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**Habitual Awakenings:
Resurrecting the Importance of Habitual Experience via William James and
Zhuangzi**

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James describes the pervasive influence of habit over the stream of consciousness. James' explanation illustrates the true depth of habitual experience, highlighting the range of habit's effects, which extend from rote and mechanical action to perception and willing. Ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, like James, recognizes the importance of daily habitual and skillful activities. Zhuangzi's comments on skill, which are presented in the form of stories, are always paired with a critique of language. While Zhuangzi himself uses language creatively to circumvent the problem of language, insinuating that language may be able to be used in a skillful way, he ultimately wants to claim that skills are ineffable. Habit and skill are difficult to talk about because they are intimately linked to everything one does. This intimacy is a result of habit's pervasiveness; its ubiquitousness makes it disappear. The project of this thesis is to make habit reappear, to reinstate its importance and influence. James and Zhuangzi provide a stable foundation for establishing habit's importance because both thinkers view our daily, habitual and skillful actions as the key to navigating life well. Both thinkers broaden the scope of experience, illustrating that the true depth of consciousness can only be illustrated when we pay attention to what is closest to us, when we investigate the effects of our habitual and skillful actions.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. William James: Habit Volition and Perception.....	12
Habit and the Brain.....	12
Habit and the Will.....	18
Habits of Attention: Active Perception.....	26
II. Zhuangzi: Habitual Language.....	32
The Story of the Wheelwright.....	36
Zhuangzi and the Dao.....	39
The Tale of Cook Ding.....	43
Zhuangzi and Plato: Skillful Language.....	47
III. Language, Pure Experience and the Dao.....	53
Bibliography.....	62

Introduction

In his extensive work entitled *The Principles of Psychology*, William James describes humans as “mere walking bundles of habits.”¹ Habits are pervasive, influencing every aspect of experience. James’ explanation of habit disproves theories that define habit as irrational, rote, mechanical or animal. Instead, his theories illustrate the true depth of habitual experience, highlighting the range of habit’s influence and effect. The Ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, like James, recognizes the importance of daily habitual and skillful activities. While James provides a psychological account of habit, Zhuangzi approaches the topic through allegory, suggesting, in several stories, that habitually formed skills can help us to understand the Dao, or the undercurrent of flowing energy that Daoist thinkers like Zhuangzi believe exists as the heavenly force of nature. Zhuangzi’s comments about skill often include a critique of language, asserting that it is impossible to capture the nuance of a skill with the coarse hands of language. James also acknowledges the incompatibility of habit with language. Habit is difficult to talk about because it is intimately linked to everything we do. This intimacy is a result of habit’s pervasiveness throughout experience. Because everything we do is touched by habits steady force, we often fail to notice the profound effects that habit, in fact, has over our lives. Its ubiquitousness makes it disappear. The project of this thesis is to make habit reappear, to reinstate its importance and influence.

This thesis is a reaction against thinkers who, instead of recognizing the importance of habit, place emphasis on rare moments of epiphany and realization. A pervasive example of this emphasis on rupture appears in the writings of Martin

¹ James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Volume I. New York: Dover, 1950. p. 127.

Heidegger. Heidegger's writings have had an extraordinary influence over the history of twentieth century thought, causing the echoes of rupture to reverberate through the theories of many modern philosophers.² Heidegger places emphasis on rare moments of epiphany and realization, instead of the dull and regular experiences that comprise the majority of our lives. For him, the moments of habit's rupture are the locus of importance. I argue, instead, that habit is an important element of our lives that deserves more attention in philosophical discourse. The majority of our daily experiences are regulated by habit's steady force. These daily experiences, normally invisible to us, account for the majority of what we do. In this project, I will examine the habitual parts of experience that normally recede into the background of consciousnesses.

Heidegger and Rupture

This project was precipitated by encountering philosophies that privilege *epoche*, rupture, breakage, and moments of shock. Heidegger is guilty of this prioritization of rupture over the everyday. For him, ontological significance is signified not in our everyday dealings with the world but in the rupture of them.

² Immanuel Levinas is a paradigmatic example of a twentieth century thinker who responds to and reacts against Heidegger's notion of rupture. Levinas' own thoughts prioritize rupture as the locus of ontological insight. At the same time, Levinas explicitly argues against Heidegger's disdain for the everyday. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas responds to Heidegger's echoes when he states: "But in the ontological adventure the world is an episode which, far from deserving to be called a fall, has its own equilibrium, harmony and positive ontological function: the possibility of extracting oneself from anonymous being. At the very moment when the world seems to break up we still take it seriously and still perform reasonable acts and undertakings; the condemned man still drinks his glass of rum. To call it everyday and condemn it as inauthentic is to fail to recognize the sincerity of hunger and thirst." (Levinas, Emanuel. *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1978, p.37) Levinas defines the world as a place where we can become caught up in our everyday actions, ignoring the lingering call of being. For Levinas, the world is the realm in which habit can exist. Despite this interpretation of the world as a realm that seems to lack potential for ontological insight, Levinas nonetheless inserts a place of importance into the "world." Contra Heidegger, Levinas suggests that there is an authenticity that exists within our everydayness. In the world of light, ontological significance remains.

Martin Heidegger's famous example of a broken hammer from *Being and Time* is a paradigmatic example of the need to break from habit in order to experience something of ontological significance. For Heidegger, the "ready-to-hand,"³ or things that we use as equipment or tools, are defined by the purpose or use that we have for them. When we are absorbed with the ready-to-hand, as when we are in the process of building a table and are using a hammer and nails to attach the legs to the base, we are unaware of the world that surrounds us. Habitual activity blinds us to our surroundings. It is only when the hammer breaks that the world lights up around us. When the hammer breaks, we stop hammering, put down our equipment and are forced to re-evaluate our environment. Our habitual activity having been interrupted, we must re-inspect our surroundings in order to look for a new means of completing our task. Instead of only regarding the hammer in its usefulness, we see the entire room, the relations of all aspects in our work space and our world. As Heidegger says: "The environment announces itself afresh."⁴ The ready-to-hand, and the habitual activity associated with it, are insufficient in portraying the worldly character of the world. In order for this glimmer of ontological understanding to unveil itself, we must have a break in our habitual hammering. Rupture opens up a new realm of ontological understanding that habitual experience is never capable of revealing.

