

Zhuangzi's "Treatise On Making Things Equal"

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Introduction

Many contemporary commentators on the *Zhuangzi* believe that the second chapter, "The Treatise on Making Things Equal," represents the core of the text (particularly Sections 3-15 in the translation that appears here). I agree with that assessment. However, the second chapter is also perhaps the most difficult essay to understand in the entire early Chinese philosophical corpus, and no two interpreters agree on what it says.

A pivotal turn in our understanding of the "Treatise" was made in the late sixties when A.C. Graham, whose name we encountered earlier in connection with the Mohist logical canons, offered a remarkable new interpretation of the text based on what he had discovered in his research on Mohist philosophy of language. Graham realized that many of the passages in the "Treatise" constituted commentary on the types of linguistic and logical issues that were the focus of the Mohist canons. Not only did this begin to clarify Zhuangzi's ideas by revealing the technical nature of the language he employs in the "Treatise," but by alerting us to the commentarial style of the chapter, it also taught us that a number of sayings long attributed with Zhuangzi, such as "Heaven and earth are born together with me," were actually being cited by him for critical comment. Graham's translation completely revised our view of the "Treatise," and that is why Burton Watson's earlier translation is no longer adequate.

As we now read the chapter, its focus is on what Zhuangzi regarded as the arbitrary nature of linguistic acts of assertion, and the radical relativity that he applied to their analysis. Throughout the text, Zhuangzi critiques phrases such as "this is so" and "that's not" (in Chinese, they are each represented by a single word that may serve a variety of grammatical functions), which, he claims, lock us in to patterns of verbal behavior that come to shape our experience of the world. In the translation that follows, the critique of these patterns of assertion builds towards a final rejection of them in favor of the non-verbal alternative of "ordinary practice," a phrase we will discuss further, and whose ultimate meaning may only be fully comprehensible in terms of the third chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

The "Treatise" includes many difficult sections, and we will focus on these in class, but it also includes two of the most famous lyrical interludes in the *Zhuangzi*, the first and last sections. As you read the chapter, if certain sections do not make sense to you, put them aside for now and focus on those which do. Hopefully after our class session, the overall thrust of the chapter will have become clear. (The section titles in this translation do not appear in the Chinese text; they are added to help you keep track of the argument.)

TREATISE ON MAKING THINGS EQUAL

(*Qiwu lun* 齊物論)

Section 1: *Ziqi of South Wall; The pipes of heaven and earth.*

Ziqi of South Wall sat leaning upon his armrest. He looked up at the sky and sighed in a dazed manner, as though he had lost his double.

Yancheng Ziyu stood in attendance before him. “What is this?” he said. “Can one truly make one’s form like a withered tree. Can one truly make one’s mind like dead ashes? The man who is reclining here now is not the one who was reclining here before!”

Ziqi said, “Well may you ask such a question. Just now, I lost myself -- you understand? You may have heard the pipes of man but not the pipes of earth; you may have heard the pipes of earth but not the pipes of heaven.”

“May I inquire the method for this?”

Ziqi replied, “The Great Clod belches forth *qi*: it is called by the name Wind. It has no point of arising, but having arisen, the myriad hollows begin to howl. Have you never heard their long drawn cry?”

“The twistings of the mountain woods, the caverns of great trees a hundred spans round -- like nostrils, like mouths, like ears, like sockets, like bowls, like mortars, like gullies, like pools: rushing, shooting, roaring, sucking, shouting, moaning, chortling, wailing. The first gust cries out *hoooo*, the winds that follow cry out *ooooh*. A small harmony in a tinkling breeze becomes the grand chorus of a whirlwind.

“When the fierce wind is past all the hollows are left empty -- haven’t you noticed their trailing cries?”

Ziyu said, “By the pipes of earth you mean the hollows; by the pipes of man you mean the braces of bamboo flutes. May I inquire about the pipes of heaven?”

Ziqi replied, “They whistle through the myriads of different things and let each be like itself, each taking all that is appropriate to each -- but who is it who blows them?”

Section 2: *The withering of the heart.*

Great understanding is broad,
small understanding is picky.

Great words overflowing,
small words haggling.

Asleep the bodily soul goes roaming,

awake it opens through our form.
 Our day by day encounters
 become the wrangling of our hearts --
 overgrown, encaverned, dense.
 Small fear all startled,
 great fear spreading out.

“Shooting forth as from the trigger of a crossbow” --
 such are judgments, “that’s so, that’s not.”

“Kept like an oath or a treaty” --
 such is the way we hold fast to prevailing.

