Thought." *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*. Ed. Anthony J. Marsella, George DeVos and Francis L. K. Hsu. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985. Print. 237.

<sup>41</sup> Berkson, Mark A. "Conceptions of Self/No-Self and Modes of Connection." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33. 2 (2005): 293 – 331. Online. 319-20.

<sup>42</sup> Hall 27.

shaped by the social order within which they have been brought up.”<sup>43</sup> The subject’s fundamental social involvement is illustrated in passage 5.12 of *The Analects*: “Zigong said, ‘I do not want others to impose on me, nor do I want to impose on others.’ Confucius replied, ‘Zigong, this is quite beyond your reach.’”<sup>44</sup>

As the Confucian self is constructed based upon its relationships to others, so selfhood is conceived of as an ongoing narrative rather than a specific element of the self. When the self is a son, for example, it is constituted by its relationships with father and mother, but when this individual creates his own family, his relationship to others changes, and therefore his self itself must change. This change is often described as cultivation, the gradual betterment of the self and thereby those intrinsically related to you. As Tu describes, “The ultimate purpose of life is neither regulating the family nor harmonizing the father-son relationship, but self-realization. Indeed, only through self-cultivation can one’s family be regulated and, by implication, one’s relationship to one’s father harmonized.”<sup>45</sup>

This process of development over a lifetime is an important aspect of Confucian selfhood. Selfhood here requires a temporal narrative, not merely a consciousness of one’s life but an active effort towards cultivating the correct qualities. Confucius describes the narrative transformation of his self over his life in *The Analects*, noting each stage as an achievement: “From fifteen, my heart-and-mind (志 *zhi*) was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of heaven; from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind (心 *xin*) free rein without overstepping the boundaries.”<sup>46</sup> The two characters given here, 志 *zhi*, and 心 *xin* are the characters generally translated as the will in the western sense, although 志 *zhi* is closer to disposition in meaning. Although I will analyze the Chinese notion of will later, it is interesting to note that Confucius does not give his will, or heart-mind (心 *xin*) ‘free rein’ until he is seventy.

In the Confucian tradition what is cultivated is one’s nature, which is generally considered fundamentally good. Although we have a basically good nature, without proper cultivation we are less than human, showing that a human divorced from society and relying only on its nature is for Confucius merely an animal. Tu Wei-Ming comments on our necessity for cultivation despite having good nature: “the intrinsic goodness in our nature is often in a latent state: only through long and strenuous effort can it be realized as an experienced reality.”<sup>47</sup> For Confucius socialization is a betterment of our nature, and it is only through participation in culture that we have the opportunity to

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<sup>43</sup> Shun, Kwong-Loi. “Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought.” *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*. Ed. Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 183-203. Print. 194.

<sup>44</sup> *Analects* 98.

<sup>45</sup> Tu 243.

<sup>46</sup> *Analects* 76-77.

<sup>47</sup> Tu 246.

become human at all. As Berkson writes, “While we are born with our nature, we come into selfhood; it is fully realized only with our effort and over time. Everyone has a nature; not everyone has a fully developed self.”<sup>48</sup>

### *Section 2.3: The Confucian Self within Ritual and the Focus-Field*

In Confucian thought, it is ritual, 禮 *li*, which provides the framework for the cultivation of the self. Ritual refers to the intricacies of social relations, from the movements of court officials within Imperial buildings to the way we greet one another on the street. Proper participation in ritual is the means by which the progress of self-cultivation is made. As Confucius states in *The Analects*, “One stands to be improved by the enjoyment found in attuning oneself to the rhythms of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and music, by the enjoyment found in talking about what others do well, and by the enjoyment found in having a circle of many friends of superior character.”<sup>49</sup>

Here we can see that for Confucius ritual is the link between the self and the other, for in participating in ritual with others we cultivate ourselves, yet it is only through the other that we can begin to be cultivated. In Confucian thought, ritual is not a constriction added on top of general social interaction, but rather is itself the basis of social interaction, and therefore self-cultivation. As Berkson writes, “Confucian thinkers believe that the cultivation of the self through these activities, which are preserved and transmitted through education and constitute the essence of the tradition, is the essential humanizing activity.”<sup>50</sup> Without cultivation there is no human, without the other there is no cultivation, and without ritual there can be no other, meaning that ritual is essential for achieving humanity in Confucian thought.

Ritual should not be viewed as a restriction on natural human life (although we will encounter certain Daoists who do), but rather as that which allows us to be human. Tu comments that the father-son relationship “is a constraint, a limitation, and bondage; yet through its constraining, limiting, and binding power, it provides a necessary means for self-cultivation for the father as well as the son.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, we do not grow more familiar with the other—and therefore our selves—despite the rigors of ritual, but rather are able to grow precisely because such restrictions are in place. For Confucians, the way, or 道 *dao*, the manner in which the world unfolds, is expressed through ritual itself. Ritual is not a translation or set of rules applied to the experience of the way, but is itself an unfolding of the way. As Berkson writes, “It is not that the authentic

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<sup>48</sup> Berkson 302.

<sup>49</sup> Analects 197-98.

<sup>50</sup> Berkson 303.

<sup>51</sup> Tu 240

experience of the other (or of the *dao* itself) is somehow mediated by categories. Rather, the *dao* manifests itself in just these ways, with these distinctions.”<sup>52</sup>

The objective of observing ritual in Confucian thought is ultimately the achievement of harmony between the innate qualities of the person, 質 *zhi*, and the cultural norms of the surrounding society, or form, 文 *wen*. As the Analects states, “Achieving harmony (*he* 和) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮).”<sup>53</sup> These qualities, *zhi*, are the innate traits of the person, the particular characteristics which define the individual. Form, *wen*, is the cultural schooling the individual receives, inundating the person with the social etiquette and cues necessary to participate in society.

While a European philosophical formulation of the relationship between individual quality and cultural form would generally be of form dominating and correcting what is lacking in quality, in the Confucian conception harmony between the two is required for the successful cultivation of the self. As Confucius states, “When quality (*zhi*) overwhelms form (*wen*), one is a rustic. When form overwhelms quality, one is a pedant. Only when form and quality are combined is one an exemplary person.”<sup>54</sup> While cultivation of the self as human cannot be done without participation in the social, the innate qualities of the self cannot be washed away with this participation—harmony rather than control is essential in the proper realization of ritual.

My own teacher, Professor James Behuniak, relates the importance of harmony between form and quality using the analogy of soup, an analogy ubiquitous within classical Chinese discussions of harmony. He writes, “while the unique features of an onion are rendered delicious in a well-harmonized soup, the strongest feelings and desires of a person are rendered social and communicable in a well-harmonized ritual. . . . Both soup and ritual promote the expression of a unique quality (*zhi*); both give it outlet and render its expression palatable and aesthetically fitting.”<sup>55</sup> While the onion has its own unique qualities, it would be disgusting to eat it raw. Its participation in the soup allows it to express the full quality of its taste while at the same time allowing for its participation in the broader field of tastes. Without the overall form of the soup, each ingredient would be inedible, yet if each ingredient did not have its own unique quality, the soup would be tasteless. This is the crux of the Confucian conception of order: recognizing the unique quality of each particular and bringing them together in a harmonious form which exceeds the value of its individual constituents without at the same time losing what is unique in each.

In the Confucian tradition, participation in ritual interaction advances the way of the tradition and allows for self-cultivation. I have noted earlier that Confucians

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<sup>52</sup> Berkson 319.

<sup>53</sup> Analects 74.

<sup>54</sup> Analects 6.18, See Behuniak’s translation 52.

<sup>55</sup> Behuniak, James Jr. “Confucius on Form and Uniqueness.” *Confucius Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Analects*. Ed. David Jones. Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 2008. 49-59. Print. 55.



consider the self irreducibly social, thrown into an awareness of the other without a state of being prior to this relationship. The implications of this social embeddedness is farther reaching than simply being the prerequisite for formulating a self. The Confucian self develops within the field of its relationships, cultivated by enacting the role of the particular individual relative to the things which allows the particular to be the particular which it is. When the self is properly cultivated in this way, it is not only the self which is cultivated, but in turn the field of things around the self are cultivated as well. As the father cultivates himself as a father, the family around him is also bettered and allowed to enact their proper roles as well. This relationship is so irreducible that the progress of the self is measured not internally, but by examining its effects on the broader field of which it is a constituent. As Shun writes, “One’s own self-cultivation will have a transformative and nourishing effect on other things, and such effect is itself a measure of one’s progress in self-cultivation.”<sup>56</sup>

As outlined in the second section of this chapter, ancient Chinese thought views the order of existence as concentric rings, with its constituents organized around the focusing center. As Plato saw the world organized analogously to the self—the cosmos, city, and self all divided by ruling and ruled, rational and irrational—so Confucius perceived order in the world to be analogous to the self—the cosmos, kingdom and self are all divided between the field of constituents and the focusing particular. To cultivate the self is in turn to cultivate the field around the self, and although the concentric fields begin with the family, the rings extend outward, to community, kingdom, and cosmos itself. Even at such a grand scale, the basic relationship stands, meaning that cultivation of self is in turn cultivation of cosmos. As Berkson observes, “The cultivation of self is the root of the order of the family, state, and cosmos; at the same time, the self can only be cultivated through the connections it has with family, state, and cosmos.”<sup>57</sup>

The field without the particular individual is indeterminate, nebulous, and is only truly ordered by the individual located within the field, as a particular focus of the field. Hall and Ames conceptualize this relationship in terms of the 德 *de* or excellence of the particular in relation to the 道 *dao* or way, the field of tradition which the individual of excellence organizes around the self. In their words, “When *de* is cultivated and accumulated such that the particular is integrated efficaciously into its environments, the distinction between *dao* and *de*, as field and focus, collapses. . . . *De* is both particular and its particular field—that is, the field as construed from its perspective. It is both *focus* and *focused field*.”<sup>58</sup> It is the particular which gives immediate context to the network of relationships organized around it, as *focus*, yet the particular is defined inseparably through its relationship to the field, so it can also be understood as the *focused field*.

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<sup>56</sup> Shun 193.

<sup>57</sup> Berkson 320.

<sup>58</sup> Hall 40.

If self is understood in this way, as a point at the center of a field which reciprocally define each other, then the Confucian definition of self cannot be constrained to the individual body-mind. The definition of the point cannot be said without the definition of the field. So Hall and Ames conclude, “The locus of mind is coterminous with its field of social activity and relations. In the Chinese perspective, the person extends as far as the roles that define her and through which she expresses herself.”<sup>59</sup>

#### *Section 2.4: The Confucian Self in Contrast with the European Self*

Having covered the early conceptions of self in both European and Chinese thought, we can begin to examine the differences between the two. By finding differences between what is considered fundamental to the self in the East and West, we begin to understand that any such conception of the self cannot be innate but instead must be imparted by culture. It is my hope that the gap between what is innate and what is cultural generated here will provide space for the deconstructionists of the next two chapters to pry apart what we believe is fundamental to the self and what is extra.

The most telling difference between East and West lies in their conceptions of order. Hall and Ames draw a distinction between two manners of conceptualizing order, the logical and the aesthetic. The logical is conflated with the European, while the aesthetic is more closely related to the Chinese, although neither region perceives order in strictly one mode or the other. It is also important to note here that the term aesthetic is chosen as a contrast to the term logical, and does not necessarily carry any sense of artistic or pleasing, although it is argued that art is ordered aesthetically more than logically.

Logical order begins with ideal forms of organization and moves from here to place particular components in order according to the higher understanding. In logical order, the uniqueness of each object is abstracted into a general category, allowing for the interchange of particular parts so long as each fits the needs of the order being imposed. Henry Ford’s invention of the interchangeable part is a perfect example of logical order—so long as it fits the ideal form of the piece required, the actual characteristics of the particular part matter little. Logical order is top-down, abstracting from the particular such that the particulars are interchangeable—in this way logical order is composed of components. In contrast, aesthetic order begins with the unique attributes of the particular constituents in order to organize them into a harmonious whole. What the whole is cannot be determined until the parts are understood. The Chinese soup analogy provides an example of aesthetic order—each ingredient of the

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<sup>59</sup> Hall 42.

soup must be correctly balanced with the flavors of every other ingredient in order for the soup to be successful. The order imposed by the soup must create harmony between the qualities of the ingredients, so this order cannot be determined without intimate knowledge of the particulars. Aesthetic order is bottom-up, attentive to the particular such that the particular is not interchangeable—so aesthetic orders are composed of constituents.

Hall and Ames define the difference between logical and aesthetic order in this way: “One attends to the manner in which the experienced items instance a given pattern or set of formal relations, the second notes the manner in which just those experienced items constitute themselves and their relations to one another in such a way as to permit of no substitutions.”<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note here that logical and aesthetic order are inversely related, such that absolute logical order would mean abstracting away all particulars, while absolute aesthetic order would pay attention to all particulars such that no abstractions could be formed.<sup>61</sup> While human social activity falls somewhere between the two extremes, the European tendency towards logical order and the Chinese tendency towards aesthetic order is a distinction which carries noticeable repercussions in the production of culture.

Although it would be beyond this paper to posit causality, a correlation does hold between the logical mode of conceiving order and European culture’s need to posit a higher order to the patterns they perceive—whether it be Plato’s Forms or Einstein’s theory of relativity, Western cultures search for norms and laws which are universal and seek to abstract all things into one unified conceptualization. European cultures produce “concepts of ‘human nature,’ ‘human rights,’ ‘equality under the law,’ and so forth”<sup>62</sup> due to the imposition of an order which seeks to abstract from each individual what is relevant and place them into a system which considers them interchangeable. The French revolution or the American civil rights movement might be interpreted as the byproduct of logical ordering.

In contrast, the ordering of society through aesthetic order “will not be open to the employments of rules, standards, or norms that are presumed to be generalizations or instances of essential defining characteristics of human beings and of their modes of togetherness. Neither will consensus be used as objective grounds for social order.”<sup>63</sup> It is rare in Chinese history to find an instance where collective agreement or universal human rights has successfully served as the grounds for the shifting of power. Instead, we see generally the accumulation of power in the hands of particular individuals who have situated themselves at the center of the country through a deep understanding of the particular forces at work throughout the field.

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<sup>60</sup> Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987. Print. 134.

<sup>61</sup> Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* 136.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* 137.

<sup>63</sup> Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* 137.