Heidegger's later work, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, also exemplifies the prioritization of rupture. In this book, Heidegger famously invokes the example of a Van Gogh painting. This painting, which depicts "a pair of peasant shoes and nothing more,"⁵

³ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 99.

⁴ Heidegger 105

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001. p. 33

opens up a narrative for Heidegger, a window into the life of the woman who would have worn these shoes. It is only when the shoes are displayed in a painting that their being comes forth. While simply viewing a pair of shoes as equipment would not invoke any insight into their being, something in the painting speaks and allows Heidegger to see the story that surrounds the shoes. Using a piece of equipment, as the peasant woman uses her shoes, could never reveal the story, the being, of her foot coverings.⁶ The peasant woman does not pause to take account of her equipment, but goes about her day as if her shoes were an extension of her natural feet. In the painting, the shoes are no longer concealed in the cloak of their everyday use, but are represented in such a way that their true nature can be unveiled. The painting isolates the shoes, takes them away from their owner, their everyday use, and “sets them up”⁷ in such a way that a new truth can be revealed. For Heidegger, the truth of the Van Gogh painting is manifested in the story of the peasant woman. The painting’s truth can only be found after the shoes have been taken out of their everyday use and portrayed in a painting. The actual daily life of the shoes, and the labor of the fictitious woman who wears them, is of little importance. It is only when the relationship of the shoes to their labor is ruptured that Heidegger finds any significance in them.⁸

Heidegger’s focus rests on the rupture of our habitual relationships with objects in the world. A portrait of a pair of shoes operates in a similar way to a broken hammer.

⁶ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” 33

⁷ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” 35

⁸ Heidegger’s account of the Van Gogh painting implies that art, in many ways, takes the form of a rupture. While in many ways artwork does function as a rupture, taking us out of our daily existence, it is worth asking if artwork must always function in this way. Does art necessarily involve a break with our day to day experiences? Is this rupture only on the part of the viewer? Can the creation of artwork be without a rupture, comprising, for the artist, a non-interruptive experience of daily activity?

They both light up a world that was otherwise closed off. While Heidegger's examples may seem largely to have to do with equipment rather than with habitual activity, his focus is not actually on these objects but on our relationship with them. The way that we use a hammer or a pair of shoes defines whether or not they are capable of manifesting a world. Ultimately, for Heidegger, the best way to light up a world is to take things out of their daily and habitual use and to place them into a use-less context, whether that be a work of art or a wastebasket full of broken tools.

A tendency towards rupture is not only manifested in the thoughts and writings of Martin Heidegger, but is also manifested in the attitude of contemporary society. In his book, *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell claims that the modern individual leaves home in search of authenticity, that it is the mark of the modern individual to discount the authenticity of one's everyday life and to search for the genuine in some other place and some other time. For him, travel and the search for authenticity in tourist destinations is prototypical of modern society, placing travel and leisure at the height of modern consciousness. Travel is an escape from the monotonous work-a-day world, something to be looked forward to and sought out- something to work for. For MacCannell, authenticity is not found in the day-to-day lives of modern individuals. Instead, the truly authentic exists in another place and another time.

The displacement of the authentic is what MacCannell calls the "dialectics of authenticity."⁹ In this dialectic, the modern individual is driven further and further away from his domestic, work-a-day life in search of authentic society. While reminders of authenticity are always present in everyday life, appearing in the form of souvenirs,

⁹ MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999. p. 145.

photographs and wall-calendars, the genuine is always held at arms length, never fully attainable: “Pretension and tackiness generate the belief that somewhere, only not right here, not right now, perhaps just over there someplace, in another country, in another life-style, in another social class, perhaps, there is genuine society.”¹⁰ Reality is always elsewhere and can only be found in another, more genuine, way of living.

For MacCannell, the search for authenticity is extensive and must be so because a true tourist attraction or cultural experience is rare. The experienced traveler comes closest to understanding what authenticity is because she spends most of her time away from home, away from what is not authentic and in search of what is.

Similarly, the position of the person who stays at home in the modern world is morally inferior to that of a person who “gets out” often. Vicarious travel is freely permitted only to children and old folks. Anyone else may feel a need to justify saving picture postcards and filling scrapbooks with these and other souvenirs of sights he has not seen. Authentic experiences are believed to be available only to those moderns who try to break the bonds of their everyday existence and begin to “live.”¹¹

In MacCannell’s analysis, “life” begins away from the home and everyday life. In other words, it must be sought. Thus, even our most intimate experiences become suspect. The time spent with spouses, childhood memories and family gatherings lack the stamp of authenticity. If we want to attend a “true” family dinner, we should travel to Italy and enjoy a homemade dinner cooked by someone else’s Nonna, not spend time in our own kitchens with our own families. Domestic experiences can never be as authentic as the domestic experiences of another time and another place. As MacCannell puts it: “The

¹⁰ MacCannell 155

¹¹ MacCannell 159

dialectics of authenticity insure the alienation of modern man even within his domestic contexts.”¹²

The implications of MacCannell’s argument, that the modern individual can never be authentic, even within his own home, his own daily existence, his own habitual world, illustrates the lengths we go to in order to evade our daily experiences. For the modern individual, the problem is not just that she ignores her daily experiences but also that she attempts to escape from them. Much like Heidegger, modern man harbors a disdain for everydayness. Daily and habitual experiences, which occupy the majority of our time, are something to be escaped and fled. Thus, the modern individual’s emphasis cannot be on these daily, habitual experiences, but instead on the rupture of daily life. The significance of common, mindless, daily experiences cannot compare to the excitement of travel.¹³

While MacCannell’s notion of rupture is specific, focusing on tourism and travel, his analysis ultimately highlights the emphasis that is placed on moments which are out of the ordinary, which are a distraction from daily activity. Focus is placed on the exception, not on the rule. While all of these claims may be true- we may need our hammer to break in order to re-evaluate our workshop or we may need to go on vacation to find an authentic experience- this emphasis on rupture fails to recognize the richness of everyday experiences in the world. It fails to acknowledge a large part of experience, ignoring what we do every day in favor of what is perceived as more exciting.