“Its death is as by autumn or winter” --
 describing its daily deterioration; what drowns it cannot revive it.

“It is engulfed as though sealed up” --
 describing its desiccation in age; the heart near death cannot be
 returned to *yang*.*

Pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, forethought, regret, change, stubbornness, ease and dissipation: these are like music emerging from air or mists congealing into mushrooms. Day and night they revolve before us and none knows whence they spring. Enough! Enough! It is the very coming of them, dawn and dusk, from which they are born.

Section 3: *The true self and its fate.*

“Without ‘other’ there is no ‘me’; without ‘me’ there is no reference point.” -- this certainly comes close to it, but we don’t yet know what brings ‘me’ about. It appears that there is something truly in control, but we just can’t find a trace of it. It can act itself out, true enough, but we cannot see its form -- it possesses a true nature but lacks form.

The hundred joints; the nine orifices, the six organs, all these are complete within -- which do we take as closest kin? Are you pleased with them all, or partial to one? Do they all take parts as servants and consorts? But they would be unable to

* *Yang* here denotes health. The underlying concept relates to the dualistic model of *yin* and *yang*, which comes to have a pervasive influence on Chinese cosmology. *Yin* and *yang* stand in for a string of dyadic relations based on polarities of dark/light, female/male, wet/dry, soft/hard, and so forth. *Yang* represents forces associated with male qualities, among which is youthful health, which the text draws on here.

rule one another in this way. Do they take turns acting as ruler and subject or is there one who abides as a true ruler? Though we may fail to seek out its true nature, that has no bearing on whether it truly is there or not.

Once we have received its completed form we can never lose awareness of it all the time we await its extinction. It grinds itself down against things and races towards its end at a gallop, none can stop it -- how sad!

To the end of its days it labors without ever seeing any accomplishment; all hemmed in, it labors to exhaustion without ever knowing where it shall return to in the end -- is this not sorrowful! Men call this immortality: what's the use of it? As the form changes so the heart changes with it: can this not be called great sorrow?

Is man's life inherently befuddled in this way, or is it I alone who am befuddled while there are others who are not?

Section 4: *The fully formed mind and judgment.*

As for following one's fully formed mind and taking it as a teacher -- who is without such a teacher? But why must one first understand alternatives? The mind can spontaneously select, and even the ignorant have such a mind.

That there should be judgments of "that's so; that's not" before alternatives are fully formed in the mind is akin to the old saying about "going to Yue today and arriving yesterday"* -- this is taking what is not for what is. To take what is not for what is: though one be the spirit-like Yu one could not understand this, and whatever could I make of it?

Section 5: *Daos and words.*

Pronounced sayings are not just puffs of wind -- sayings consist of things said -- it is only that what their words refer to has not been fixed. Do they really say anything? Have they never said anything? We think our speech is different from the chirping of baby birds, but is there a real distinction, or is there none?

How do *daos* come to be obscured, such that they are subject to judgments of "authentic" or "inauthentic?" How do spoken words come to be obscured, such that

* One of Hui Shi's paradoxes.

they are subject to judgments of “true” or “false?” How can a *dao* be walked and not really exist? How can words exist and be “unallowable?”**

It is that *daos* become obscured in minor perfections; words become obscured in flowery speech. Thus it is that you have Confucians and Mohists, each with their own “this is it” and “this is not.” What is “it” for the one is “not” for the other.

If you would affirm their denials and deny their affirmations, view them in the light.

Section 6: *On the relativity of assertion and denial.*

There is nothing that is not a “that”; there is nothing that is not a “this.” One cannot see oneself as a “that,” but if one knows oneself, one knows what it is to be an other. That is why it is said, “That arises from this, and this also relies on a that.” This is the explanation of how this and that are born in the same instant.

However, “The instant one is born one is dying” -- and the instant one dies one is being born; the instant we allow we prohibit; the instant we prohibit we allow; to rely on what we assert is to rely on what we deny; to rely on what we deny is to rely on what we assert.

So the sage does not proceed by this path. He lays all open to the light of heaven -- and yet saying this is also to assert a “this is so.”

Section 7: *Escaping relativity through the non-assertion.*

A this is a that; a that is a this. That implies one set of assertions and denials; this implies another set of assertions and denials. After all, is there this and that or, after all, is there no this and that? When neither this nor that possesses its double it is called the pivot of the Dao.

The pivot first grasps the center of the ring and thereby responds without end. Asserting “this” is one endlessness; denying it is another endlessness. That is why I say, “Nothing is better than opening to the light.”