The second issue between European and Confucian notions of the self which must be resolved is the notion of autonomy. Although the Confucian self is considered irreducibly social, it is not the case that such a self lacks autonomy. While the European tradition places extreme emphasis on the individual as the means to truth, for the Confucians it is more the case that the self is best developed in the presence of others. Autonomy is still present, but it is an autonomy already wrapped up within the social realm. What is crucial in the exemplary person is not merely participation in ritual, but authentic performance of the ritual as that which makes us human. In passage 9.24 of the *Analects* Confucius emphasizes the value of authentic interaction with ritual: “How could one but find pleasure in polite language? But the real value lies in drawing out its meaning.”<sup>64</sup>

Finally there comes the difficult task of contrasting the European and Chinese notions of will. The Chinese have two words roughly equivalent to will, 心 *xin*, heart-mind, and 志 *zhi*, intention. *Xin* is the self-reflective force within us, examining the self in order to re-direct it towards greater cultivation. The character *zhi* contains the character *xin* within it, and means what is in the heart-mind, what we have set our hearts on, our goals and intentions.<sup>65</sup> In the Confucian tradition, this faculty is related to the ruling aspect of the self, or the commander of an army. However, while an army can be divorced from its commander, the individual cannot be without *zhi*<sup>66</sup>, as Confucius states, “The Combined Armies can be deprived of their commander, but common peasants cannot be deprived of their purposes (志 *zhi*).”<sup>67</sup>

Although this language of the will commanding the other elements of the self may sound similar to the European conception, it is important to remember the difference between European and Chinese manners of conceptualization. European thought generally conceptualizes things independently, such that when the relation between two things is removed their definitions remain constant, while Chinese thought conceptualizes correlatively, such that when a relationship between two things is removed the fundamental definition of both things is altered. While the European thinker may be able to pluck the faculty of will away from other faculties of the self and point to its control over all other aspects as evidence of its primacy, for the Chinese thinker it is merely another aspect of the self which would generate little value in thinking of it divorced from the other constituents of the self.

This distinction is most telling in light of Descartes’ formulation of will’s unlimited scope. For Descartes a great problem arises between knowledge and will because knowledge is seen as finite while the will is infinite. Descartes believed we could will beyond what we were capable of understanding—this is the source of will’s primacy as well as the source of man’s sin and error. Yet in classical Chinese thought,

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<sup>64</sup> *Analects* 131.

<sup>65</sup> Hall *Thinking From the Han* 38.

<sup>66</sup> Shun 188.

<sup>67</sup> *Analects* 132.

idea and action are inseparable, meaning that there was no conception of a faculty of will beyond the actual act of willing. As Hall and Ames write, “the absence in the classical Chinese tradition of any individual faculty of will distinct from the act of willing suggests that, for Confucius at least, no distinction is drawn between intentionality and what is intended. . . . Under this assumption, both intentionality and specific intentions are, like one’s self, social facts.”<sup>68</sup> This lack of a distinct concept of the faculty of will as divorced from the actual act of willing, as well as the absence of Christianity’s language of finite and infinite, meant that the will never took on such a problematic, central character in the Chinese conception of the self.

The questions confronting the European self in these early stages of conceptualization are born from a tradition which defines things independently of each other, which perceives order in a logical, universalizing fashion, and believes the inner realm of the self is the source of truth and certainty. These questions were concerned with ontology, how being is—if sense experience is to be trusted, which faculty of the self rules the rest, how to personally remain true to God. The Chinese tradition defines things correlatively with the things associated with them, perceives order in an aesthetic fashion, focusing on the particular, and believes that truth and self-fulfillment can only be found through participation in a social world into which we are already thrown. The questions confronting the Chinese self concerned correlations, how beings relate—if ritual social conduct should be strictly followed, how one is to properly cultivate the self as the specific social roles one inhabits, how to carry out the mandate of the cosmos through proper social conduct.

### *Section 2.5: Conclusion*

My joking with my roommate Zhou Rui that chilly afternoon in Harbin was a simple yet powerful indicator of the way in which our culturally transmitted conceptions of self influence every facet of the way in which we navigate existence. My propensity for ‘your mother’ jokes and my friend’s aversion to them speaks to more than simply national trends in humor. Nor is it the case that Zhou Rui loves his mother while I do not. I believe it has more to do with the way we have constructed our senses of self. When I was sitting in that room, the boundaries which demarcated my self stopped at the borders of my flesh—my definition of self was there, affirmed to whatever extent through a lifetime of relying on myself to provide the final answer as to what made me, me. I was me, and my mother was my mother, halfway around the world sleeping in her bed in America. Yet for Zhou Rui, things were different. I had the sense that when I insulted his mother, I had insulted him. But it was not him personally who was offended, for I had insulted him plenty—it was his self in the larger sense of the term, the

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<sup>68</sup> Hall *Thinking From the Han* 38.

correlative, Confucian sense—it was his family which I had insulted. Perhaps, for Zhou Rui, his sense of self did not stop at his skin, but extended through the bonds which formed the foundation of his sense of self—he was son, student, and Chinese before he was any sort of independent Zhou Rui.

Americans carry a skepticism for tradition, customs and formality. We can often be caught saying, “now that the formalities are over with. . .” We find such things to be a preamble to authentic interactions, pleasantries we rush through so that we can begin the real work of interpersonal life. perhaps this is driven by our pragmatism, our need to get the job done. Or perhaps it has more to do with our incomplete comprehension of the nature of ritual. In Confucian thought, ritual is *the* way in which we encounter the other, it is the sole means by which we cultivate the self and our relations to those around us.

In the chapter which follows I will first draw on Nietzsche to delineate the culmination of the Eastern self’s obsession with the will, manifested in the will to power, the drive to exert one’s will above all else. Then I will read Derrida for his methods of deconstruction, exposing the European self as I have constructed it to be based upon binaries which cannot maintain their legitimacy without this binary relationship to depend upon. Derrida finds that there can be no objective truths, only subjective truths which carry meaning from one particular perspective or another.

Next, in the fourth chapter I return to the Chinese tradition, this time constructing the work of the Daoist Zhuangzi as a deconstruction of the Chinese notion of self. Ultimately, I hope to show that, despite the definite differences between the European and Chinese conceptions of self, the subsequent deconstruction of these concepts shares many similar qualities, despite one being espoused by a European writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the other being espoused by a man living in 300 BCE. These similarities point to the way in which such constructions must fall apart under the reflective eye, and therefore should be treated as such, which will be the argument of the conclusion.

## *Chapter 3: The Deconstruction of the European Self*

### *Section 3.1: The Purpose of This Conceptual Structure*

In Chapter 1 I established the traditional conception of the self in European thought: a coherent whole which has access to truth through rationality, and which is ordered and directed by the unlimited faculty of will. Chapter 2 describes the traditional conception of the Chinese self: an irreducibly social, culturally established self cultivated through harmony with the particulars of the world around it. Now, Chapter 3 marks the turning point of my argument's structure, moving from the established conceptualizations of European and Chinese selfhood to the *deconstructive* philosophies which challenge the dominant understanding of the self. This chapter, the chapter on the deconstruction of the European self, will concern itself with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida. Chapter 4 will follow with the Daoist deconstruction of the Confucian self using the writings of Zhuangzi.

Nietzsche was a German philosopher during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose life work seemed bent on tearing down the institutions of European philosophy in favor of a more critical, independent way of thought. He wrote in a maddeningly artistic style, often making overstated claims without defense, in constant dialogue with philosophers of the past and the reader himself, hammering and prodding at the roots of established thought. Indeed, by the end of his life, those with the power of defining sanity declared that Nietzsche had little left. Regardless, his philosophy served as a source of inspiration for the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose work channeled the spirit of Nietzsche's deconstruction into a much more coherent and exact philosophy.

The Chinese thinker Zhuangzi is thought to have lived around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and similarly challenged the established thought of the time, employing a writing style comparable to Nietzsche's—eclectic, conversational, filled with aphorisms and characters used to illustrate the jumble of ideas he refused to apply structure to, literally posing questions to both traditional figures of philosophy and the reader. The gap between these two European thinkers and their Chinese counterpart spans half a world and nearly the entire stretch of human civilization, yet the resemblance is there. Surely, much of this connection springs from the pinhole of my own subjectivity, yet I still believe there is something telling in the development of two similar deconstructive traditions situated within traditions which have very different things to deconstruct. So many worlds apart, two traditions have each noticed that structures tend to fall apart, that there is more meaning in the world than what the dominant discourse has to offer. I feel compelled to note here that there has been some historical research suggesting a mixing of European and Chinese thought, specifically in the work of Martin Heidegger, a

European philosopher influenced by Nietzsche and influencing Derrida.<sup>69</sup> But this is the pursuit of another paper.

I intend to order the thought of these three thinkers along a continuum, a development of thought moving from the traditional understanding of truth to a completely deconstructed view of truth. I cast Nietzsche as the forbearer of ‘true’ deconstruction, because his critique of traditional philosophy carries many of the hallmarks of the deconstructive tradition—the relative, perspectival nature of truth, the denial of a universal morality, and the tendency of language to mislead our search for meaning.

However, in his deconstruction of modern philosophy Nietzsche paradoxically seeks to posit a new universal truth in his conception of the *will to power*, an ordering principle which informs the activity of all things. I see the concept of the will to power as the culmination of the western formulation of the self as directed by the will. The general outline of Descartes’ and Nietzsche’s formulation of the self are similar—rejecting all culturally established truths, they turn inward to determine that the will ultimately rules and directs the self. However, while Descartes’ self is confirmed by God, established in the truths of his tradition, Nietzsche’s is rooted in a denial of all universal truths save the truth of the will to power. Fully aware of the relative, empty nature of truth, the *Übermensch* or Overman is passionate yet controlled, overcoming the slave mentality of his culture in order to creatively establish himself against it.

The prioritization of the rational and the will of the individual in the European tradition culminates in such a self-conception: all things—science, art, philosophy, history, the nation, the other, the self—all are construed as means to an end, cogs in the exchange of the only thing which can be an end in and of itself, power. Nietzsche’s refutation of rationality means that the rational element of the self cannot rule, and further, that the self cannot be unified, cannot be a coherent self. The traditional assertion of the existence of a rational unified self is for Nietzsche only another manifestation of the will to power shaping human beliefs and culture.

Derrida will espouse a method of deconstruction similar to Nietzsche’s in his own, careful style, but his aim is not to deconstruct the tradition in order to rebuild it himself, as Nietzsche does, but instead simply to leave the tradition in its deconstructed state. While for Nietzsche deconstruction leads to reconstruction, for Derrida deconstruction is the end goal—to challenge the established tradition, creating a space for the perspective of the other. Derrida’s goal is to problematize established truth, to show that it is built on arbitrary foundations, without pushing his own view of truth in the aftermath. The aftermath is enough, to know that truth is relative, to be uneasy about our beliefs.<sup>70</sup> Still with Derrida there remains the paradox of constructing a deconstruction—how can one posit the fundamental truth of the lack of fundamental truth?

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<sup>69</sup> See May, Reinhard. *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources*. London: Routledge, 1996

<sup>70</sup> I borrow the binary of unease and being at ease from Robert J. Shepherd’s article, *Perpetual Unease or Being at Ease? Derrida, Daoism, and the ‘Metaphysics of Presence.’*



This is why I see Nietzsche as the forbearer of ‘true’ deconstruction, while Derrida represents deconstruction in its ‘purer’ sense. Nietzsche, perhaps due to his location on the cusp of deconstruction’s emergence in Europe, still seems to have one foot in the camp of traditional philosophers who use their arguments to posit a universal truth, evidenced in his assertion that the universe is ordered and moved by the will to power. It will take Derrida to assert that deconstruction is enough, that in light of deconstruction we must be uneasy about making truth claims rather than simply positing a new brand of truth.

Derrida’s philosophy remains within the tradition, challenging the dominant modes of thought in order to better the tradition as a whole. In contrast, Zhuangzi’s philosophy ultimately lies at the exterior of the tradition, encouraging his readers to abandon the pursuit of truth and progress in favor of following the *dao* or Way. Derrida teaches us to be uneasy about the foundations of truth from the interior of the tradition, while Zhuangzi urges us to be at ease with the perspectival nature of truth from the exterior. Although Zhuangzi must interface with the tradition in order to deconstruct it, his work offers one solution to the paradox of constructing a deconstruction so problematic for Nietzsche or Derrida—Zhuangzi’s work is scattered, fragmentary, in pieces—it is up to the reader to provide interpretation, to structure the work into an argument with a point. His thought is offered up *unconstructed*, carrying in its very form the notion that structures inherently fall apart.

### *Section 3.2: The Nietzschean Deconstruction of the European Self*

Nietzsche’s thought will serve as a bridge between the narrative of the traditional European self and the deconstruction of Derrida because it displays characteristics of both traditions. Like Descartes, Nietzsche refutes the thought of all philosophy before him in order to posit his own conceptual structure. However, while Descartes’ philosophy ultimately returns to an affirmation of rationality, God, and the tradition, Nietzsche vehemently refutes rationality’s ability to gain access to a universal truth, arguing instead that there are no truths but only opinions, beliefs and interpretations. However, while Nietzsche would tear down traditional thought in order to posit his theory of the will to power, the aim of Derrida’s deconstruction is simply the act of deconstruction: to leave room for the voice of the other, to establish a challenge to dominant thought. In this way Nietzsche is not a true deconstructionist, but rather utilizes deconstruction to strengthen his own construction.

As I have established in chapter one, the certainty of the European self is founded upon its claim to have access to truth, an understanding of the ordering principle of the universe which provides justification for the self to move confidently into the world. Plato establishes the veracity of his thought by claiming to have access to the Forms, idealizations which inform the particular instantiation of the thing in the

world of appearances. For Augustine, the truth of God reached through turning the senses inward provides the grounds necessary to posit a unified self. Finally, in Descartes empirical reason is the basis of knowledge, truth accessed through a rational series of inferences beginning with the certainty of the existence of the thinking subject itself.

To deconstruct this self which claims to be unified, having access to truth through rationality, the claim to knowledge of a universal truth must be challenged. In so challenging, the true nature of truth can be revealed, as relativistic, applicable only in context. This formulation of truth allows us to see the dominant European construction of self for what it truly is: a manifestation of the subject's will to power, claiming access to Truth as a tool to overcome the other. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche derides philosophers of the past for their rush to establish themselves as definers of truth: "they wanted to furnish the *rational ground* of morality—and every philosopher hitherto has believed he has furnished this rational ground; morality itself, however, was taken as 'given.'"<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche's point of contention is that previous philosophers were caught up in the task of rationally determining the nature of something they assumed existed—morality itself.