¹² MacCannell 160

¹³ MacCannell’s observations about modern man and his desire to escape his work-a-day world have deep social, political and economic roots which, while significant, are not the focus of this paper. While I will not fully consider these implications here, I do wish to acknowledge the impact that certain socio-economic contexts might have on one’s relationship to his or her labor. Whether an individual is in fact alienated from his work, whether or not he enjoys it or is forced into it, is of significance in relationship to the habits that we inevitably form to support and the jobs we work day to day.

In this project I will focus on two seemingly different thinkers who are united in their belief in the importance of habit, skill and everyday action. While twentieth century American philosopher William James and ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi may seem an unlikely pair in the history of philosophy, both thinkers share a common view on the importance of habitual, daily action as a means of better navigating the world that we live in. Navigation is a good metaphor, perhaps, for James, who sees habits as neural pathways, or brain currents, that experience carves deeper and deeper into our brains as we repeat habitual action. The key is to navigate through life well, to exercise the will, so that these currents do not take us along mindlessly into dangerous territory. For Zhuangzi, the practice of a skill is a metaphor for sagely behavior, for living wisely in accordance with the Dao. To become embedded in a daily activity, to practice the skill and to habituate to it, is a model for how we all should live our lives. These two thinkers, unlike many in the tradition of philosophy, come together around the idea that habit, instead of blinding us to our environment and to virtue, is essential in understanding the best way to live.

I begin by tracing James' theory of habit, which he claims influences not only simple, daily and common tasks, but also affects the intellect, the will and the attention. James illustrates that the majority of action occurs automatically, without the interference of conscious volition. Habit is responsible for these automatic actions, automating a large portion of daily activity. Knowing that habit in fact influences not only rote and mechanical actions but also the faculties of willing and perception is a compelling reason to take a closer look at this otherwise ignored aspect of consciousness. If the majority of our actions are in fact unconscious, then we must investigate the force and effects of habit

in order to better understand the actions that we commit day to day. The nature of habit requires us to re-evaluate the way that we analyze and understand action and volition.

Zhuangzi also asks us to attempt to understand a part of experience, like habit, that we might otherwise ignore. For him, what we often fail to notice is the Dao, or the heavenly force that underlies nature. Zhuangzi suggests the practice of a skill as a method for tapping into the Dao. Skill, which relies on habit for its cultivation and perfection, allows the craftsman to react spontaneously to the particularities of his environment. This spontaneous action, which is not the same as habit, responds to the world and to the Dao which underlies it. Skill and habit, while not the same, are related. While habit operates unconsciously, skill requires an active attention to one's activity. While skill might appear to be of a higher order than the automating effects of habit, one must rely on habit if one wants to increase proficiency in any skill. Without habit it would be impossible to become skillful in anything.

Zhuangzi's comments on skill, which are presented in the form of stories, are always paired with a critique of language. His skillfully written stories highlight the tenuous relationship that language has with habit and skill, asserting that words are incapable of fully portraying the richness of the Dao. While Zhuangzi himself uses language creatively to circumvent the problem of language, insinuating that language may be able to be used in a skillful way, he ultimately wants to claim that skills are ineffable because language only deals with aspects of experience that we actively notice. Skill, which is powered by habits, is difficult to capture in language because language can only express the parts of experience that we all share and name. Since habits and skill recede into the background of consciousness, silently operating, they evade the bounds of

language. Neglected parts of experience, like habit and skill, are often missed because they are closest to us; we fail to see them because they are so ordinary. Unlike experiences of rupture, which stand out in our memories, our habitual or skillful actions recede into the background, all the while playing a huge part in how we view and act in the world.

Both James and Zhuangzi highlight the aspects of experience that otherwise fade into the background. Habit and the Dao both evade our consciousness. The goal, then, is to attempt to connect with what we often fail to see. We don't need a rupture to reveal the missing. Instead, we simply need to pay more attention to the things we do everyday. We don't need our hammer to break in order to better understand our workshop. We just need to be mindful of the particularities of our experience and our habitual actions, so that we can respond to the world in all of its particularities. Only through a closer look at habit are we truly able to see the entire spectrum of human experience. An investigation of habit allows us to tap into a full picture of life.

The importance of an analysis of habit, then, lies in its connection to the otherwise overlooked aspects of our experience. When we take a closer look at the phenomenon of habit, we have a fuller picture of experience than if we only see the moments of rupture. Looking only at ruptive moments is like looking at stills of a cartoon. The stills may depict the exciting parts of the story, the climax or the happy conclusion. However, these images can never depict the full narrative, the motion of the characters, their sadness's or their triumphs. Looking at these isolated moments, like looking at the pictures of tourist destinations or a picture of a broken hammer, can give us some insight into the full story, but it will always miss the full richness of the stills in motion, flowing into one another,

creating a complete story that acknowledges the richness of experience. An investigation of habit allows for a more flowing picture of experience by calling attention to a complete narrative of experience rather than focusing only on moments of rupture. Focusing only on rupture leaves us with a half told story which is comprised of the aspects of experience that stand out most strongly in memory. This investigation of habit intends to broaden the scope of experience, illustrating that the true depth of consciousness is much richer than a philosophy that prioritizes rupture is capable of providing.

Section 1

William James: Habit, Volition and Perception

William James is famous for his pragmatism, for believing that truth lies in what works and for emphasizing the importance of our everyday actions. In his chapter on habit in *The Principles of Psychology*, he makes a point of illustrating that the majority of our lives are controlled by habit. While we may like to think that we have an active control over all of the activities that we commit, the truth is that we go through life with the lights off, automatically following the path that habit has set. James is careful to assert that we are not complete automatons, not completely subject to the currents of our brains. We are capable of controlling habit through the power of our will. However, the majority of our actions are not motivated by a conscious effort. Instead, they flow along the paths that practice has worn over time. James's psychological observation that our habits in fact guide the majority of our actions ultimately brings Heidegger's prioritization of rapture into question. If raptures are all that we pay attention to, if moments of insight are the only aspects of experience that we deem important, then we are missing ninety nine percent of what we actually do. By focusing on rapture, we miss the fullness of everyday experiences and the true richness of life. While James' project may have been to simply illustrate the way that habit functions on a neural level, he ultimately reveals an aspect of experience that is otherwise ignored and forgotten. He reveals that habit infests the majority of our actions.