Rather than use meaning to argue “the meaning is not the meaning,” use “not the meaning” to argue “the meaning is not the meaning.” Rather than use horse to

** “Allowable” and “unallowable” are technical terms of early Chinese philosophy of language. They indicate whether a verbal phrase possesses coherent meaning.

argue “a horse is not horse,” use “not horse” to argue “a horse is not horse.”* Heaven and earth are one meaning; the things of the world are one horse.

Section 8: *Dividing through assertion; uniting through practice.*

“Allowable” lies in allowing; “unallowable” lies in not allowing. A *dao* is created as we walk it; things become so as they are referred to. Wherein are they so? In being affirmed as so. Wherein are they not so? In being denied as so. Things inherently are in some way so, things inherently are in some way allowable. There is no thing that is not so, no thing that is not allowable.

We contrive an asserted “this is so” and distinguish a stalk from a pillar, a leper from the beauty Xi Shi. But with the grandness of the bizarre, the Dao comprehends them together as one.

When the one is divided, things are brought to completion, and in being brought to completion, the one is destroyed. When things are not subject to completion or destruction, they are once again comprehended as one. Only the man of attainment knows how to comprehend them as one. He asserts no “this is so.” His assertion is lodged in ordinary practice. Ordinary practice means use; use is comprehension; to comprehend is to grasp -- once you grasp it, you’re nearly there! Reliance on assertion ends, and when it ends and you do not even know it is so -- that is called *dao*.

Section 9: “*Three in the morning.*”

To wear out one’s spirit-like powers contriving some view of oneness without understanding that it is all the same is called “three in the morning.” What do I mean by “three in the morning?”

A monkey keeper was handing out nuts. “You get three in the morning and four in the evening,” he said. All the monkeys were furious. “All right,” he said. “You get four in the morning and three in the evening.” The monkeys were all delighted.

There was no discrepancy between the words and the reality yet contentment and anger were stirred thereby -- it is just thus with assertions of “this is so.”

* These are references to Logicians’ paradoxes.

Therefore, the sage brings all into harmony through assertion and denial but rests it upon the balance of heaven: this is called “walking a double path.”

Section 10: *Transcending perfection and imperfection.*

The knowledge of the ancients reached the limit. What was the limit? There were those who believed that no thing had yet begun to be. The limit! Exhausted! Nothing to add! The next believed there was something, but there had not yet begun to be boundaries. The next believed there were boundaries, but there had not yet begun to be an affirmable “this” or deniable “that.” It is in the patterns of affirmation and denial that the Dao becomes imperfect. The source of this imperfection is what brings to perfection attachment. But after all, is there perfection and imperfection or is there not?

Let us say that there is perfection and imperfection. This is like the master lute player Zhao Wen playing the lute.* Let us say that there is truly neither perfection nor imperfection. This would be like the master lute player Zhao not playing the lute. Zhao Wen playing the lute, Music Master Kuang beating the time, Hui Shi leaning on the wutong tree: the knowledge of these three men was close to perfection.** It flourished in them, and they bore their knowledge to the end of their days. Only, different from others in their love of their knowledge, from love of their knowledge came a wish to enlighten others. But they enlightened others by means of that which was not the means of enlightenment, and thus Hui Shi ended with the darkness of logical disputations, and in the case of Zhao Wen, in the end his own son was left with merely the strings of the lute. And so, in the end, these masters achieved no perfection after all. If what they achieved was perfection, then even I have perfection. And if such as they cannot be said to have achieved perfection, then neither have I nor has any thing.

Thus the Sage sees by the glimmer of chaos and doubt. He does not affirm of anything: “this is it”; his affirmation is lodged in ordinary practice. This is to view things in the light.

* We do not have any other information on Zhao Wen or his story.

** Music Master Kuang was a musician of Lu in Confucius’s time; Hui Shi (Huizi) was a famous logician and Zhuangzi’s friend.

Section 11: *An experiment in different levels of language.*

Now I am about to make a statement. I don't know whether it is in the same category as assertions that are so or not in the same category as assertions that are so. "Being in the same category" and "not being in the same category" both belong to a single category type, hence the statement is actually no different from its contrary.

Nevertheless, let me state it.

There is that which has begun; there is that which has not yet begun to begin; there is that which has not yet begun to begin to begin. There is that which is; there is that which is not; there is that which has not yet begun to be that which is not; there is that which has not yet begun to begin to be that which is not. Suddenly, there is that which is not, but I don't yet know whether being that which is not is being or not being.

Now I have said something, but I don't yet know whether what I have said has actually said anything or whether it has actually not said anything.