What these philosophers posed as self evident truths were for Nietzsche baseless assumptions, evidence only of the philosopher's willingness to posit opinion as universal truth. As he declares, "the most strongly believed a priori 'truths' are for me—*provisional assumptions*."<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche challenges Plato's claim to truth, beginning with an analysis of one of his own heroes, Socrates. Nietzsche believes Socrates upheld reason as the most important faculty of man, yet recognized instinct's inability to completely align itself to the rule of reason. Nietzsche says first of Socrates, "Fundamentally he had seen through the irrational aspect of moral judgment." He continues, disparaging Plato, who, "more innocent in such things and without the craftiness of the plebian [Socrates], wanted at the expenditure of all his strength. . . to prove to himself that reason and instinct move of themselves towards *one* goal, towards the good, towards 'God'; and since Plato all theologians and philosophers have followed the same path."<sup>73</sup>

Nietzsche's challenge of Plato goes to the beginnings of his philosophy, prior to when Plato would even believe philosophy begins. Plato believes that to know the form of the Good is to love it, that man in encountering reason must be ruled by, must find it compelling, that we are already primed to accept rational morality as truth. What Plato formulated as access to a higher truth was to Nietzsche merely evidence of Plato's privileging of the rational as a means to power.

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<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 2003. Print. 108.

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1967. Print. 273.

<sup>73</sup> Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* 114.

Nietzsche also critiques Descartes, striking again at the root of his claim to truth in order to show that universal truth is only a fabrication of those looking to utilize it in their formulation of power. Nietzsche writes,

‘There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks’: this is the upshot of all Descartes’ argumentation. But that means positing as ‘true a priori’ our belief in the concept of substance—that when there is thought there has to be something ‘that thinks’ is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed. . . . Along the lines followed by Descartes one does not come upon something absolutely certain but only upon the fact of a very strong belief.<sup>74</sup>

These last lines bring up what is crucial in Nietzsche’s critique of reason as the means to truth—in claiming to be upholding the tenets of rational thought and scientific inquiry, philosophers like Plato and Descartes imply that their beliefs and emotions play no part in their formulation of truth. If reason rules the tripartite soul as something removed from the emotional workings of the self, then the rational philosophy produced by such a self could not have any trace of the spirit or desires.

Yet Nietzsche argues that such a trace is present, a presence which undermines any claim to rational truth the structure may have. Nietzsche finds that morality is not built up from a rational base to access truth, but rather that moralities serve a purpose, are tools generated to reach an end. As he describes, “there are moralities which are intended to justify their authors before others; other moralities are intended to calm him and make him content with himself; with others he wants to crucify and humiliate himself. . . in short, moralities too are only a *sign-language of the emotions*.”<sup>75</sup> Rationality cannot claim dominance if rational structures are generated by emotion more fundamentally than a rational approach to truth.

This is Nietzsche’s challenge to the rational claim to truth—rationality is not an end in itself but is instead a means to power, such that when a thinker sets out on a series of rational deductions the thinker already has the conclusion in mind. Will to power, and with it desires and emotions, shapes the production of a rational proof more forcefully than rationality itself. Nietzsche argues, “we suspect any thinker who ‘wants to prove something’ – that they always knew in advance that which was *supposed to* result from the most rigorous cogitation. . . .”<sup>76</sup>

Nietzsche aims to break down all claims to certainty, all claims to knowledge beyond the perspective of the subject. He writes, “. . . facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.”<sup>77</sup> There exists no category of knowledge which is true ‘in itself,’ because all knowledge originates from a subject who is implementing that knowledge to an end. So far, I have described the will to power in terms of the subject exercising it through various claims to truth, but this is a simplification of the concept. For Nietzsche,

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<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 268.

<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* 110.

<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* 111.

<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 267.

the will to power is a force which informs all things in the universe, from the exchange of energy between two microorganisms to the imperialism of one nation over another. It is not so much that the subject exercises their own will to power, but rather that the will to power is exercised through them.

The subject cannot exercise the will to power as a faculty of the self because for Nietzsche the idea of a unified self is also constructed, is itself an expression of the will to power. In light of the traditional European constructions of self, it should come as no surprise that a philosophy interested in tearing down the primacy of rationality or truth should also oppose the unity of the self posited as a result. Indeed, Nietzsche cites the unqualified positing of the unified self as the event which causes us to posit further truths. In his words, “‘the subject’ is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the ‘similarity’ of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity (—which ought rather to be denied—).”<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche refutes Plato’s claim that human nature and rationality tend towards one good, and further refutes Descartes’ claim that the subject must exist if there is thought. Nietzsche wishes to reverse the traditional view of what *causes* a sense of the self as a unified substance prone to rationality. For Nietzsche, it is the tradition’s need to posit a dominance of rationality, of a coherent subject directing his entire being through the dominance of the will, which causes it to then posit that rationality and the will are dominant.

The need to see ourselves as rational and driven by the will is the root of all further conjecture about the nature of the world. The traditional European view of the self is of a rational subject which controls the emotions and puts forward a rational account of the world, giving him access to universal truths. Nietzsche would argue instead that the self has rationality, but also emotion and desires, and is driven not through any love of thought or truth but by a will to power. It is the will to accrue power which causes the subject to posit that he is unified, ruled by rationality, driven by the will, for this is a formulation which allows him to pursue power in the name of truth or knowledge, in the name of building a good morality. However, Nietzsche argues that all moralities are expressions of emotion, not expressions of rational reflection.

So Nietzsche writes, “the belief in substance, accident, attribute, etc., all derive their convincing force from our habit of regarding all our deeds as consequences of our will—so that the ego, as substance, does not vanish in the multiplicity of change.—But there is no such thing as will.—”<sup>79</sup> Belief in the will as a guiding force of the self is a *habit*, not a fundamental aspect of the self. In believing in the self as a rational coherence, we are habituated to believe in the world as rationally organized. Yet such a belief is not fundamental but imparted by a tradition founded upon the emotional expressions of Plato, Augustine, and Descartes, framed as rational and therefore truthful. The sensation of rationality and the existence of a faculty of will are products of our interpreting similarity in the myriad emotional states of the self, not products of such

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<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 268-9.

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 270.

faculties genuinely existing in man. Hence, “there is no such thing as will.” Nietzsche’s accusation is that the traditional thinkers of European philosophy are engaged in a form of self-deception, believing they are producing rational evidence of the truth, God, or the unified self, when in fact such thought is more fundamentally directed by the will to power. Nietzsche’s own philosophy is equally open to such criticism, although he acknowledges and embraces rather than denies the part his emotions play in the generation of his conceptual structure.

Nietzsche sees the dominant tradition as one which encourages the pursuit of idle happiness, conformity, and the narrowing of perspective. He argues that such a culture is produced through a sort of Darwinian evolution, meaning that such a culture came about not through rational development toward a pinnacle of civilization, but instead because such a culture is best suited for keeping man alive and in control. The cultural prevalence of trust in reason demonstrates only reason’s utility as a survival tool, not as proof that such a thing is inherently truth bearing. Nietzsche sees the error of philosophy so far as the act of positing concepts important to human survival as fundamentally in the world. As he writes, “we have projected the conditions of *our* preservation as predicates of being in general. Because we have to be stable in our beliefs if we are to prosper, we have made the ‘real’ world a world not of change and becoming, but one of being.”<sup>80</sup> Although the world is really in a state of constantly becoming, it is useful for us to conceptualize things as stable and unchanging, to posit that there is being rather than becoming. But the understanding of the world as being is a tool for preservation, not a fact of existence. Truth in a culture arises from thought founded in utility yet posited as universal.

This brings Nietzsche’s deconstruction of the European self to a close, refuting all claims to universal truth and the primacy of reason, arguing instead that the self is not unified, and that all attempts to posit it as such deny the true nature of man—a creature bred by the will to power.

### *Section 3.3: Nietzsche and the Will to Power*

Nietzsche deconstructs the European conceptualization of truth in order to build up his own formulation of the world, represented in the enigmatic concept of the *will to power*. His definition is that “the will to power is the primitive form of affect, that all other affects are only developments of it. . . that all driving force is will to power, that there is no other physical, dynamic or psychic force except this.”<sup>81</sup> The will to power is that aspect of physics, psychology, and evolution which exhibits a force, a drive to overcome and prosper. It is the first cause of the chain of events of existence, as power

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<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 276.

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 366.

is the only thing which is sought for its own sake. Power is the only thing which is an end in itself—therefore, all means are a means to power.

Nietzsche sees any such manifestation of the drive to overcome as a product of the will to power, indeed, there is nothing which is not principally moved by it. This encompasses all life, culture, religion, government, consciousness, and the concept of self. He writes, “The victorious concept ‘force,’ by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still needs to be completed: an inner will must be ascribed to it, which I designated as ‘will to power,’ i.e., as an insatiable desire to manifest power; or as the employment and exercise of power, as a creative drive, etc.”<sup>82</sup> It would be incorrect, in such a construction, to simply contend that the notion of God was created by man’s inward knowledge of his imperfection, a claim made by Descartes. Rather, the creation of God is a product of the will to power, the will to overcome, to order the other—God is a means to power, not a means to truth. (Truth, too, is will to power.) This will to overcome is not the will of the unified self which Descartes believed ruled the soul, but is rather the inner driving force which moves all things to competition, the force which would drive a creature like Descartes to even posit the existence of such a will.

Yet the will to power does not merely manifest in the conceptual structures of man. It is the ordering principle of all organic life, moreover the ordering principle of all becoming, living or otherwise. So Nietzsche argues, “in the case of an animal, it is possible to trace all its drives to the will to power; likewise all the functions of organic life to this one source.”<sup>83</sup> Additionally, he contends, “For what do the trees in a jungle fight each other? For ‘happiness’?—*for power!*—”<sup>84</sup> Phototrophic prokaryotes battled each other 3 billion years ago as embodiments of the will to power, and all organic life since has been a continuation of this conflict.

And man is no different. Indeed, man is a particularly good example of the flexing of the will to power upon substance. As Nietzsche describes, “man, become master over the forces of nature, master over his own savagery and licentiousness (the desires have learned to obey and be useful)—man, in comparison with a pre-man—represents a tremendous quantum of *power*—*not* an increase in ‘happiness’!”<sup>85</sup> Here we can begin to understand the European construction of self as nothing greater than a manifestation of the rote drive to compete, as in bacteria, so no different in man. To develop tools, physical and conceptual, to project order onto the chaos of becoming, positing the existence of being, to develop reason and control the spirit and desires, to invent civilization, all these are means to power—as the prokaryote develops flagella, so we develop God and Truth. Yet nowhere in the world exterior to man are God and Truth to be found. They originate in man, as means to power.

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<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 333.

<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 333.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 375.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 375.

With such a formulation, it becomes clear that consciousness itself has developed as a means to power. As Nietzsche writes, “becoming conscious is obviously only one more means toward the unfolding and extension of the power of life.”<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Nietzsche argues that *life itself* is merely one form of the will to power, merely one way in which power is pursued. Hence, it cannot be the case that the human will, as formulated by Descartes, can be at all compared with the will to power as formulated by Nietzsche. The only relation will as a faculty of the self has with the will to power is that the human faculty is merely a manifestation of the will to power, as another means to power, like the concept of God, or rationality. So Nietzsche contends,

That the will of psychology hitherto is an unjustified generalization, that this will does not exist at all, that instead of grasping the idea of the development of one definite will into many forms, one has eliminated the character of the will by subtracting from it its content, its ‘whither?’ . . . It is even less a question of the ‘will to live’; for life is merely a special case of the will to power;—it is quite arbitrary to assert that everything strives to enter into this form of the will to power.<sup>87</sup>

Nietzsche’s contention with the traditional conception of will is that it fails to take into account *what is willed*, its “whither,” that what is willed can be interpreted accurately only as the accumulation of power. In understanding this, we find that the self’s faculty of will is not the driving element of the self but is rather just another element of *the* driving force, the will to power. Not only is the traditional European conception of the self merely an arbitrary expression of the will to power, the self, the will, consciousness, even *life itself*, are all arbitrary expressions of the original affecting force.

For Nietzsche, culture and ethics manifest will to power by stifling individual freedom and creativity so as to control the masses. This ‘herd mentality’ keeps the masses under control by espousing complacent happiness as the goal of all life. Happiness as the goal of civilized life can be seen in the Greek’s pursuit of *eudemonia*, happiness or flourishing, the Christian ideal of faith, patience in God’s plan during physical life in exchange for eternal salvation of the soul, and today in material gain as the end of life. Culture shaped by the will to power does not encourage man to achieve his highest potential, his highest formulation of power, but rather encourages man to achieve his greatest state of mollification. Docility is the ideal of the cultured man. As Nietzsche puts it, “This is why ethics, with its unconscious instinct for education and breeding, has hitherto aimed at holding the desire for power in check: it disparages the tyrannical individual and with its glorification of social welfare and patriotism emphasizes the power-instinct of the herd.”<sup>88</sup> One has only to watch traffic on a busy highway or a stadium of sports fans to see the herd mentality present in civilized life. Do the businessmen in silk suits honking at each other through their luxury cars in the crawl of bumper-to-bumper traffic behave so differently from a herd of cattle? I believe one has merely to compare the two in order to understand that the force which organizes

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<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 376.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 369.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 384.

both forms of life is the same. Power is the end, and docility of group behavior is the means.

At this point I want to use Nietzsche's concepts of the will to power and the herd mentality to formulate my own understanding of culture, an understanding somewhat divorced from Nietzsche's. Nietzsche held strong value judgments concerning particular cultures, believing the Greeks and Romans had a strong, or 'master' morality, while modern Christian culture taught a submissive, or 'slave' morality. However, such valuations do not hold much currency for me. Perhaps they are a product of his struggle to topple Christian morality, representations of the will to power acting on his historical perspective. Regardless, I am instead concerned with arguing that *all* cultures are entities which manifest the will to power through manipulation of the populace which supports it. Culture is the will to power acting through man in its most developed state, herding us by the millions into great wars, genocide, and economic combat, keeping us satiated and mollified, causing us to train our children to perpetuate its life cycle. Culture is a beast whose body spans entire continents, composed of billions of individual cells, none of which can totally control that which exerts dominance over them.

So I begin by arguing that man is not in control of culture, is not generating it as a product of civil life. Rather, *culture controls man*. Like all things, culture is moved by the pursuit of power, and culture's means to power is domination of the herd. Culture teaches us to reproduce culture, the way a virus teaches a host cell to reproduce the same virus. We are born into a culture, and within any successful culture are always mechanisms which teach each successive generation to continue to uphold the same culture. We are taught not only to maintain culture, but are also taught to not destroy culture, as shown in the herd's pursuit of happiness as the end of life. The will to power of culture is exercised by dampening the will to power of the individual which it dominates, by teaching the individual to simply participate in and accept culture rather than to reject and question it.