Habit and the Brain

The word “habit” most often calls to mind activities that one accomplishes with little thought or care. One thinks of brushing one’s teeth, driving while having a conversation with a friend, or succeeding in not stubbing one’s toes when walking around in the dark. Habit is often thought of as confined to the movements of the body- as only capable of influencing simple, everyday and common actions. James, however, recognizes that habit has effects that go beyond simple motor activity and, in fact, influences thinking and willing. For James, the effects of habit reach into many different realms of activity and ultimately play a large role in shaping the world in which one lives. In short, habit guides what one does, what one sees, and how one sees it.

James begins his explanation of habit by examining how it works on a neural level. Habits are nothing more than neural pathways that become strengthened through repeated use. James explicitly lays out his thesis when he states:

An acquired habit, from the psychological point of view, is nothing but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain, by which certain incoming currents ever after tend to escape.¹⁴

Each time a person commits a new action, a new neural pathway is created. With every repetition of the action the neural pathway deepens, making it easier and easier to complete the action. Eventually, the neural pathway becomes so deep that the action associated with it occurs with little effort- habitual action occurs almost automatically. Just as a stream cuts grooves deeper and deeper into the riverbed along which it runs, our actions cut grooves deep into our brains, allowing the current of activity to flow without resistance.

¹⁴ James, William. *The Writings of William James*. Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 9.

This law of neural activity is not confined to bodily actions but extends to other human functions. As James states:

And we shall see in the later and more psychological chapters that such functions as the association of ideas, perception, memory, reasoning, the education of the will, etc., etc., can best be understood as results of the formation de novo of just such pathways of discharge.¹⁵

While James' initial discussions of habit center around examples of simple motor-activities like learning to ride a bike, learning to swim, brushing one's teeth and getting dressed in the morning, the basic premise of habit, that "our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised,"¹⁶ extends to other aspects of experience such as memory, reason and willing. Habit, for James, impacts all human activity. It is the basis for and the driving force behind the entirety of human action.

Habit is so essential because it allows the majority of our tasks to be automated, freeing up attention for more important matters. If habits were never formed, simple and everyday tasks would take up all available psychic and physical energy. Making coffee in the morning might take an entire day's worth of effort. Once these daily and repeated activities become automated by habit, one no longer has to focus all of one's energy on them. The effect of automation allows one to pursue other, perhaps new or more mentally taxing aspects of the day, freeing the mind and attention to tackle the more challenging aspects of life, such as work, relationships and hobbies. These more important tasks are the ones that cannot be easily automated because of their fluid and changing nature. Their complexity and novelty demands a level of attention that habit alone is incapable of providing.

¹⁵ James 9

¹⁶ James, William. *Principles of Psychology*. Volume I. New York: Dover, 1950. p. 112

However, for James, the majority of action is automated by habit and occurs with little conscious effort. As adults, when we notice that our shoe is untied, we simply bend down and tie our shoes. However, this activity was not initially so simple. Children are taught the saying “over under around and through” as a method of learning to tie a knot, providing them with a pneumonic device that helps them to remember each step. Without habit, even as adults, one would have to say to oneself “over under around and through” each time one tied one’s shoes. The process of tying would never become automatic. The ability to automate tasks is one of the practical benefits of habit.

James enumerates two specific benefits of habit, one that benefits the physical body and another that benefits the psychic or spiritual energies. The first benefit has to do with the amount of physical, bodily energy one exerts when completing an activity. James explains this benefit as follows: “habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue”¹⁷ James cites G. H. Schneider, who provides the example of someone learning to play the piano.¹⁸ For this novice, each stroke of a piano key involves not only the movement of a single finger, but the movement of the entire hand, forearm and other parts of the body. When he is concentrating on a new movement, he focuses all of his energy on that single movement, unconsciously involving parts of the body that are unnecessary for carrying out the new action. However, when the student has learned to play the piano, he no longer moves his entire body but instead confines the movement to his finger alone. By limiting the motion to his finger, the habitual piano player exerts much less energy than the novice. Without the aid of habit, each and every action would require intense concentration and

¹⁷ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 112

¹⁸ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 113

the involvement of unnecessary parts of the body. In short, the simplest task would be exhausting. As James states: “If practice did not make perfect, nor habit economize the expense of nervous and muscular energy, he [the piano player] would therefore be in a sorry plight.”¹⁹ Without the assistance of habit to automate basic actions, doing something as simple as getting dressed or brushing one’s teeth might require an entire day’s worth of effort.

The second practical benefit of habit is that it reduces, along with physical exertion, the psychic or spiritual energy required to complete a task. As James puts it: “habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed.”²⁰ In the case of habit, a single cue is required to complete a whole series of actions. Instead of having to think through each step of an action and put forth a new surge of effort for each of these steps, the habitual action follows from a single cue.

When we are learning to walk, to ride, to swim, skate, fence, write, play, or sing, we interrupt ourselves at every step by unnecessary movements and false notes. When we are proficient, on the contrary, the results not only follow with the very minimum of muscular action requisite to bring them forth, they also follow from a single instantaneous ‘cue.’²¹

The first time that one plays a song on the piano, one must concentrate on pressing each key in the right order and in the right tempo. Each note is seen individually and one must attend to each and every one with the same amount of concentration. Once the song is learned, all one has to do is to issue the cue “play twinkle twinkle little star” and the entire song, all of its formerly separate and tedious notes, will follow forth automatically.

¹⁹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 113

²⁰ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 114

²¹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 114

Habit allows one to commit more actions with greater accuracy because one is not forced to think deliberately through each and every step of a task. One is freed from the burden of having to pay close attention to the mundane and daily activities, enabling one to shift focus to matters that have not yet become habitual.