Section 12: *Critique of the monistic paradoxes.**

"Nothing in the world is bigger than the tip of a strand of hair sprouting in autumn, and Mount Tai is small."

"None is longer lived than one who dies as a baby, and Pengzu died young."

"Heaven and earth were born together with me and the ten thousand things of the world and I are one."

Now that we are all one, can I still say anything? Now that I have called us all one, can I have not said anything? One plus speech is two; two plus one is three. If we proceed on from this even an expert calculator can not reach the end of it, how much less a common man?

Hence we can go from nothing to something and then to three; how much further may we go if we start by going from something to something?

Do not take this step -- the reliance on an asserted "this is so" will come to an end.

* A number of the paradoxes that appear in this section are attributed elsewhere to Hui Shi.

Section 13: *The limits of speech.*

The Dao has never begun to possess boundaries and words have never yet begun to possess constancy. Once a “this is so” has been contrived there are boundaries.

Let me name these boundaries. There is recording and there is not recording; there is discussing and there is judging; there is distinguishing and there is debate; there is competing and there is wrangling. These are called the eight virtues. What lies beyond the realm of the six directions, the sage records but does not discuss. What lies within the realm of the six directions the sage discusses but does not judge. The spring and autumn chronicles of the records of the former kings the sage judges but does not debate.

Section 14: *Escaping the infinite regress of adjudication.*

Now let’s say that you and I debate. If you prevail over me and I do not prevail over you, does that mean that what you say is so and what I say is not? If I prevail over you and you do not prevail over me, does that mean that what I say is so and what you say is not? Or is it that one of us is right and one of us wrong? Or are both of us right or both of us wrong? If you and I are both unable to know, then others will become muddled as we are.

Whom shall we call upon to put it right? Shall we call upon one who agrees with you? But if he agrees with you, how can he put it right? Shall we call upon one who agrees with me? But if he agrees with me, how can he put it right? Shall we call upon one who differs with both you and me? But if he differs with both you and me, how can he put it right? Shall we call upon one who agrees with both you and me? But if he agrees with both you and me, how can he put it right?

Thus you and I and these others all cannot know -- shall we await yet another? Harmonize all of these by the horizon of heaven. Relying on it to stretch forward is the way to live out your full lifespan; forgetting the years, forgetting all judgments, stirring within the boundless.

What do I mean by the horizon of heaven? It is to say, assert what is not true; affirm what is not so. Were what is true so different from what is false, there would be no arguments; were what is so that different from what is not, there would be no arguments. The mutual dependence of shifting voices is the same as if they were not mutually dependent.

Therefore lodge all this in the boundless.

Section 15: *The non-verbal Storehouse of Heaven.*

Hence amidst distinctions there is that which is not distinguished; among that which may be debated there is that which is not debated. Why? What the sages cherish the mass of men debate over to show off to each other. Thus it is said, “Those who debate do not see.”

The great Dao is not named; great debate is not spoken; great ren is not *ren*; great honesty is not modest; great valor is not aggressive. When the Dao shines bright none follow it; when words are precise they fail to convey; when ren is constant it is imperfect; when honesty is pure it is not trusted; when valor is aggressive it does not prevail. These five are round yet almost match the square.

Hence when one knows to dwell within what one does not know, one reaches the limit. Who understands the debate without words, the Dao that is not uttered? If there is one who can have such understanding, it may be known as the Storehouse of Heaven. Pour into it and it is never full; pour out from it and it is never exhausted -- yet who knows where it comes from? This is called preserving the brilliance.

Section 16: *Yao and Shun: the power of light.*

Yao once asked Shun, “I wish to punish the states of Zong, Kuai, and Xu’ao, as I sit uneasy on my throne. What is the cause of this?”

“These three rulers,” Shun replied, “are still living in the midst of brambles. Why should they make you uneasy? Of old, ten suns rose together and the things of the world were all illuminated. How much more true of virtue that approaches the brilliance of the sun?”

Section 17: *Nie Que and Wang Ni: going beyond species understanding.*

Nie Que asked Wang Ni, “Do you know of something that all agree in affirming?”

“How would I know that?” replied Wang Ni.

“Do you know what you do not know?”

“How would I know that?” replied Wang Ni.

“Then do you know nothing?”

“How would I know that?” replied Wang Ni. “Nevertheless, let me state this. How do I know that what I term knowledge is not in fact ignorance? How do I know that what I term ignorance is not in fact knowledge?”