The analogy comparing culture and the herd to a virus and a host cell remains useful. The virus, technically, is non-living—it is merely a coil of genetic information wrapped in a protective shell. When it infects the host cell, the mechanisms of the host normally used to produce things useful to the host are instead turned to the production of more viruses. In the same way, culture 'infects' the host populace, as the newest generation is reared, they are inoculated with cultural norms and ideals, including the norms which cause us to teach our children culture as well as the pursuit of complacency as a cultural value. Although culture exercises power over us, in understanding the relationship between culture and the herd in this way we gain power over culture. The virus dominates the host cell, yet the virus also needs the host cell, whereas the host cell does not need the virus. Culture dominates us, yet also needs us—human beings are culture's roots in substance. Culture, an entirely conceptual phenomenon, needs the beings it dominates in order to continue itself.

At some point in the evolution of life on this planet, single-celled organisms joined together to create multi-cellular organisms, and through this collective action gained access to a higher order of power. Culture bears a similar quality in its unification



of disparate men, organizing them into a higher stratum of power. The multi-cellular organism orders its constituent parts toward its own ends, ends which are the individual cell's only because of its association with the whole. They are provided for by the multi-cellular whole, yet also enslaved to its purposes. Analogously, culture provides for its people, creating standards of morality and progress which can empower the individual to heights of power beyond what he could achieve on the exterior of culture. Yet culture also controls man, keeping him complacent by training him to pursue simple happiness rather than an authentically lived life, moving him to compete with other cultures in the constant struggle for power. In such a formulation we must ask, do we act through culture, or does culture act through us?

Nietzsche believes resistance of this societal mollification is the basis of becoming an authentic self, the basis of his ideal man, the *Übermensch* or Overman. If culture flexes its will to power by inducing us to pursue happiness, then the individual exercises his will to power by resisting society in the pursuit of freedom rather than happiness. So Nietzsche writes, "The degree of resistance that must be continually overcome in order to remain on top is the measure of freedom, whether for individuals or for societies—freedom understood, that is, as positive power, as will to power."<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche believes the boundaries of freedom are most clearly defined when it is sorely lacking, such that the individual most representative of Nietzsche's ideal of freedom, of the man pursuing his own will to power over against the will to power of his culture, emerges most clearly in times when culture is strongest, at its most tyrannical.

The individual must always recognize the power relation between culture and self in order to give up the pursuit of happiness to instead pursue the realization of his will to power. When society is most oppressive is when this choice which is always present for the individual becomes most glaring, and likewise when society is at its most liberal that the choice becomes most difficult to perceive. Man, too, is moved only by the will to power, and in realizing this, we see that there is no choice, that mollification properly understood is no longer an option. As Nietzsche contends, "One must have no choice: either on top—or underneath, like a worm, mocked, annihilated, trodden upon. One must oppose tyrants to become a tyrant, i.e., *free*."<sup>90</sup>

Rather than pursue happiness, such a person gains pleasure in the exertion of the will against those things which stand against him. In Nietzsche's words, "it is *not* the satisfaction of the will that causes pleasure. . . but rather the will's forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way. The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance.—'The happy man': a herd ideal."<sup>91</sup> Happiness is a false goal, generated by the development of cultures which train humans to be docile as a means for the culture's will to power. In order to properly pursue freedom, as a positive manifestation of our own will to power, we must be in a constant

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<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 404.

<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 404.

<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 307.

struggle with those things which limit our power. This is the root of true pleasure. Such a will is not the will developed by Descartes, as a part which unifies the whole, for the unity of the whole is a falsity generated by the pursuit of power. Rather, the self's will for Nietzsche is the same as the will of all things, as the inner force which drives the thing to compete and overcome.

In deconstructing the traditional accounts of the self, we are left with an understanding that any conceptual structure aimed at positing access to Truth or a unity of the self is at root a manifestation of the will to power acting through the subject. The faculty of conscious thought necessary to develop such conceptual structures is understood merely as the next step in the development of power. The will to power manifested first in the form of life itself, which then found greater power in multi-cellular organisms, then with consciousness, and finally a conception of the self as a unified substance, what Nietzsche sees as the catalyst for producing value judgments, morality, ontology, and culture.

In trying to get a clear view of what exactly the self is in light of this deconstruction of traditional thought and the subsequent reconstruction as a means for the will to power, I believe a comparison will be helpful. Specifically, I want to draw connections between culture's relationship to the herd and the self's relationship to the multi-cellular structure of the body and mind. I have formulated culture as a thing which exerts its will to power over an aggregate collection of parts, in this case individual people, providing for these parts but also directing them towards culture's struggle against other cultures and the perpetuation of the culture's own existence. Culture generates an abundance of conceptual structures—nationalism, democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, slavery, ad infinitum—but these must ultimately be understood as means to further empowerment for the culture.

Analogously, the self is a purely conceptual phenomenon which exerts its will to power over the parts, in this case cells, which compose its roots in substance. These various cells are provided for by the self, gaining the proper nutrients and environment they need, yet they are also dominated, bent towards ends which further the power of the self, and not necessarily the power of the individual cell. The cells necessary for such an organism to have the faculty of consciousness developed as a means to power, and as such we must understand that like cultures the individual self will produce all manner of conceptual structures—access to the Form of the Good, God, free will, the will to power, etc.—as means to further their power over the world around them.

Such a comparison, while certainly of dubious scientific grounding,<sup>92</sup> can nonetheless provide further insight into the role of the self within culture. Only the most evolutionarily advanced cells, those of the brain and nervous system, can be said to control the multi-cellular organism, as the site of the chemical interactions which are the necessary conditions for consciousness and the production of the concept self. Analogously, it should hold that only those with a high degree of power within a culture

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<sup>92</sup> Although we must remember that the concept of objective scientific grounding, being nothing more than the will to power manifested in the production of conceptual structures, is itself of dubious scientific grounding.

have the power to shape culture's course. Although we do not yet fully understand the human brain, it seems safe to argue that no single neuron dictates the operations of the self. As Nietzsche has shown in his deconstruction of the European self, there is no unity of self, no dominance of one faculty over another, but rather a competition of opposing forces. Similarly, no single person or organization dictates the machinations of a culture, for culture's direction is instead the product of the exertion of the forces of the 'controlling' class of people against one another.

The comparison of culture and the herd to the self and the multi-cellular organism causes one to question whether or not self-determination exists for the individual under the organizing dominance of culture. With the occasional exception of male spermatozoa, to venture forth from the multi-cellular organism means certain death for the individual cell. We tend to understand the goals of the cell to be synonymous with the goals of the self. Cells exist entirely for the execution of the self's ends. Should it then be argued that the individual exists entirely for the execution of culture's ends? To pose the question in this way seems to betray the extent to which we still rely on the traditional conceptions of the self. The self is not a transcendent entity, unified in its pursuit of goals through utilization of the cells which compose its body. Rather, the self is merely a conceptual structure, generated by a collection of highly evolved cells which exert competing forces upon each other. Therefore, in our comparison, it would be incorrect to formulate culture as a transcendent entity which dictates the activities of man. On the contrary, culture is itself merely a conceptual structure generated by the competing forces of its 'nervous system,' those individuals who have accumulated enough power to influence the interplay of competing forces. Culture is not a unity, but is instead a conceptual structure generated by the competing voices of the powerful which in turn exerts its power over the herd.

Despite the seemingly insidious character of culture, like the cell of an animal, the individual human has little recourse but to participate or face certain, lonely death. Here we must look beyond subjective valuations of good and bad in order to understand culture as another function of the will to power manifested in the process of life. In the same way that we would see the consumption of one amoeba by another as a fact of natural life, and not of evil forces acting upon good, so we must also see culture as a fact of natural life. This necessary participation is evidenced by the way in which we must use traditional conceptual structures even as we deconstruct them. Nietzsche seems to support this analysis. He begins by arguing that all beliefs in truths are founded on the original belief in the ego as a substance, in the self as a unity. He concludes, "here we come to a limit: our thinking itself involves this belief (with its distinctions of substance, accident; deed, doer, etc.); to let it go means: being no longer able to think."<sup>93</sup> Raised in a culture which espouses such beliefs, even in rejecting them we are unable to form concepts without the use of these false-truths. Hence, we must still use such concepts in

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<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 269.

order to continue living. So Nietzsche writes, “All ideals are dangerous: because they debase and brand the actual; all are poisons, but indispensable as temporary cures.”<sup>94</sup>

Nietzsche challenges all claims to truth through rationality, refuting the unity of the self. He argues that there is no unifying principle, that any attempt to posit such a thing is really a manifestation of the philosopher’s will to power, of the competing forces of his nervous system, a product as much of emotion as of rationality. Any code of morality is a means used by culture to control the herd, to pacify and stunt the individual’s will to power. Yet in positing the will to power as a unifying principle, and advocating that the *Übermensch* reject the herd morality in order to properly realize his own will to power, Nietzsche has posited a morality. He has generated a construction which is open to the same deconstructive arguments he has applied to thinkers before him.

This is Nietzsche’s paradox, deconstructing all previous moralities as generated by the will to power of their culture to then posit his own morality. He refutes the unity of the self under the traditional formulation of will, only to then argue that the ideal man must direct himself in life according to Nietzsche’s own formulation of the will. Even if we are to believe that Nietzsche’s version of morality has somehow broken free from society’s dominance over man, the *Übermensch* must still act in a world defined by belief in the unity of the self and the primacy of rationality. Nietzsche himself posits ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ about the world, despite his assertion that there are no facts, but only interpretations. For Nietzsche, perhaps, there is no way out of this paradox, no way to posit the truth of the will to power without being contradictory. As he contends, all ideals are dangerous, but are also indispensable as temporary cures. Derrida and Zhuangzi, however, provide a solution to the paradox of deconstructing to reconstruct: They stop at deconstruction.

#### *Section 3.4: Derrida and The Metaphysics of Presence*

Jacques Derrida was a French philosopher who wrote through the 1960s into the 1990s. Two of his greatest inspirations were Nietzsche and another, later German, Martin Heidegger. Nietzsche’s project we are familiar with, challenging established thought as enslaving and mollifying, calling for the authentic individual to properly realize his will to power over against the dominant discourse. Heidegger, partially in response to Nietzsche’s work, outlined the fundamental problem with European philosophy as he saw it: the ontic-ontological distinction. As he sees it, the problem with European philosophy was that it assumed the presence of being, as opposed to the partial presence of becoming.

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<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche *The Will to Power* 130.

From these two thinkers before him, Derrida takes up the task of challenging the dominant tradition, which he dubs the 'metaphysics of presence'—a philosophy of existence which believes that transcendental signifiers, ideas like truth or reason, must necessarily exist in the present because they are perceived as such. Ultimately, Derrida wants to deconstruct the dominant tradition, not in order to replace it with the thought of the dominated, but instead to problematize the dominant tradition's claim to transcendental truth. For Derrida the result of this deconstruction is a recognition that one's conceptualizations are unstable, tenuous, that we must constantly question the grounds upon which we take ethical or political action. Derrida wants to place moral responsibility entirely upon the subject and deny this subject recourse to logic or transcendental truths as a means of shirking such responsibility.

Where Nietzsche deconstructs only to reconstruct the tradition according to his own vision of the will to power, Derrida's philosophy offers a way out of this contradiction by simply completing his task at the point of deconstruction. Yet here Derrida encounters his own paradox. His theory of deconstruction, although formulated with writing in mind, can be applied to the notion of the self which the dominant tradition has produced. Read in this way, Derrida's philosophy seems to indicate that there can be no *a priori* self, that the concept of self is merely a production of the subject differentiating. Yet after deconstructing the dominant tradition, Derrida seems to cling to his sense of self which this tradition has produced, as evidenced in his assertion that we must doubt the self, yet still remain within the tradition, to problematize and open the way for full acceptance of moral responsibility.

The philosophy of Zhuangzi, which will be covered in the next chapter, carries many similarities to Derrida's. It can even be argued that the *Dao* 道, or way, as Zhuangzi articulates it is identical to Derrida's concept of *différance*, in that both are the way in which things are differentiated from one another. Both thinkers discover similar symptoms due to this concept—the relativity of meaning in binaries, the limits of language in speaking about truth—yet they draw different conclusions about how to act. While Derrida calls for a perpetual challenging of the confidence of the self, Zhuangzi recommends that we stop pursuing knowledge altogether, that instead we foster an enjoyment of the constantly changing nature of the world, losing our attachment to the unity of the self as we cease to privilege one state of being over another.

I begin my construction of Derrida's argument here in the 4<sup>th</sup> section of this chapter, with his challenge of *logocentrism*, the belief that speech is more meaningful than writing. For Derrida, speech is always done in relation to writing, is in a way a form of writing. Derrida then challenges dualistic conceptualization—a challenge borrowed from Nietzsche's toolkit—showing that in any binary relationship, the dominant pole is dependent upon the other pole for meaning, and that they are thereby equally valid. The objective here is to problematize any claims to *a priori* truths, in order to demonstrate instead that all statements or claims are only provisionally useful.

This leads into the 5<sup>th</sup> section, where I will try to illustrate the meaning of deconstruction for Derrida. The objective of deconstruction is ultimately to create an ethical demand to hear the perspective of the other as a supplement to the dominant

perspective. First, it must be understood that deconstruction is not a process, but is instead simply a phenomena which occurs when there are structures. To convey his argument, Derrida now invents a new word: *différance*. *Différance* is the occurrence of differentiation, the thing which allows us to create dualistic conceptions. When there is differentiation, there is *différance*. As one pole of a binary relationship is only meaningful in the context of the binary, there cannot be a thing which has intrinsic meaning. Rather, all things are defined only in relation to other things, creating a chain of meaning between concepts which informs all concepts. This is what Derrida dubs the *trace*, the presence of all other names wrapped up in the definition of one name, such that we can only understand a thing through the trace of all other things which it is not—an understanding made possible by *différance*.

Finally, I turn Derrida's deconstruction upon the notion of the self. As the faculties of will or reason are defined only in relation to other faculties of the self, these things cannot be inherent in the self but are instead simply the play of *différance* differentiating one thing from another. Despite his philosophy refuting the self, Derrida seems to cling to his concept of self, calling for us to question the assuredness of our moral perspective, but not the assuredness of our sense of self. It will take Zhuangzi in the next chapter to explore the ramifications of living without the self.