Purely habitual activities require no help or interference from conscious thought, language, or ideas. In fact, thoughts or ideas can interfere with and hinder the progress of habits. If one attempts to remember the particulars of getting dressed in the morning or cooking breakfast, one often find oneself incapable of recalling the details of one's movements. The body knows and completes these activities with no hesitation or trouble. However, when asked to think about or verbalize them, one comes up empty handed. Thinking only gets in the way. As James puts it: "our higher thought-centers know hardly anything about the matter."²² He goes on to say:

Few men can tell off-hand which sock, shoe, or trousers-leg they put on first. They must first mentally rehearse the act; and even that is often insufficient- the act must be performed. So of the questions, Which valve of my double door opens first? Which way does my door swing? etc. I cannot *tell* the answer; yet my hand never makes a mistake. No one can *describe* the order in which he brushes his hair or teeth; yet it is likely that the order is a pretty fixed one in all of us.²³

What the body knows cannot be communicated. Habitual knowledge is powered by sensation, not ideas or words. James asserts that our bodies cannot communicate our actions to our own minds. One cannot recall and name all of the small things that one does every day. As James asserts, we cannot "tell" or "describe" the order in which we

²² James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 115

²³ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 115

get dressed and brush our teeth. Habit automates these activities, removing them from the realm of conscious thought.

Habits are powered by sensation, automating most activities and allowing one to go through life with a certain amount of thoughtless ease. For James, voluntary life is a secondary phenomenon. Habitual actions account for the majority of one's life. However, life is not completely run by habits; we are not mere automatons. James develops the relationship between habits, which are largely powered by sensation, and willing, which is "guided by idea, perception and volition throughout its whole course,"²⁴ in his chapter on the Will. Habit and the will are intimately tied up with one another. Willing allows us to control our habits, saving us from the plight of helpless passivity, predestination and automatism. The relationship between habit and the will provides the individual with a power over her circumstances, allows her to shape her activities and the person she ultimately hopes to become.

Habit and the Will

Habits, otherwise ignored and devalued by philosophers like Heidegger, in fact comprise the majority of everyday action. Habits are guided by willing, are formed by voluntary action and are a result of effort and attention. Unlike habit, which one can comprehend biologically, James claims that the will is shaped by an inexplicable mysterious force. While this force may be of spiritual nature, there is some sense that it could be explained if only we had a more advanced knowledge of the brain. This is because the will seems to follow the same laws as habit. Power of will can be strengthened and developed through practice, through repeated exertion of effort. While

²⁴ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 115

on the one hand the will is what controls habit, it also seems to be under habit's spell. Thus James' assertion that habits control the majority of what we do, whether they control the way we brush our teeth or the way that we make decisions, takes on a deeper significance. While habits might, at first glance, appear only to reside in rote and mechanical actions, they, in fact, also reside in what is traditionally considered our "higher faculties." James' account of habit and the will reveals that the realm of volition, which is popularly thought to be of a more sophisticated order than the realm of habitual action, is in fact subject to habit's laws. Habit not only regulates simple activities, but also controls the faculty of volition.

The will is at once capable of exerting power over habit and subject to habit's forces. In his chapter on the "Will," James describes how we exert control over passive habits, how we create the people we become. He explains how we come to exercise volition over the ever-flowing stream that comprises consciousness. For James, the exercise of volition is a special case within human experience because, the majority of the time, actions and thoughts are dictated not by a voluntary will but by habit, which functions without conscious deliberation. Most of one's actions occur somewhat automatically.

Effort and attention, the essential functions of the will, comprise the aspect of consciousness that one is able to control. As was pointed out in the discussion of habit, James believes that, for the most part, actions occur with little deliberation or effort. Using the example of how we manage to get out of a warm and comfortable bed in the morning, James describes how most actions occur without deliberation:

A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs; we forget both the warmth and the cold; we fall into some reverie

connected with the day's life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, "Hollow! I must lie here no longer"- an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects.²⁵

This example illustrates how, for the most part, actions flow without any conscious effort. Getting out of bed on a cold morning may seem to require an act of volition. James wants to assert, however, that most of the time, actually getting up occurs with no deliberation at all. The two competing trains of thought, staying in bed versus getting up and starting the day, resolve their conflict when one of these activities becomes the focus of the sleeper's attention. When thoughts revolving around today's life take over the mind, the sleeper no longer struggles to get up because he has forgotten about the comfort of the bed and is now most concerned with the matters of the day. While one might initially experience a moment of deliberation, actually getting out of bed requires no effort of deciding; one simply gets up. James wants to emphasize that: "consciousness is in its very nature impulsive."²⁶ By this, he means that, most often, there is no intermediary force between a feeling and an action. When I feel like scratching my head, I simply scratch my head, without making any conscious decision for or against it. When I wake in the morning, I may lie there for a few moments, but when I actually do get up, the action follows without any additional effort. The force of habit, the fact that we have gotten out of bed every day, makes this action a simple one. It simply occurs, without much deliberation at all.

In his discussion of volition, James differentiates between two types of will: explosive and obstructed. In the explosive will, deliberation occurs with very little effort.

²⁵ James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. New York: Dover, 1950. p 524.

²⁶ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 526

A person of this disposition does not hesitate before committing an action; his actions follow with minimal deliberation. The explosive personality is characterized as impulsive and potentially dangerous, because he goes through life without any “brakes”²⁷ or ways of filtering out bad decisions. A person with an obstructed will, on the other hand, is incapable of connecting an idea with an action, cannot connect his will with his body. As James puts it: “man’s conduct is no more influenced by them [ideas] than an express train is influenced by a wayfarer standing by the roadside and calling to be taken aboard.”²⁸ This class of individual is comprised of the “hopeless failures, the sentimentalists, the drunkards, the schemers, the ‘dead-beats,’ whose life is one long contradiction between knowledge and action.”²⁹ James characterizes the obstructed life as a “moral tragedy:”

The moral tragedy of human life comes almost wholly from the fact that the link is ruptured which normally should hold between vision of the truth and action, and that this pungent sense of effective reality will not attach to certain ideas.³⁰

James views the obstructed as a group whose volition is, if not diseased and abnormal, at least tragic. This group has failed to exercise their volition, to make a habit out of effort.