“Moreover, let me ask this of you. When a man sleeps in the damp, his waist pains him and one side loses all sensation. Is that so of the loach? When he dwells in a tree he trembles in terror. Is that so of the ape? Which of these three knows the proper place to dwell? Men eat grain-fed beasts; deer eat grasses; centipedes relish snakes; owls and crows have a taste for mice. Which of these four has the proper sense of taste? Apes mate with other monkeys, deer couple with deer, loaches roam alongside fish. Lady Li and Lady Mao were beauties in the eyes of men, but when fish saw them they swam down to the depths, when birds saw them they flew high, when deer saw them they bolted away at a gallop. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world?”

“As I see things, the sprouts of ren and righteousness, the paths of what is so and what is not, are all hopelessly confused. How could I know the distinctions between them?”

Nie Que said, “If you do not know benefit from harm, then the True Man surely does not know benefit from harm!”

“The True Man is spirit-like,” said Wang Ni. “Were the great lakes to burn he would not feel the heat; were the Yellow River and the River Han to freeze he would not feel the cold. Were terrific thunder to rend the mountains and whirlwinds stir up the seas he would not be startled. One like this would ride the *qi* of the clouds as his carriage and mount the sun and moon. He would wander beyond the four seas. Death, life: these would make no change in him -- how much less the sprouts of benefit and harm!”

Section 18: *Ququezi and Changwuzi: the sagely conundrum.*

Ququezi inquired of Changwuzi saying, “I have heard it from the Master that he regarded as wild and excessive teachings that hold that the sage does not strive towards any goal, does not pursue benefit or evade harm, takes no pleasure in seeking for things and does not stick to the Dao; that when he is silent he is speaking and when he is speaking he is silent, and that he roams beyond the world of dust. But I regard these as the practice of the marvelous Dao. What do you think, sir?”

Changwuzi replied, “Such teachings would have confounded even the Yellow Emperor; how could Qiu ever understand them!”* And you are making your own plans far too early -- at the sight of a hen’s egg you’re waiting for cock crow, at the sight of a pellet of shot you’re expecting roast pheasant.

“Now I’m going to speak some wild words to you; listen to them wildly, too.

Why not lean on the sun and moon,
 with time and space tucked under your arm?
 Make a perfect fit
 by setting up random disorder.
 Honoring one another as slaves
 the mass of men are ever laboring.
 The sage is ignorant and dumb,
 the match of ten thousand years, a simple lump.
 Thus it is with all things of the world,
 and thereby are they generated.

“How do I know that delight in life is not a confusion? How do I know that in hating death we are not little ones who have lost our way home? Lady Li was the daughter of a border officer of Ai. She was first taken as a mate for the ruler of Jin, her tears coursed down upon her garments. But once she reached the king’s palace, shared the bed of the king’s chamber, and eaten the meat of grain-fed beasts, she repented of her tears. How do I know that the dead do not repent of their former prayers for life?

“He who dreams of drinking wine weeps when he awakes; he who dreams that he is weeping is off to the hunt at dawn. When he dreamt he did not know it was a dream, and in his dream he may even divine about a dream he dreams he dreamt; only waking will he know it was a dream.

“There will come a great awakening and only then shall we know the great dream that all this is. Yet the ignorant are sure that they’re awake, sure as sure can be! This one’s a ruler, that one’s a shepherd -- they’re absolutely certain of it!

“Qiu and you, you’re just dreams, and my telling you that you’re a dream is a dream too. This teaching he told you about is called a conundrum. If one sage in ten thousand generations understands it, it’s like encountering him in the space of a day.”

* This refers to “the Master.” It is Confucius’s personal name. Use of it here implies great disrespect, by the author as much as by Changwuzi.

Section 19: *Penumbra and shadow.*

The penumbra questioned the shadow. “Just now you were moving, now you’ve stopped. Just now you were sitting, now you’re up. How is it you’ve no settled control?”

The shadow answered, “Is it because there is something upon which I depend, or that what I depend on has something upon which it depends too? Am I dependent on a snake’s sloughed skin or a locust’s tossed away wings? How can I tell why I am as I am? How can I tell why I’m not as I’m not?”

Section 20: *The butterfly dream.*

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting gaily.* He knew nothing of Zhou. Suddenly, he awoke, and all at once he was Zhou. But he didn’t know whether Zhou had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly was dreaming he was Zhou! Surely there is a difference between Zhou and a butterfly -- this is what we call the transformation of things.

* Zhou was Zhuangzi’s personal name. The text adds at this point, “Was he conveying to himself his own wishes?” This is almost certainly a later commentary insertion.