Derrida's project is to problematize the 'metaphysics of presence,' the dominant European philosophical tradition which claims to have access to the world as being, as opposed to becoming, a conclusion reached through the prioritization of speech over writing, what Derrida calls logocentrism. In this way, his goal is similar to Nietzsche's or my own. As he sees it, his work continues a project, "the undermining of an ontology which, in its innermost course, has determined the meaning of being as presence and the meaning of language as the full continuity of speech."<sup>95</sup> Ontology is the study of existence, the nature of being. For Derrida what is important in ontology is whether or not there are static beings (the traditional view) or something altogether different, a constantly shifting field of meaning created through the differentiation of things, a model which posits that only becoming is, and that the idea of beings is merely a subjective projection upon this process of becoming.

Derrida maintains that one of the principle errors of the metaphysics of presence is a 'vulgar concept of time,' a phrase borrowed from Heidegger. With this 'vulgar concept of time,' traditional European philosophy takes the basic notion that time progresses in a linear fashion and from this draws a series of erroneous conclusions about the nature of language. For Derrida, such a misunderstanding of language's relationship to time "was not born out of a philosopher's carelessness or from a theoretical lapse. It is intrinsic to the totality of the history of the Occident, of what unites its metaphysics and its technics."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. Print. 70.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology* 72.

What Derrida is challenging is the traditional understanding of how language relates to the thing it represents. Derrida views language in terms of two things, the *signifier* and the *signified*. When we see a tree, the signified, and want to tell or write to someone else about it, we use its signifier, the word 'tree.' The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, there is nothing inherent in this bark-covered leafy structure which means tree, rather, we name it tree as a utilitarian gesture, in order to differentiate it from other things or ideas. Hence, words gain their meaning from their relationships to other words, not to the thing they signify. Therefore, the meaning of a word carries with it the *trace* of the meaning of all other words, for it is only in relation to other signifiers which the word tree becomes significant, not its relationship with the signifier, the particular tree.

However, the dominant tradition has lost sight of this *trace*, this way in which words depend upon each other for meaning. This is due to the prioritization of speech over writing, the justification for which is that speech must have occurred anthropologically before writing, and must therefore be more meaningful. However, Derrida believes that speech carries with it the act of writing, that speech depends upon writing to the extent that the signifiers used in speech can only be defined against the entire field of signifiers which compose a language, a field created as much in writing as in speech. Here too Derrida finds traditional philosophy's 'vulgar concept of time' has further obscured a complete understanding of language, such that signifiers are not only meaningful horizontally, in relation to other signifiers at that moment, but also vertically, across time, in relation to the same signifier at different times, both its past meanings and its possible future meanings. For Derrida, when we speak, we do so in relation to writing, such that the signifiers we use carry meaning only in relation to the field of other signifiers, both past and future.

Such an understanding of language contradicts the traditional philosophical view, most importantly in that it denies the existence of a *transcendental signifier*. The transcendental signifier occurs when the signified transmits, in and of itself, without outside reference to other signifiers, the meaning of its signifier. We find such an idea in Plato's idea of the Form of the Good, a thing which, once perceived, is understood in and of itself, and further informs the subject's understanding of all other things. Augustine discovers another transcendental signifier in his inward experience with God, encountering Him and knowing solely through this encounter what He is. For Derrida, of course, the occurrence of a transcendental signified is impossible. It is a problem of incorrectly conflating how reality works with how our language works. Simply because the word is spoken, signifies, at this moment, does not mean that all its significance is also wrapped up in this moment. Rather, all its meaning cannot be in the present, for the signifier is only meaningful through its relationships across writing as well as time.

This can be seen as a continuation of Nietzsche's critique, in which he attacks Descartes' claim that there is a subject simply because linguistically there must be one. To claim that a unified subject, an 'I' exists because you are able to say "I think, therefore I am," is to believe that our language exactly reflects the way in which reality operates. In Derrida's words, "the play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and

referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present.”<sup>97</sup>

Derrida believes that by showing the real way in which language works, in contrast to how Plato, Augustine or Descartes understood it, the legitimacy of the dominance of traditional European philosophy can be called into serious question. If all signifiers rely upon other signifiers for meaning, then those signifiers in a binary or dualistic relationship, such as moral and immoral, good and evil, right and wrong, can only be said to exist to the extent that the other pole exists. We cannot posit that good exists without implicitly arguing that evil exists. On the contrary, the concept of good can exist only to the extent that there is also a concept of evil. The dominance of Plato’s reason can only exist to the extent that he has also defined the desires as inferior. If the desires do not exist, then reason also cannot exist. In this way, reason cannot be a transcendental signifier, but is instead simply an arbitrary differentiation between two things, a differentiation which Plato erroneously believed held sway in reality due to its ability to be put into language. As Michelle Yeh describes it, “Derrida seeks out the manifest or concealed hierarchy on which the text under consideration is based and, by focusing on the inferior or negative term that is being repressed, demonstrates that the superior term actually relies on the very same conditions of possibility the inferior term does.”<sup>98</sup> Descartes’ positing of the existence of a unified subject points not to the *a priori* existence of a unified subject, but rather to the existence of a differentiation between unified and non-unified subject.

Given such an understanding of language—that it is an arbitrary differentiation between two poles—transcendental or absolute meaning of a signifier cannot exist. Instead, words are only meaningful in context, as temporary transmissions of binary relationships. As Nietzsche puts it, language is a poison, but indispensable as a temporary cure. Derrida frames it in this way, “if words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one’s language, and one’s choice of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute or definitive.”<sup>99</sup> By re-defining our understanding of language, Derrida has problematized the dominant tradition’s claim to transcendental truth, showing instead that differentiation between terms is really only a temporary tool. This understanding allows us to move into Derrida’s conceptualization of deconstruction, which will require a thorough understanding of the term *différance*. Once these have been covered, we can apply Derrida’s deconstruction to the notion of self, showing that, although Derrida wants to remain within the dominant discourse in order to problematize it, his philosophy of deconstruction suggests that the unity of the self required to do so may be untenable.

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<sup>97</sup> Derrida, Jacques. . Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. Print. 26.

<sup>98</sup> Yeh, Michelle. “The Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tzu.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10. (1983): 95-126. Print. 100.

<sup>99</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology* 70.



### Section 3.5: Derrida, *Différance*, and the Deconstruction of the European Self

In order to properly express his understanding of how meaning is generated in language, Derrida invents a new word, *différance*. The concept of *différance* represents the process of differentiation, the play of relative meaning. The spelling of *différance* represents the way it operates in speech. Like in the French, the change of the 'e' in difference to the 'a' of *différance* is silent in speech yet visible in writing. We know of the difference between the two words, but this difference cannot be said. When we think of the meaning of a word, we do not understand it through what it signifies, as a transcendental signifier, but rather through its differentiation with the rest of language, through what it is *not*.<sup>100</sup> We know that language is meaningful through differentiation, but we are not aware of this differentiation. *Différance*, like the 'a' which differentiates it from difference, is not noticeable in speech. Yet it is *différance* which allows for the production of meaning through the creation of differences. As Derrida describes it, "*différance* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other."<sup>101</sup>

*Différance*, despite its importance in Derrida's system of thought, is not an overarching rule or transcendental signified, but is instead simply another concept. As Wayne D. Owens notes, "'difference' is not a transcendental or metaphysical category of discourse. It is simply the process of differing."<sup>102</sup> *Différance* is the process of differing, a process which always occurs in a context, such that differences can never be absolute or transcendental, but always only relative and subjective. Difference is constantly at play, constantly being generated, such that the totality of difference could never be circumscribed through careful study. So Derrida writes, "the activity or productivity connoted by the *a* of *différance* refers to the generative movement in the play of differences. The latter are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that a synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust."<sup>103</sup>

Moreover, *différance* is not a concept or a word, in effect, it cannot be named. Yeh writes, "Derrida repeatedly warns against turning *différance* into a concept, for, differing from and contradicting within itself, *différance* cannot be a concept; it is an anti-concept or rather a nonconcept that *functions* as a concept."<sup>104</sup> *Différance* is the

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<sup>100</sup> Chien, Chi Hui. "Theft's Way: A Comparative Study of Chuang Tzu's Dao and Derridean Trace." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17.1 (1990): 31-49. Print. 36.

<sup>101</sup> Derrida *Positions* 27.

<sup>102</sup> Owens, Wayne. "Tao and Difference: The Existential Implications." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 20. 3 (1993): 261-277. Print. 270.

<sup>103</sup> Derrida *Positions* 27.

<sup>104</sup> Yeh 107.

process of differing, and so does not exist before this differentiation occurs, cannot be named or defined as a concept apart from the differentiation which marks its occurrence. In the same way that the 'a' which distinguishes it is silent, undetectable yet leaving a trace in the text, so *différance* is itself un-definable yet present. So Derrida says, "the motif of *différance*, when marked by a silent *a*, in effect plays neither the role of a 'concept,' or simply of a 'word'. . . . This does not prevent it from producing conceptual effects and verbal or nominal concretions."<sup>105</sup>

The idea that meaning is merely created in the play of *différance*, that language does not gain its meaning from the thing being spoken of, but instead only through the *trace* of what it is not, construed by the subject over language and time, invalidates any metaphysics which uses a transcendental signifier as its justification. So Derrida argues, "it could be shown that metaphysics has always consisted in attempting to uproot the presence of meaning, in whatever guise, from *différance*."<sup>106</sup> For example, Augustine's proof of God's existence is that in perceiving His presence (the signified), the name God (the signifier) in all its meaningfulness came to him. That this signifier God is meaningful in and of itself, that in the presence of this word alone—and in the temporal sense, in the present moment of perceiving it alone—the meaning of the word God came through to Augustine denies the true nature of the word. Rather, the word God is rendered meaningful, and even existent, only through the play of *différance*, only in its differentiation from other words, not present in speaking but leaving their *trace*, and in its differentiation from the same word over time, in the *trace* of the meaning of the word God in the past and future.

The word God is not objectively meaningful, in the world outside of human perception, but is instead generated through the differentiation of the subject as it uses language. To believe that God exists in and of Himself is to believe that reality is ordered like our language, that a signified with a transcendental signifier must therefore be metaphysically transcendental, needing only the presence of itself to be meaningful. This is the metaphysics of presence intrinsic to European thought.<sup>107</sup>

Having established the nature of his deconstruction, Derrida must establish what he intends to *do* with his deconstruction. Having deconstructed traditional philosophy before him, Nietzsche posits a new overarching concept, the will to power, showing all philosophy and existence to be directed by the drive to overcome. Conversely, Derrida wishes to deconstruct in order to problematize, to make room for the voice of the other in the dialogue of the dominant, to partially break *open* the closed-off discourses of philosophy, ethics, and politics dominated by the metaphysics of presence without completely breaking them *apart*. Derrida wishes to deconstruct, not destroy. As he develops it, the purpose of this general strategy of deconstruction "is to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply *residing* within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Derrida *Positions* 39-40.

<sup>106</sup> Derrida *Positions* 32.

<sup>107</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology* 72.

<sup>108</sup> Derrida *Positions* 41.

Again like Nietzsche, Derrida's deconstruction now reaches a paradox. Deconstruction can only take place within the dominant tradition, as a response to the established tradition—there cannot be deconstruction without a structure. Yet what deconstruction brings to the structure is wholly outside it, for it brings the entire structure itself into question. Derrida's deconstruction denies any transcendental truth to the metaphysics of presence, a denial which denies such a metaphysics its very foundation, its justification for action. Yet the deconstruction must still use the language of the metaphysics of presence to generate its deconstruction. So Derrida continues, "therefore we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple. . ." <sup>109</sup> The dualism of unity and non-unity itself falls apart, such that the tradition can be said to be both unified and not unified from certain perspectives, at certain moments, but neither is true absolutely.

Having covered Derrida's conceptualization of deconstruction, we can now look to deconstruct the self. Understanding language as the play of *différance*, and therefore unable to support the transcendental signifier, Derrida calls for us to be a self which is always uncertain of what we believe, of the justifications for our ethical and moral actions. He advocates a recognition of our subjectivity, and our subsequent inability to completely circumscribe the moral ramifications of a given situation. As Robert J. Shepherd writes, "perfect knowledge, hence absolutely certain decisions, is impossible. This being the case, Derrida argues for the recognition of the personal responsibility that all decisions carry, a responsibility that cannot be shielded by the comforts of rational calculation or denied by falling back on the logic of cause and effect." <sup>110</sup>

Belief in the *a priori* truth of a transcendental signifier allows one to justify one's actions in light of this truth, allowing for a stability of purpose which denies the voice of the other through a confidence that there is no truth external from that already possessed. Derrida's project is to problematize these *a priori* truths, showing them to be like any other word in language, meaningful only relatively and never absolutely true. So Derrida argues, "if there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential, or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other." <sup>111</sup> It is in the chaos of language differentiating through the play of *différance* that meaning is generated, and it is upon this meaning that ethics and morality are founded. Therefore, we cannot forget that our morality is founded in relative dualistic conceptualizations, and should never treat it as anything more than the production of a subjective mind.

However, the purpose of my conceptual structure is to deconstruct the self, not the ethics which it practices. Although Derrida is concerned with the operations of the

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<sup>109</sup> Derrida *Positions* 41.

<sup>110</sup> Shepherd, Robert J. "Perpetual Unease or Being at Ease?—Derrida, Daoism, and the 'Metaphysics of Presence.'" *Philosophy East & West* 57.2 (2007): 227–243. PDF. 237.

<sup>111</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism." *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. Ed. Chantal Mouffe. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print. 84.

text, his deconstructive philosophy applies also to the self, to the extent that the concepts of the self—the will, emotions, rationality—are also dualistic differentiations produced by the metaphysics of presence. So Derrida contends, “the presence-absence of the trace. . . carries in itself the problems of the letter and the spirit, of body and soul, and of all the problems whose primary affinity I have recalled.”<sup>112</sup> All of the binaries developed as *a priori* truths by the traditional European philosophers—rationality and desire, body and mind, Godhood and imperfection, will and understanding—owe their existence and following to the metaphysics of presence’s denial of the play of *différance* and the *trace* of the not-present.