In cases of those with a healthy will, there exist special situations that fall outside of the bounds of automated action, of habit. These situations involve indecision.

Indecision occurs when one must decide between two different actions. In order to end

²⁷ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 538

²⁸ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 547

²⁹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 547

³⁰ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 547

this indecision and come to an action, one must deliberate between these competing courses of action. James describes the conflict of indecision as:

This inclining first to one then to another future, both of which we represent as possible, resembles the oscillations to and fro of a material body within the limits of its elasticity. There is inward strain, but no outward rapture.³¹

Much like Robert Frost's famous poem, "The Road Not Taken" the indecisive individual must choose between two equally viable options. There are two equally good paths presented to the deliberator, and he must choose which one to take. The choosing of one means the abandonment of the other.

The plight of indecision can only be solved by deliberation. In James' discussion of volition, he identifies five different types of deliberation. In the first four types, a decision is made with a reasonable amount of ease, the chooser quickly recognizing that one path of action is clearly better than the other. In the fifth type of deliberation, the individual must struggle and force herself to one decision or the other. This type of decision, unlike the other four, is accompanied by the feeling of effort. James characterizes the decision made in these instances as a "slow dead heave of the will."³² In this type of decision, one must choose between two options that are equally appealing yet will lead to divergent results. As James says: "here both alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose."³³ In these situations, the chooser must murder one possibility in order to pursue the other.

³¹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 529

³² James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 534

³³ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 534

In order for this dead heave of the will to occur, the individual must attend to one object with effort. Attention with effort is a strain, a struggle to bring one option fully in front of the mind, disregarding the other.

Though the spontaneous drift of thought is all the other way, the attention must be kept strained on that one object until at last it grows, so as to maintain itself before the mind with ease. This strain of the attention is the fundamental act of the will.³⁴

As an example of this strain, James describes the condition of an exhausted sailor who must struggle between the delicious comforts of sleep and the necessity of attending to his ship, lest he capsize and be engulfed by the sea. For this exhausted sailor, the needs of sleep are nearly as compelling as the need to stay awake and tend to the boat. In his weary state, this sailor must strain his attention on surviving, on fending off sleep.³⁵ This internal struggle is the essence of effort.

The only way to create or change habits is through effort and attention, which James claims are synonymous with the will. While a habit, once put in place, is difficult to change, it is possible to change a habit through strength of will. When one wants to change a habit, one must focus one's effort on not committing the bad action, replacing it with a good one. This transition can only occur through sustained effort. Committing a new action only once cannot undo the deep neural effects of habit. Instead, one must stand steadfast against habitual inclinations, consistently refraining from committing the activity one wishes to eliminate. In deliberation, much like the sailor, one must choose between the habitual inclination and the new activity that one would like to commit. One must fend off the easy path of sleep and choose, against the flow of inclination, to stay

³⁴ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 564

³⁵ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 566

awake and pilot the ship. It is only with this level of vigilance that one can make a change within oneself and the actions that one habitually commits.

Effort is essential for the creation or dissolution of habits. Like Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, James believes that the ethical formation of a person lies in the daily, habitual formation of the self over time.³⁶ A person is the accumulation of her actions over the course of her life, not the end result. While habits, for the most part, control what we do, effort guides what habits we create. Once a habit is ingrained, it is difficult to remove. Each and every action leaves a mark on us, a neural pathway that has the potential to be developed into a habitual mode of acting. The exertion of effort is what allows us to control which of these neural scars we will deepen, and what sort of actions will occupy our lives. The will is necessary for exerting control over the actions that we commit and the people we become.

Effort, however, while seemingly independent of habit, is subject to habit's laws. Effort can be habituated. In his chapter on Habit, James claims that habits not only run along "particular lines of discharge," but also along "general forms of discharge."³⁷ Particular habits guide the specifics of how we get dressed in the morning, the way that we walk and talk and other nuances of our daily lives. General habits guide our tendency towards action and the healthiness of our will. By a general habit, James means that one

³⁶ Aristotle's writings, while not included in the scope of this paper, are a natural compliment to James' theory of habit. In Book Two of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes how the formation of character is intimately linked to the formation of habit: "In a word, characteristics develop from corresponding activities. For that reason, we must see to it that our activities are of a certain kind, since any variations in them will be reflected in our characteristics. Hence it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes a considerable difference, or, rather, all the difference. From. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Martin Oswald. Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1962. pp. 34-5.

³⁷ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 126

can train, through habit, the faculty of effort. If one forces oneself to exercise volition everyday, one will be better able to alter one's own behavior, will have the strength to take charge of one's course in life. The sailor who chooses sleep over work will fail to save his ship when a big storm comes, his ability to act under these circumstances being unpracticed and neglected. The individual who cultivates effort, who repeatedly exercises his volition, will be better prepared when life's storm comes, his habit of effort having been carved deeply into his person. While effort cannot, like habits, be explained as a series of firings in the brain, it does seem to operate under the same laws as habit. The more one exercises one's volition, the stronger it will become.

Effort and attention define what actions we will commit and what habits we form and thus comprise the one aspect of consciousness over which we have explicit control.

It is because of this that James sees effort as essential in defining the self.

Our strength and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck, are things which warm our heart and make us feel ourselves a match for life. But deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth. Those are, after all, but effects, products and reflections of the outer world within. But the effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm as if it were the substantive thing which we are, and those were but externals which we carry.³⁸

Outside standards, things and even people are products of the outer world and belong to a different realm from volition. Effort and attention form the core of the self because they represent the actions that one is able to control.

The effort of volition defines the self, providing a basis for differentiating the core of who we are from the rest of the objects in the world. Effort and attention develop and

³⁸James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. II. 578

mold who we are in a strong way. For James, our “self” is not some abstract or metaphysical entity, instead, it is a compilation of our actions over the course of our lives. Effort, attention and the will are important because they are one of the few aspects that we control in our stream of consciousness. Without the ability to control habit and action we would be mere automatons, unthinkingly following the course that our neurons have created for us.