Indeed, the ability for the subject to constitute the concept of self relies on the play of *différance*. As Derrida says, *différance* “confirms that the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences and the movement of *différance*, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral. . . .”<sup>113</sup> The conceptualization of the subject as a self is a differentiation, and therefore carries the *trace* of all other language. This means that the self is not stable, not transcendental, but only a temporary truth. Derrida continues:

At the point at which the concept of *différance*, and the chain attached to it, intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics. . . —to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present (for example, in the form of the identity of the subject who is present for all his operations, present beneath every accident or event, self-present in its ‘living speech,’ in its enunciations, in the present objects and acts of its language, etc.)—become nonpertinent. They all amount, at one moment or another, to a subordination of the movement of *différance* in favor of the presence of a value or a meaning supposedly antecedent to *différance*, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis. This is still the presence of what we called above the ‘transcendental signified.’<sup>114</sup>

As Derrida sees it, the self as a thing which is unified in its actions, directed by an overarching force such as reason or the will, always present whenever the bodily organism is present, is itself a transcendental signifier, a fallacy generated by traditional philosophy, the metaphysics of presence. Rather, the unity of the self is only a differentiation between unity and non-unity, and as such is only a temporary, relative truth, not a transcendental truth.

The self is constructed, not inherent. Its existence as a transcendental truth, as a given in the European tradition, stems from a belief in the ability of the signified to transmit its meaning as a signifier, a belief that our language reflects the operations of reality. Descartes’ contention that the subject exists because the French language grammatically requires a subject misses the true nature of language, a system of differentiation in constant flux, in which truths are only ever provisionally and relatively

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<sup>112</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology* 71.

<sup>113</sup> Derrida *Positions* 29.

<sup>114</sup> Derrida *Positions* 29.

meaningful. That the will or reason dominate a unity is one pole of a binary, and is in some perspectives and moments truthful, yet its opposite, that there is no unity inherent in the firing of so many neurons, that the will and reason are just two more forces alongside the desires and illogic, competing yet never controlling, must then also be at some moments truthful.

With such an understanding of the self, Derrida seems to proceed in a contradictory fashion. He argues that the self must move into the world without stability of purpose, yet this self is itself without stability of self. How can I advocate for the voice of the other within the dominant discourse if my 'I' is not unified, a construction only provisionally existent, a differentiation which carries the destabilizing *trace* of all other meaning? As Derrida argues that the writing of the dominant discourse in light of the effects of *différance* is a sort of double writing, that the discourse is both systematically unified yet in itself divided, so he seems to propose a sort of double understanding of the self. The self and its stability of purpose are both problematized, shown to be provisionally useful, yet despite the always present uncertainty of truth we must still move forward into action.

Derrida wants to destabilize logocentrism from the inside, to use its terms and structures to press the truth that there are no transcendental truths. Yet to some extent, this approach will always be mired in the fundamental violence against truth which this tradition has been performing since its inception. If the dominant discourse depends upon its opposite pole of minority discourse in order to remain dominant, will the deconstruction of such structures from the interior, as a minority discourse, ever fully rectify the dominance of the dominant discourse, this metaphysics of presence? It seems that, given the truthfulness of the lack of truth in transcendental signifiers, and in philosophies which claim certainty (even the certainty of the instability of certainty), one would be more in line with the true workings of the world by distancing oneself from logocentrism, by casting off the constructed sense of self in order to become more attuned to the raw and constant becoming of the world which language and all its attempts to signify it can only obscure and violate. This is the approach I read in the writing of the Chinese Daoist Zhuangzi, an argument which I will construct next, in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter.

## Chapter 4: The Deconstruction of the Chinese Self

### Section 4.1: The Purpose of This Conceptual Structure

In the three preceding chapters I have established the constructions of the self in European and Chinese philosophy, as well as the deconstruction of the European self by Nietzsche and Derrida. In this, the fourth chapter, I will demonstrate the deconstructive approach of Chinese Daoist thinker Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi was born sometime around 370 BC, a few hundred years after Confucius. In the same way in which Nietzsche would sometimes initiate fictional dialogues with his philosophical foil, Socrates, Zhuangzi's work has multiple references to Confucius, often casting him in mock discussions with his disciples in which he laments the Daoist's general disregard for proper ritual, sometimes seeming to envy their superior connection with the Way.

Interestingly, Zhuangzi's philosophy of deconstruction carries a strong resemblance to Derrida's, despite their cultural and temporal differences. While some part of this perceived similarity is likely a result of my cultural background, the similarities seem too strong to ignore. While the marked differences between the European and Chinese constructions of self illustrate the self's constructed, arbitrary nature, I believe the similarities between the European and Chinese methods of deconstruction point to the universal nature of the problems with language in expressing reality and truth.

I will begin my construction of Zhuangzi's deconstruction in the second section, starting with an exploration of the concept of the 道 *dao*, or Way, and the implications of such an understanding of the world on the nature of truth. In the third section I examine Zhuangzi's deconstruction of the Confucian self based on the principles of the *dao*. The primary concern for Zhuangzi is that discussion of binaries like virtue and non-virtue draws the subject away from a true understanding of virtue, and moreover pursuit of knowledge and deliberate action lead away from attunement with the Way.

I continue in section 4.4 with the positive aspect of the Zhuangzi I have constructed, his advice for how to live a more skillful life in accordance with the constantly becoming nature of the world. This will require us to stop attempting to order reality, to not cling to our position in the field of aesthetic order as the center of a focus-field, but to instead be at ease in the flow of existence, not privileging one particular state of becoming over another. Finally, I show that, because Zhuangzi must enter conventional language and thought in order to understand the necessity of forgetting conventional language and thought, he shares the paradox which Nietzsche and Derrida seem to encounter as they attempt to deconstruct from the interior.

While Nietzsche rebuilds the tradition in his own image, and Derrida accepts his place as an ever-present problematizer, Zhuangzi offers a third alternative. Like most Chinese texts at the time, including *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Zhuangzi* is composed

of small chapters of writing attributed to Zhuangzi, with later chapters of further commentary by notable scholars. However, Zhuangzi's writing style is an extreme example, filled with strange tales and stranger characters, complete disregard for the fourth wall, and an affinity for perplexing analogies which cause us to question the sureness with which we know the things we think we know. Zhuangzi leaves his work in pieces, without any clear argument, and peppered with admonitions that he has no idea what he's talking about. In this way, Zhuangzi leaves his thought unconstructed, his fantastic tales pushing us to think beyond what our intellect can circumscribe with logic. Because each commentator must build his own construction of what he believes Zhuangzi to be arguing, Zhuangzi has left his body of thought to the constant play of new meaning, rather than willingly entering into the dominant discourse.

In the last section, the fifth, I compare Zhuangzi's deconstruction to his European counterparts. This will begin with a comparison of Derrida's *différance* to Zhuangzi's *dao*. Both concepts can be defined as the process of differing, and both are described as indescribable, unable to be circumscribed by language because their occurrence is always prior to language. I argue that it is possible both Derrida and Zhuangzi had the same thing in mind, with the differences between the terms attributable to the different conceptual tools available to the thinkers. While Derrida did his thinking in 1960's France, amidst the intellectual turmoil of the structuralism movement, his description of the 'unnameable mover' is linguistically based, caught up in his work on semiotics and grammatology. In contrast, Zhuangzi lived in a time where 氣 *qi*, or 'vital energy' was commonly accepted as the causal force behind illness, fortune, and the weather.

Lastly, I want to examine the difference between Zhuangzi's understanding of the self and Derrida's. The self for Zhuangzi is not the same as the European conception, i.e., it is not a conceptual unified self able to rationally examine itself. Rather, the self for Zhuangzi is merely a certain quality which has a propensity for deliberate action and applying order to the world, traits which Zhuangzi believes detract from true harmony with a constantly becoming world. Chris Jochim conjectures that an understanding of self similar to Zhuangzi's is present in the works of Homer, a predecessor of Plato, adding weight to the argument that the Western self as rationally directed began with Plato. I offer this as an explanation for Derrida's insistence that we remain with the dominant tradition, in constant unease, while Zhuangzi advocates un-involvement with debate and the pursuit of knowledge, despite the similarity of the two thinker's philosophy. While Zhuangzi viewed something like a government job as an opportunity for one to be used by others, like a tree which is cut down for timber, Derrida's conception of his self as rationally unified and goal-oriented drove him to dedicate his life to problematizing the dominant tradition.

#### *Section 4.2: Zhuangzi's Dao and the Relativity of Truth*

It seems right to begin any articulation of the meaning of the 道 *dao* or Way, with the first two lines of Laozi's 道德經 or *Dao De Jing*. They read: 道可道非常道，名可名非常名, *dao ke dao feichang dao, ming ke ming feichang ming*. Here Laozi appears to be playing on way that the characters *dao*, way, and *ming*, name, can be both nouns and verbs. *Dao* as a verb can also mean to show, so the translation is something like: The way which can be shown is not the true Way (the *dao* which can be *dao*-ed is not the true *dao*), the name which can be named is not the true Name (the *ming* which can be *ming*-ed is not the true *ming*). That is to say, the *dao* is prior to language, and defies our attempts to define it. It is the vital energy which moves the becoming of the world.

Zhuangzi offers a very helpful analogy which helps us to understand the *dao* by way of showing its effects, by pointing to what is not. He frames this description as a discussion between two men, Ziqi and Ziyou. Ziqi tells Ziyou that he has lost himself, but that he would not understand because he does not hear the piping of earth or Heaven.<sup>115</sup> At Ziyou's prompting, Ziqi describes the piping of earth:

The towering trees of the forest, a hundred spans around, are riddled with indentations and holes—like noses, mouths, ears; like sockets, enclosures, mortars; like ponds, like puddles. Roarers and whizzers, scolders and sighers, shouters, wailers, boomers, growlers! One leads with a yeee! Another answers with a yuuu! A light breeze brings a small harmony, while a powerful gale makes for a harmony vast and grand. And once the sharp wind has passed, all these holes return to their silent emptiness.<sup>116</sup>

Ziyou understands this to be the piping of the earth, and the “sound of bamboo panpipes” to be the piping of man, but he still does not understand the piping of Heaven, the *dao*. Ziqi responds, “it gusts through all the ten thousand differences, allowing each to go its own way. But since each one selects out its own, what identity can there be for the rouser?”

In other words, the *dao* is the force which blows through all existence, allowing for the differentiation of things from each other. The analogy comparing the *dao* and the world to wind and pipes implies that the multitude of things in the world could not be differentiated without the *dao*, as the pipes could not sound without wind blowing over them. In this way, the *dao* can be understood as the process of differing. Ziqi's analogy also provides insight into the un-nameable nature of the *dao*. He concludes, “what identity can there be for the rouser?” To attempt to name the *dao* is to make it a thing differentiated from other things, a hole which allows sound to be made. Yet as soon as we try to name the *dao*, we realize that we have failed in the attempt, for we cannot say that the wind itself is the sound of one of the holes, or the hole itself. As the process of differing, the *dao* is present beyond the play of language, it is the wind which enables the piping and so cannot be narrowed down to a specific hollow or noise.

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<sup>115</sup> It should be noted here that the translation of 天 *tian* as heaven does not carry any Western Christian connotation, referring instead to the Chinese understanding of the celestial bodies and immortal deities.

<sup>116</sup> Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*. Trans. Brook Ziporyn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009. 9.



Yet it is also the case that the *dao* does not exist independently from the differentiation of things. While the holes cannot “yeee!” or “yuuu!” without the wind, the wind also cannot blow in a vacuum, devoid of the holes. The process of differing occurs only when differentiation is present.

With such an understanding of the nature of the world, human perceptions of right and wrong become problematized. Because there is nothing inherent in the world beyond the play of *dao*, it is impossible to establish a fixed perspective from which to posit objective truths, for what there is to talk about is always mutating, in a constant state of becoming. So Zhuangzi argues, “for our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a relation of dependence on something, and what it depends on is always peculiarly unfixed.”<sup>117</sup> If humans generate meaning through relations, there cannot be stable meaning if what is related is always in a state of flux.

If all definitions or truths are only meaningful in relation to other terms, if good is only meaningful in relation to evil, then there can only be good if evil is also present — a term depends on the binary it participates in for meaning, and nothing else. As Zhuangzi describes it, all things are both a ‘this’ and a ‘that,’ yet we can only know of ‘that’ from ‘this.’ In other words, all things can be said to belong to either part of a general binary, all things can be said to be both ‘here’ and ‘there,’ yet it is only from ‘here’ that we can understand ‘there.’ He continues, “thus, we can say: ‘that’ emerges from ‘this,’ and ‘this’ follows from ‘that’ . . . their simultaneous generation is their simultaneous destruction, and vice versa.”<sup>118</sup> When ‘this’ is posited, its generation simultaneously produces a ‘that’ as what it is differentiated against. Yet because they must be generated simultaneously, they are also destroyed simultaneously, as their essential pairing eliminates the possibility that they could be meaningful independently.

Zhuangzi concludes, “thus the Sage does not proceed from any one of them alone but instead lets them all bask in the broad daylight of Heaven. And that too is only a case of going by the rightness of the present ‘this.’”<sup>119</sup> Letting all ‘thises’ and ‘thats’ ‘bask in the broad daylight of Heaven’ is to let the various formulations of truth all unfold in the flow of the *dao*, following them when they are correct but instantly letting them go when they are no longer necessary. “Going by the rightness of the present ‘this’” here means that the Sage recognizes his humanness, that to let all conceptualizations be equally valid is only necessary if one is confined to language to generate meaning. Were the Sage a different ‘this,’ i.e., were he a different form of the ‘ten thousand things’ through which the *dao* passes through, something other than human, he would go by a different ‘this.’ To have such an understanding is to both ‘go by the rightness of the present this,’ and to let all ‘thises’ and ‘thats’ ‘bask in the broad daylight of Heaven.’

Zhuangzi’s primary concern with the current state of society is that very few people follow the Sage’s lead. Instead, people believe that because they use language to create differentiations, they must therefore understand what is being differentiated,

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<sup>117</sup> Zhuangzi 39.

<sup>118</sup> Zhuangzi 12.

<sup>119</sup> Zhuangzi 12.

and further that the differentiations they have formed are present in reality. So he states, “the mind comes to be what it is by taking possession of whatever it selects out of the process of alternation—but does that mean it has to truly understand that process? . . . to claim that there are any such things as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ *before* they come to be fully formed in someone’s mind in this way. . . . This is to regard the nonexistent as existent.”<sup>120</sup> Zhuangzi acknowledges the fact that the human mind forms meaning through differentiation, ‘the process of alternation,’ but refutes the claim that such alternations are therefore inherent in the world. Right and wrong exist only to the extent that we think them, but such things cannot be found beyond the subject’s projection of meaning.

Zhuangzi not only rejects any natural connection between language and truth, he also wants to show that the generation of seemingly objective meaning is the product of an incomplete understanding of language. So he states, “Courses are formed by someone walking them. Things are so by being called so. Whence thus and so? From thus and so being affirmed of them. Whence not thus and so? From thus and so being negated of them.”<sup>121</sup> Although a common understanding of language is that we see a ‘thus’ and then name it ‘thus,’ when one really understands that meaning is simply symbolic differentiation, we can see that a ‘thus’ is only a ‘thus’ when it is named as such.

#### *Section 4.3: The Problem with Culture*

The Confucian tradition was just beginning to flourish during Zhuangzi’s lifetime, and Confucius appears several times in Zhuangzi’s work, at times seeming to challenge the Daoist perspective, while at other times arguing for it. One possible explanation for this is that by sometimes putting his message in the mouth of his opponent, Zhuangzi is disorienting our sense of ‘this’ and ‘that,’ preventing us from keeping straight where the lines of opposition lay. In this way, the form of his work enforces the philosophical message.

In the fourth chapter of *The Zhuangzi*, Confucius is in a dialogue with a disciple, Yan Hui, a form often taken up in the *Analects of Confucius*. Yan Hui expresses interest in travelling to a nearby state which is in turmoil, hoping to do the virtuous thing and assist in their statecraft, and asks Confucius for advice. After berating Yan Hui for his ignorance, Zhuangzi’s Confucius says, “do you know what it is that undermines real Virtuosity, and for what purpose, on the contrary, ‘cleverness’ comes forth? Virtuosity is undermined by *getting a name for it*. Cleverness comes forth from *conflict*.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Zhuangzi 11.

<sup>121</sup> Zhuangzi 13.

<sup>122</sup> Zhuangzi 24.

Virtuosity and knowledge, translated here as cleverness, are two of the most important traits the real Confucius pushes his students to cultivate within themselves in the *Analects*. Yet here Zhuangzi's Confucius seems to challenge one's ability to achieve such things, that real Virtuosity is undermined by naming it Virtuosity.

Zhuangzi's Confucius continues, "for a good name is most essentially a way for people to one-up each other, and cleverness is most essentially a weapon for winning a fight. Both are inauspicious implements, not the kind of thing that can be used to perfect your own behavior."<sup>123</sup> Here Zhuangzi's Confucius is speaking with an understanding of language's arbitrary nature, such that to name virtuosity is already to get away from a true understanding of what virtuosity is. What the disciple Yan Hui is seeking here, in his ignorance of the *dao*, is not true virtuosity but the *named* virtuosity, not true knowledge but *named* knowledge. Rather than moving us toward a greater understanding of real virtuosity and knowledge, to pursue them by 'getting a name for it' is only useful in societal competition with others, through pointless debate or the knowledge of how to exploit the other.

Confucius appears again in Chapter 6, this time attempting to describe to his disciple Zigong why Daoists act the way they do. Zigong has just returned from a funeral, where two of the deceased's friends unceremoniously sing him away: "Hey Sanghu, Hey Sanghu! / Come on back, why don't you? / You've returned to what we are really, / While we're still humans—wow, yippee!"<sup>124</sup> For Confucians, participation in ritual is the means to self cultivation, what makes one human, and no ritual is more sacred than the funeral.

Yet here these men sit, irreverently singing a silly song at the deathbed of their friend. Zhuangzi's Confucius, here seeming to espouse a Daoist perspective, replies, "those who serve each other in the Course do so by not being bothered to serve any one particular goal, thereby allowing the flow of their lives to settle into stability. Thus it is said, fish forget one another in the rivers and lakes, and human beings forget one another in the arts of the Course."<sup>125</sup> For these two Daoist mourners, what brings stability in life is not 'being bothered to serve any one particular goal,' but instead following along in the flow of becoming. Somewhat counter-intuitively to us, for Zhuangzi we are at our most stable when we are fully at one with the chaos of becoming, such that measures which prevent our going with the flow—deliberate action or the pursuit of status and material wealth—actually destabilize us, because they allow us to be used by others, investing us in the system and distracting us from the pleasures of becoming.

Again in chapter 4, Confucius is used to deliver Zhuangzi's message, saying, "Can you afford to be careless? Let yourself be carried along by things so that the mind wanders freely. Hand it all over to the unavoidable so as to nourish what is central within you. That is the most you can do. What need is there to deliberately seek any

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<sup>123</sup> Zhuangzi 24-5.

<sup>124</sup> Zhuangzi 46.

<sup>125</sup> Zhuangzi 47.

reward? The best thing is just to fulfill what's mandated to you, your fate—how could there be any difficulty in that?"<sup>126</sup> While the typical person would argue that to 'hand it all over to the unavoidable' is 'to be careless,' in the Zhuangzian illogic, to be careless is to deliberately seek reward, because it will have wasted what is truly stable within us by pursuing what is important only in a cultural sense.

#### *Section 4.4: Implications for Skillful Action*

I have built up an opposition in Zhuangzi's work between the deliberate pursuit of cultural reward and the non-purposeful action of following along with the play of the *dao*. It now becomes clear that Zhuangzi sees cultural participation as a tool, something useful in passing but not worth devoting one's life to. For the sage, steeped in an understanding of the *dao*'s play, even being human is just another 'this' to be temporarily acknowledged. So Zhuangzi describes, "the sage has his ways of wandering. For him, understanding is merely a bastard son, obligations and agreements merely glue, Virtuosity a mere continuation of something received, skill merely salesmanship."<sup>127</sup> The traits cultivated by the Confucian self, traits said to be fundamental to being human, are for the Zhuangzian sage merely useful in passing, applicable to a certain situation but not necessary for the stability of his own being.

On the contrary, things like understanding, obligations, Virtuosity, and skill can only hinder the formation of a self which is stable in the constant instability of becoming, by attempting to posit a stable self using the unstably founded norms of language and culture. So he concludes, "the sage makes no plans, so what use would he have for understanding? He is unsplit, so what use would he have for glue? He loses nothing, so what use would he have for the attainments of Virtuosity? He is not for sale as a commodity, so what use would he have for salesmanship?"<sup>128</sup> If culture is a production of language, whose referent is always 'peculiarly unfixed,' then it does not take into account the constantly becoming nature of the world in its pursuit of stability. Therefore, our cultural tenets actually de-stabilize us by attempting to posit their own stability ignorant of the change in the world. To be truly stable is to be stable in the constant flux of becoming.

Therefore, in order to find inner stability we must stop attempting to order the outer world based upon our cultural predispositions. The Confucian self perceives order as a field focused around the center, such that in a family the mother and son are ordered and cultivated by the father, who in turn is ordered and cultivated by the focus-field through his place at its center. Such a formulation of order can only be applicable

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<sup>126</sup> Zhuangzi 29.

<sup>127</sup> Zhuangzi 38.

<sup>128</sup> Zhuangzi 38.

from a certain perspective, from 'this,' and so cannot be said to be inapplicable from a different perspective, from 'that.' Because its applicability is simultaneously generated, it is also simultaneously destroyed. Ultimately, order is only as applicable as the particular situation dictates, and cannot be said to be universally applicable, much less the basis of all further conceptions of order, as is the case in the Confucian view. For Zhuangzi, the true way to impose order is to find your place within the piping of *tian*: "let your mind roam in the flavorless, blend your vital energy with the boundless silence, follow the rightness of the way each thing already is without allowing yourself the least bias. Then the world will be in order."<sup>129</sup>

Zhuangzi's work is filled with examples of people who perform skills with the utmost deftness, who lose themselves in the flow of their work, only becoming conscious of themselves once they finish their skillful activity. The most famous of these 'knack stories' features Cook Ding, a man who carves oxen in the king's kitchen. The king, delighted with his skill, asks Cook Ding to describe how he handles the knife. Cook Ding responds,

What I love is the Course, something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow.<sup>130</sup>

This state of mind has most likely been experienced by everyone, in the heat of a sport, while cleaning a room, or just in the pleasantness of a long walk. What is important for Zhuangzi is that the 'understanding consciousness' only impedes skillful action, for although it is useful in generating differentiations and thinking abstract thought, what we use when we are engrossed in skillful activity is something entirely different. As Cook Ding confesses, he approaches the oxen with his spirit, with his love of the *dao*, rather than with his eyes. Instead of conceptualizing the meat as oxen, and himself as cook, the knife as knife, and then attempting to bring these things together, Cook Ding approaches the undifferentiated oneness of ox, knife and self as an undifferentiated oneness, letting the *dao* direct his movements. In this way, his understanding of the world perfectly reflects the way the world actually is. It is not the case that there is ox, knife and self in reality, and he then comes to know them through his senses. Rather, there is before perception only a oneness, and by not differentiating it into various pieces, by allowing his spirit rather than his eyes to perceive, Cook Ding is able to perceive the actual nature of reality as a oneness.

Like Nietzsche and Derrida after him, Zhuangzi's thought seems to carry a certain paradox. In order for Zhuangzi's argument to be sensible we must enter the dominant discourse, yet his conclusion seems to be that entering the dominant discourse is the last thing we should do. Zhuangzi sees himself as an old tree out in the woods, and would rather remain out there to grow in accord with the natural flow of things than to

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<sup>129</sup> Zhuangzi 51.

<sup>130</sup> Zhuangzi 22.

be cut down and put to use in the constructions of man. Yet still, Zhuangzi must enter conventional language in order to understand the necessity of forgetting conventional language. Zhuangzi's response to this paradox is wrapped up in the very style and form which his text takes. Rather than a series of logical progressions demonstrating his argument, Zhuangzi presents us with a chaos of fantastical tales, dialogues with Confucius which would never have taken place, and absolutely illogical analogies. These not only serve to obscure his own structure, preventing it from being made into the lumber of someone else's deliberate action, but also cause the reader to question his own conceptual sense of the world, priming us for authentic interaction with the *dao*.

#### *Section 4.5: The Zhuangzian Self in Contrast with the European Self*

At this point, we must recognize the profound similarities between Zhuangzi's 道 *dao* and Derrida's *différance*. Both are un-nameable because they are the process of differentiation, and thus neither are a transcendental signifier but only occur when differentiation occurs. By allowing for differentiation to occur they allow for meaning to be produced in language, and subsequently in culture. Yet it is because culture does not understand the contingent nature of truth due to the play of *dao* or *différance* that they mistakenly posit universal truths and establish dominance. One could easily read this passage from *The Zhuangzi* as Derrida's own words: "this is certainly something close to hand, and yet we do not know what makes it so. If there is some controller behind it all, it is peculiarly devoid of any manifest sign. Its ability to flow and stop makes its presence plausible, but even then it shows no definite form. That would make it a reality with no definite form."<sup>131</sup>

Yet, given such a similar understanding of the becoming of existence, Derrida chooses to throw himself into the deliberate pursuit of cultural reform while Zhuangzi would rather be out in the world, at one with the *dao* and beholden to no purpose but his own. I believe the reason for this is rooted in the difference between the two thinker's self conception, specifically, that Derrida has a rational, ethically unified self which sets deliberate life plans, while Zhuangzi does not.

We must first make sense of Zhuangzi's understanding of self, a particularly difficult task given the dominance of our western understanding. I will rely heavily upon Chris Jochim's analysis here. In the *Zhuangzi*, 身 *shen*, generally meaning body, refers to the true self, that thing which becomes stable when we go along with the instability of becoming rather than pursuing deliberate action.<sup>132</sup> In this way, Zhuangzi does have some understanding that there is a fundamental self, but we should not attach to it any

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<sup>131</sup> Zhuangzi 10.

<sup>132</sup> Jochim, Chris. "Just Say No to 'No Self' in *Zhuangzi*." *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Ed. Roger T. Ames. New York: State University of New York Press, 1998. 35-74. Print. 50.

of the ideas we usually associate with the self. Here, self is meant in the barest sense. As Jochim writes, this concept reflects “a pluralistic conception of the person, not a unitary one built concentrically around an inner, spiritual core. . . . there is no place within this conception for a mind-body dualism.”<sup>133</sup>

When Zhuangzi advocates that we lose ourselves in the flow, this is not the western understanding of self which we must lose, for Zhuangzi did not know of such a self. Rather, this self which must be lost is 己 *ji*, generally meaning self. Jochim determines *ji* in the Zhuangzi to be a quality which prevents one from properly harmonizing with others and the world, which drives us to pursue deliberate action and knowledge. However, this is still not the western interpretation. As Jochim comments, “*ji* suggests something like ‘egoism’; it does not mean ‘the self.’”<sup>134</sup>

Therefore, when one has lost *ji* and been taken up in the flow of becoming, no egoism is present, either in the western or eastern sense. Instead, there is only *shen*, the body, the barest sense of the self, as a thing which *can* be differentiated from the world, but which is in reality at oneness with it. As Zhuangzi exclaims, “without *that* there would be no me, to be sure, but then again without *me* there would be nothing selected out from it all.”<sup>135</sup> Jochim describes this sense of self as devoid of any western notions of self, “in this state, there was no Cartesian residue, no authentic transcendental *cogito*, there was simply a ‘person’ unaware of anything that distinguished him from the flow of all living things.”<sup>136</sup>

Interestingly, Jochim contends that the self as Zhuangzi conceives it may have been present in the works of the Greek poet Homer, who produced works like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* before Plato was born. It is generally accepted that the heroes populating Homer’s epic poems had an incomplete sense of self when compared to the modern western conception. Men like Achilles and Odysseus were motivated by the Gods, the Fates, and their emotions, and although they had rationality they did not seem to have a critical, self-reflective element of the self. As Jochim writes, “. . . I have come to believe that Homer had a pluralistic conception of the person parallel to Zhuang’s conception of personhood as something without a unitary self behind the thoughts, habits, actions, feelings, and so forth of which we are made. Of course, their views of personhood may be otherwise quite different.”<sup>137</sup> The presence of this ‘pre-western-self self’ in Homer’s work would place the conceptualization of a self which has a criticizing element distinct from the rest of the self, an element believed to be reason itself and nothing more, squarely upon Plato’s shoulders.

Such a conception of self, as begun in the works of Plato, and continued, for example, in the subsequent works of Augustine, Descartes, Nietzsche, and Derrida, drives the self to direct its life in rational, ethical action due to its ability to oversee and

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<sup>133</sup> Jochim 53.

<sup>134</sup> Jochim 55.

<sup>135</sup> Zhuangzi 10.

<sup>136</sup> Jochim 56.