There is a temptation to read James as suggesting a hierarchy that situates habit below and willing above. While James may name our faculty of willing as the locus of the self, it is important to remember that willing is an exception among the stream of consciousness. Reading James as espousing a hierarchy that places will, effort and attention as more sophisticated or important than habit fails to acknowledge the pervasive influence that habit has over everything. While willing is capable of controlling our habits, freeing us from automatism, the will is also subject to the force of habit. Habit is not confined to lower, animalistic, rote or simple faculties. Instead, it influences everything, even the capacity to will.

Habits of Attention: Active Perception

The psychic, spiritual or mental realm, whatever name you prefer to call it, remains, for James, a space of mystery. He does not believe that one can ever fully understand, through science, the way that attention, effort, willing, memory, etc. are linked to brain activity. This realm belongs not to psychology or biology, but to metaphysics. Despite his belief in the opacity of our psychic functions, James attempts to understand their mechanisms and behaviors, tracing out the different possibilities of their

existence. While will, attention and effort remain unexplainable by brain function, they seem to behave in accordance with the fundamental law of habit. Namely, that “our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised.”³⁹ Will, attention and effort appear to grow to the behaviors to which they have been accustomed. The intellect behaves the same way as the body: it participates in the current of habit.

We have already seen how habit can infiltrate the realm of volition, how one can fortify the will by cultivating habits of effort. Instead of cultivating specific habits, one can also create a general habit of effort, which will allow one to respond to the challenges of life with effort and determination. James also asserts that we have habits of attention, which shape the very way that we perceive the world. For James, perception is active, fueled by attention and subject to the force of habit. Habits of attention ultimately shape the world that we perceive and guide the people we become.

James describes attention as the active selection of an environment out of the chaotic flux which is pure experience. For James, primary experience is an “infinite chaos of movements”⁴⁰ that must be sorted in order to be understood. Since this primordial experience is so overwhelming, one must select certain elements out of the flux in order to make sense of one’s experiences.

Out of what is in itself an undistinguishable, swarming continuum, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this motion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade.⁴¹

³⁹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 112

⁴⁰ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 284

⁴¹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 285

The world that one lives in is selected from this undistinguishable, swarming continuum of pure experience. What one selects is powered by what one attends to, what one considers interesting and important.

Attention, like effort, is subject to the effects of habit. What we pay attention to out of the stream of consciousness is often a matter of what we have always seen. Because of this habitual selection of one part of the stream over another, certain parts of the primordial stream simply disappear.

A man's empirical thought depends on the things he has experienced, but what these shall be is to a large extent determined by his habits of attention. A thing may be present to him a thousand times, but if he persistently fails to notice it, it cannot be said to enter into his experience.⁴²

Habit's effects are not limited to action but also extend to perception. The perceived world is shaped by habits of attention, what we tend to see and what we tend to ignore. The more we pay attention to certain things, the more stably they become fixed as the experience which occupies consciousness.

While attention may be subject to the effects of habit, it is not completely habitual. Attention, at least at first, involves a choice. We are not like a piece of clay upon which experience gets stamped. Perception takes on an active role. Instead of outside experience shaping what we perceive, attention shapes what we experience, selecting what, out of pure experience, we will appropriate as our own.

Millions of items of outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to.* Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind- without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos.⁴³

⁴² James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 286

The undifferentiated stream of consciousness left in its chaos is something that we never actually experience. Instead, this stream is carved up by attention, by what we choose to emphasize and notice out of experience. There is a certain amount of consent necessary in perception. However, once an activity of attention becomes habitual, that part of experience becomes cemented for us; it becomes something that we always choose.⁴⁴

Thus, for James, the activity of attention is as important as the actions one commits in the outside world. As he says: “The problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become.”⁴⁵ Out of the

⁴³ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 402

⁴⁴ The initial pages of Marcel Proust’s stunning, massive and brilliant novel *Remembrance of Things Past* provide an excellent literary example of how habit can effect perception. The beginning of the novel focuses on a distilled set of memories that the adult narrator has of his childhood in Combray. The distillation of his childhood experiences excludes playtimes, adventures and other typical childlike experiences, focusing instead on the drama of his bedtime ritual. In these beginning pages Marcel’s world is reduced to “but two floors joined by a slender staircase, and as though there had been no time there but seven o’clock at night” (p. 59). Young Marcel’s bedroom serves as a sort of a prison, where he is forced to lie sleeplessly as his parents entertain downstairs. As a means of alleviating the prison-like walls of his bedroom, a friend gives Marcel a magic lantern, which projects, through cut outs and light, the story of Genevieve de Brabant on the walls of his bedroom. This projection, instead of easing Marcel’s misery, only increases his discomfort, transforming the familiar walls, doorknobs and dressers of his bedroom into an entirely new world. Our narrator recalls the horror he felt at this intrusion upon his habitual dwelling: “But I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself. The anaesthetic effect of habit being destroyed, I would begin to think- and to feel- such melancholy things.” (p. 59)

In the above passage, habit is more than just what Marcel does unthinkingly, his repeated mechanical actions or his tendency not to sleep. Instead, habit effects how the narrator sees his bedroom. Like James, who believes that our habits of attention shape the very world that we see, Marcel’s habitual experience with his bedroom does not reflect the actions that he commits while in the room but instead controls his perception of it. Instead of the room shaping what Marcel sees, Marcel shapes what the room looks like. In the narrator’s words: “I had succeeded in filling [the room] with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself.” Marcel’s insights in this passage illustrate that habits do not have to be confined to our simple, rote or mechanical actions but in fact control the very world that we perceive. The comfort that Marcel feels in his non-illuminated bedroom is a result of the habitual relationship that he formed with his surroundings. The doorknobs and dressers, after being observed, become a natural part of the room. In accordance with James’ theory of habitual attention, Marcel chooses to notice or miss certain parts of his environment. When the habitual selection of his bedroom is interrupted, his world becomes disturbed, causing Marcel to look at aspects of his selected environment that he otherwise would fail to notice. From: Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time. Swanns Way*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Revised D.J. Enright. New York: Modern Library, 2003

⁴⁵ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 288

flux of experience there is a multitude of simultaneous viable possibilities. It is up to each individual to select what she will attend to and who she will become. Using the metaphor of a sculptor James describes how we select who we will be and what we shall see:

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as the sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which have the mere matter to the thought of all of us indifferently.⁴⁶

We all begin with the same matter, the same primordial flux, and, like the sculptor, carve out a world that is uniquely ours. What we see and who we will become is dependent upon what we select out of the stream of consciousness. Habit guides our choices and contributes to the formation of the world that we see. It not only helps us to act but also gives us the power to create a world that is uniquely our own.