<sup>137</sup> Jochim 67.

dictate the other elements of self. We cannot help but find the sort of life put forward by Zhuangzi—in which one spends his life playing in the mud, cavorting with trees, not keeping track of years—to be starkly immoral. To live as Zhuangzi advocates would be to waste the lifetime, mind, and body given to us so that we can go into the world to rationally solve its problems. Given such an understanding, we can begin to understand why Nietzsche and Derrida, despite finding such deeply rooted issues with western culture, continued to hammer away at it, believing the problem could be solved with the unified action of a rational self.

Westerners also have the sort of experiences encountered in Zhuangzi's 'knack tales,' like Cook Ding's skillfulness with the blade, ox, and self in following the flow rather than deliberate action. Yet to the western interpretation, with the rational self transcendentally present, such a flow state is seen as a distraction from goal-setting and the presence of self. Jochim describes the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's analysis of the flow state: ". . .he acknowledges that goal-consciousness disappears *during flow*. In relation to this, the 'joy' of flow results from the effortless involvement that lays one's troubles aside as well as from the fact that, during flow, 'concern for the self' is gone."<sup>138</sup>

The language used to describe the flow state by westerners must be stressed. Here, it is a matter of goal-consciousness disappearing, that enjoyment comes from laying one's troubles aside, such that 'concern for the self' fades. What is implied is that the self fundamentally has goal-consciousness, that a concern for the self is always present except in special circumstances. In contrast, for Zhuangzi, the flow state is the true state of being, and goal-consciousness and concern for the self are extras which obscure an authentic existence with the becoming of the world. From this perspective, we can conclude that, although Zhuangzi did not know of the western conception of self, he would have denied it as strongly as he denied 己 *ji*, if not more so.

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<sup>138</sup> Jochim 63.



## Conclusion

This section will conclude the examination of the self and its deconstruction across European and Chinese philosophy, formulating what has been learned from such an exploration. We should begin with a review of what has been covered so far. In the introduction, I identify the self as a conceptual structure which seems to distort an otherwise proper understanding of the world, and moreover that conceptual structures themselves are arbitrary, and should be viewed merely as tools rather than direct representations of truth. I make the claim that morality is a tool which allows cultures to exercise power over the population. I sketch out two notions which I want to explore, first, the 'mirror-self,' a common Buddhist and Daoist image representing a manner of being which brings nothing extra to the understanding of the self beyond what is in the world, perfectly reflecting the way of things around them. The second notion is a phenomena I have encountered and dubbed, for lack of a better term, *no-self confidence*, a certain lack of inhibition and doubt produced when we encounter the world without the concept of self to intermediate between consciousness and action. Finally, I declare my intent to examine the traditional notions of the self as conceived in European and Chinese philosophy, followed by an examination of the European and Chinese philosophies of deconstruction which challenge traditional philosophy. Ultimately, I predict a tension between the self which acts within culture and the self which denies the value of any such action. I pose the questions: When do we watch? When do we act? And on what grounds do we do either?

Following the introduction, the first chapter examines the traditional European self as formulated in the philosophies of Plato, Augustine and Descartes. This formulation of self is characterized by the existence of a rational element of the self which is able to survey the other elements of the self, the spirit or desires, and control them in a rational fashion. Descartes further develops the idea of an unlimited will, a faculty of the self which supersedes understanding and rationality, unifying the self and directing its actions. The justification for such a formulation of self is the belief in language's ability to accurately reflect reality, as well as a purported access to things which are true in and of themselves, a claim which invests all further claims with its truth. This is the Idea of the Good for Plato, and later God for Augustine and Descartes, concepts discoverable only by turning away from the sensory world to the independent self.

In the second chapter I address the traditional Chinese conception of the self, as put forward in the Analects of Confucius. In this conception, the self *is* the social roles one plays, both in the family and in culture at large. The Confucian self is a process, not a ruling element, a process which must be cultivated over time through participation in culture. Self cultivation is enacted through participation in ritual, social traditions like funerals. Participation in ritual is to be human, such that to not participate in culture is to be less than human. Such a self tends to view order aesthetically as opposed to logically, considering each part in determining the whole, rather than considering the

whole in determining each part. When such a harmonious order is achieved, all of the parts are cultivated through their participation in the whole.

At this juncture it is evident that the European and Chinese traditions have produced markedly different conceptions of the self. The Europeans posit a self whose course is determined through independent, rational thought, a rationality removed from and able to dominate the emotional milieu of the lesser elements of the self. In contrast, the course of the Chinese self is determined interdependently with others, and requires a cultivation of the self through participation in culture. Because these conceptions of self are so different, and because certain crucial elements of each are so lacking in the other, neither can be said to be innate. If they are not innate, then they must be constructed.

Chapter three covers the deconstruction of the European self through Nietzsche and then Derrida. This deconstruction demonstrates that language and all meaning derived from it can only be produced by differentiating between two concepts, and thus that truth can only be relative, serving a specific purpose. Traditional European philosophy derives its legitimacy from a belief that reality is meaningful in the same way as language, and that certain words can be meaningful in and of themselves, beliefs which are both disproven. Rather, Nietzsche shows any claim to rationality or higher truth is more accurately a production of the philosopher's emotions and unstated goals, the will to power. Therefore, the self is not truly unified or ruled by any one faculty. This allows me to formulate my own argument, that culture is now the dominant manifestation of mankind's will to power. Finally, Derrida contends that given the constructed nature of the dominant tradition and the self, we have an undeniable responsibility to question our actions and their justifications.

The fourth chapter presents the Daoist Zhuangzi's deconstruction of the Chinese self. Zhuangzi's deconstructive arguments, techniques, and even metaphors often closely mirror Derrida's, demonstrating that although structures may be very different, their constructedness and subsequent deconstruction follow similar channels. Zhuangzi argues that language and the pursuit of status and knowledge prevent us from understanding the world as it really is, a constantly becoming world rather than one of fixed entities and beings. Zhuangzi advocates for a loss of self, with self here being understood as a propensity for deliberate action which interrupts harmony with the 道 or Way. Further, there is evidence that such an understanding of self—a self which does not believe in a unifying transcendental rationality—exists in the work of Homer, i.e., before Plato. Finally, I argue that Derrida carried such a self conception, which caused him to continue to participate in the dominant culture, while Zhuangzi did not, causing him to instead advocate that we distancing ourselves from culture.

In order to really conclude such an exploration of the structures of self, I believe we must return to the binary between culture and self previously established. First, we must review the relationship, then, we can explore the implications.

As Nietzsche's theory of the will to power argues, all existence is the competition of different forces struggling to dominate the other. One arbitrary manifestation of this

will to power is life itself, followed by more developments which increase life's power quotient—multi-cellular organisms, the nervous system, consciousness, rationality, a sense of self, and finally, culture.

The English word culture traces its origins to the Anglo-Norman and Middle French *culture* in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, meaning the “action of cultivating land, plants, etc.” It is not until the 1500s that *culture* takes on connotations of the development of language and literature. Interestingly, it also carries traces of religious worship, as in *cultivation*.<sup>139</sup> The Chinese is 文化, *wen hua*. 文 is to inscribe, as in language, but also carries connotations of elegance. 化 is originally to smelt, to transmute, and here can be compared to the English word part *-ation*, as in civilize(文)-ation(化).<sup>140</sup> In both languages, the concept of culture carries the idea that there is cultivation afoot, of taking what is raw and original and making it civilized. It is worth noting that for the Chinese such an understanding of the word culture is ancient, given, while for the Europeans it was not until the 1500s that the meaning of culture shifted from purely horticultural to applying to human society.

Yet culture's connotations of cultivation also speaks to the power relationship between culture and the self. As the individual cell of a multi-cellular organism is provided for, yet also dominated by, the organism itself, so the individual human is provided for, yet also dominated by, the culture which raises him. Culture cultivates us to develop a notion of self, because such a configuration allows for more advanced interaction with society and a greater ability to set abstract goals and achieve them, making us, and in turn, culture, more powerful. In this way, Culture's cultivation of man empowers us, enabling us to achieve things we could never aspire to alone, yet it also dominates us, causing us to enslave, suppress and discriminate against others, human or otherwise.

Given our deconstructive understanding of binaries, we know that culture is sometimes a unity, sometimes a non-unity. Ants have no central ordering consciousness, no transcendental unity, yet together through their natural expression of life the collective acts out the functions of an organism. In this sense perhaps culture is also blind, a collective of individuals which, through their normal life cycles, act out the functions of one vast organism. To the extent that culture is a unity, acting out this fundamental play of life, perhaps we are unable to influence its monolithic advance. Yet culture can also be said to be a non-unity, and to the extent that the whole of culture is composed only of parts, of individual people, then surely we must have some degree of control. If culture is a non-unity, then its direction is not shaped by the dominant majority, but by the interplay of every subject, the force of each person's will to power at play within society. This is Derrida's unavoidable responsibility, to be conscious that we perpetuate culture even in passive participation, and that we must therefore assume full responsibility for the course it takes. Whether or not we truly have access to

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<sup>139</sup> Oxford English Dictionary online.

<sup>140</sup> Notes with Behuniak.

culture's direction does not seem like a question which we can definitively answer. Either way, it seems to be beyond the ant's comprehension.

Regardless, such an understanding of the binary between culture and self renders a concrete lesson on how to live in the world. Foremost, as Confucius demonstrates, participation in culture is what makes us human. Although it may obscure a proper understanding of the world, we cannot turn away culture, cannot digress to a lower state of power. Second, it is imperative to recognize that we are not a unity, that we do not go into the world governed by reason and a unifying will. As Derrida teaches, there must always be unease in ethical action, a questioning of our motives and an instability in our perception of right and wrong. Culture may cultivate in us belief in absolute truths, but we must always recognize these as inaccurate.

Yet there is also the lesson which Descartes demonstrates. In the same way in which he contends that there are clear and distinct conceptions within him, which must be true, I too feel that there is something within me which confirms the philosophy I espouse as truthful. Nietzsche shows us the real meaning of this phenomenon, the force of my emotion acting upon the construction of what I believe to be a rational argument. Within the structure of these pages is a reflection of my base desires, my will to power: I have seen the concrete other, poor black boys funneled into a life of crime and oppression by the dominant majority which shirks responsibility for the ruining of these lives with the rhetoric of meritocracy, the transcendental signifier of American independence. My philosophy is a not impartial rational contemplation, it is a tool, a means to power, a weapon, which I want beyond all else to demolish the American power structure. To the extent that American culture is a non-unity, its direction is shaped entirely by the parts which compose it, the interplay of these competing forces, the exertion of each individual's will to power manifested through their philosophy, actions, and morality. Even though I am not of the majority, the microscopic cell which I represent matters, for I am a part of the whole, and the whole is nothing but parts.

Finally, we must take to heart Zhuangzi's lesson, that if the world is nothing but a constant flow of becoming, we should not burden ourselves with conceptualizations external to this flow, but instead be at ease in the 'piping of *tian*,' comfortable in the non-unity of everything. Language can only generate temporary, relative truths, and therefore the same must be said of man and culture. While for Western thinkers the 'flow state' is an interesting phenomena which temporarily distracts us from our having a goal-oriented self, for Zhuangzi such non-conceptual, skillful action is acting out the true nature of the world, being one with becoming rather than dissecting it with language. In such a state of no-self confidence, we are not so much forgetting the conceptual world as we are remembering what it is actually like to be in the world, fully, without the intermediary of self or cultural judgments to utilize us.

For this is truly what participation in culture and having a self do to us, they teach us to believe that things can be objectively true. In order to live life in a way which more accurately reflects the arbitrary nature of language and the constant becoming of existence, we must situate ourselves outside of the cultural truths which were cultivated within us, recognizing that cultural norms shape the value judgments we project upon

everything we perceive. To do this we must consider all selves and all cultures to have a one-to-one truth value ratio, that no way of life is more or less correct. To do anything less is to let a culture founded upon an incorrect understanding of existence dictate our being in the world.

When we first encounter the idea of a parity between all cultures, the suggestion that we must consider everything to be equally truthful, it seems to stop us in our tracks, halting us from further moral action. However, what is really stopping us in our tracks is our comfort within the metaphysics of presence, the conceptual sedative imparted to us by culture which tells us that there is a clear and easily understood path to morally correct action.

Therefore, the halting sensation must be passed over, seen as a first step. After we have dealt with the urge to not listen to those who tell us there is instability in our moral structures, we come upon a certain uncertainty. That we are now unsure of how to proceed, questioning the extent to which our moral structures have been informed by our culture—I think this is the correct feeling. If there is stability in our understanding, it is a sign we are forgetting something, not a sign that we have complete understanding. It feels as if we had a clear, stable path which has now been obscured by the process of deconstruction. Yet really, what we had before in the stability of our culturally supported beliefs was the obstruction, and the path of uncertainty, aware of the problems of language and absolutes, this is what it really means to have a clear path.

When we feel that we are on the brink of something irreversible, that no matter what we do it will not be the objectively right choice, then our path is clear of the half-truths and false goals which culture uses to guide us toward the pursuit of a shallower happiness. When we have an awareness that no matter how we help, damage will also be done, that we can only deconstruct by entering the structure, that our very basis for action is inherently paradoxical, then I feel we are ready to take the first step.

Having a concept of self allows us to posit that we are governed by a unifying force, allowing us to better interface with culture and direct our lives toward abstract goals, and therefore the self must represent an increase in the subject's power. It seems unlikely that the westerner will ever be able to cast off such an understanding of himself. Yet still I believe we are able to achieve Zhuangzi's ideal of mirror self. As he describes it, "the Consummate Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing and welcoming nothing: responding but not storing. Thus he can handle all things without harm."<sup>141</sup> I believe we can still use our minds like a mirror, despite having a conception of self which Zhuangzi did not.

To do this, we should not form an attachment to the self, but instead see it as a construction, temporarily useful yet not inherent in us, able to form relative truths but without access to absolute truth. We must see that our will to power wells up within us, superseding any attempt at purely rational thought or action, placing responsibility firmly upon the non-unity which we are. We should instead try to live out our lives with minds like perfect mirrors, responding to the movements of the world but never

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<sup>141</sup> Zhuangzi 54.

attaching to anything beyond this movement. We must let the self be in our minds, but should not attach to it, should not let it become dust on the mirror. In this way, the truest self is the purely reflected self, appearing when appropriate but fading away as soon as its temporary truth has been expended, allowing us to return to no-self confidence, being at one with the world.

Moreover, we cannot let such an understanding draw us into believing we now understand the world, for on the contrary, such a construction only shows us that *we know nothing*.

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