Habit not only influences our actions, but also affects our perception of the world. The role of habit, usually confined to rote and mechanical actions, in fact extends to all aspects of experience. Not only does it influence the will, making a huge impact on the formation of character, it literally shapes the world that we live in. Heidegger's prioritization of rupture fails to take account of this immensely important aspect of our being. While habits are easily missed, being so close to us that they sink into the background of consciousness, they account for an extraordinary amount of human existence. Habits provide the basis for human perception and activity.

⁴⁶ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 288

Section 2

Zhuangzi: Habitual Language

William James, in his discussion of habit, describes the impact that habit has over our daily lives. Habit not only guides simple and everyday actions, but also reaches into the realm of the will, of conscious attention and effort. While thinkers like Heidegger choose to ignore the importance of our habitual dealings in the world, James highlights their significance, revealing what otherwise remains unnoticed in philosophical discourse. Fourth century B.C.E. Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi also strives to reveal a hidden or mysterious part of experience, which he calls the Dao. The Dao is the force of nature that underlies all of experience. For Zhuangzi, the goal is to tap into the flowing Dao, enabling one to respond to the world with spontaneous action. Zhuangzi suggests the practice of skill or technique as a method of connecting with the Dao. Like James, who hopes to reveal the importance of action, criticizing the sentimental dreamers who never translate feeling into action, Zhuangzi advocates the activity of a skill as a method of tapping into the Dao. Both James and Zhuangzi place a unique importance on everyday, repeated and skillful actions, highlighting an aspect of experience that is otherwise left unattended.

Throughout Zhuangzi's text, action is in tension with language. For him, language peppers our natural experience with unnatural boulders, which interfere with the flow of the Dao. Language, unlike a skillful action, is incapable of truly representing reality. It can only portray a fractional remainder of experience. One of Zhuangzi's famous quotes compares language to a fish trap as a metaphorical means of portraying this tension between words and reality.

A trap is for a fish; when you've got the fish, you can forget the trap. A snare is for rabbits: when you've got the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words are for meaning; when you've got the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find someone who's forgotten words so I can have a word with him?⁴⁷

Zhuangzi compares language to a fish trap, viewing language as a mechanism for capturing the greater meaning behind words. The use of a fish trap is not the goal of a fisherman just as the use of words is not the goal of a speaker. Fish, for fisherman, and meaning, for speakers, are the end results that are desired. Words and fish traps can be set aside, momentarily forgotten, until they are needed once again.

Chinese thinkers, like Zhuangzi, did not write books, but jotted down sayings, verses, stories and thoughts; the above epigraph is an example of such a saying.

Zhuangzi wrote during the "classical period" of Chinese philosophy (approximately the sixth to the end of the third century B.C.E.), during the same time as Confucius, and Laozi, founder of Daoism. While some passages seem to be written by Zhuangzi, the entire text is largely agreed to be the work of multiple authors, compiled by his students and later added to by contributors, similar to the *Rhetoric* which was compiled by Aristotle's students but composed of his ideas.⁴⁸

Zhuangzi offers an interesting paradox concerning language. On the one hand, he criticizes words as a mere tool (fish trap), which is used to capture meaning. Words, as mere tools, insufficiently portray the full breadth of human experience and are ultimately incapable of helping others comprehend the Dao ("the Way"), or the ultimate

⁴⁷ Zhuangzi. "Zhuangzi." In: *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Trans & Ed: Ivanhoe, Philip & Van Norden, Bryan W. New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001. p. 243.

⁴⁸ Ivanhoe, Philip & Van Norden, Bryan W. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001. p. 203-4.

understanding of the world. On the other hand, Zhuangzi is clearly skilled in his own use of language, utilizing what he criticizes to communicate an understanding of the Dao.

In the epigraph above, Zhuangzi seems to question the importance of language, viewing words as an annoying step on the path to communication. Words do not constitute the essence of thought but are only a method of sharing and managing ideas/images. Zhuangzi, however, also seems to think that words, if used properly, can serve as non-bothersome method of communication. At the end of the epigraph comparing words to fish traps, Zhuangzi comments: “Where can I find someone who’s forgotten words so I can have a word with him?” The process of “forgetting words” would allow an individual to use language in a way that fosters unhindered communication.

The seriousness of Zhuangzi’s outright criticisms of language are tempered by his mastery of it. Throughout his text, Zhuangzi provides his reader with expertly crafted poems, allegories and stories that are intended to bring his reader into a closer relationship with the Dao. Thus, Zhuangzi’s criticism of language must be questioned. Why criticize the very medium in which you are working? Why bother writing anything down if it has no value? Zhuangzi’s position on language is complicated, suggesting that language is insufficient yet useful. His comparison of words to fish traps insinuates the double sided aspect of language. On the one hand, a fish trap is only a means to an end, is only temporarily important as a tool for catching the fish, for capturing meaning. On the other hand, a fish cannot be caught without a trap of some sort, just as meaning cannot be conveyed without words. While it might be nice to be able to do away with fish traps and words, doing so is an impossibility. We must instead look for a way to

eliminate the interval between tool and product. There must be a way to unite the action of fishing or speaking to the products of fish and meaning. If the fisherman can approach the fish trap as more than a means to an end and operate it with skill, the trap will become more than a mere tool. The use of the fish trap will become an integral part of the fishing activity. Similarly, the speaker who can relate skillfully to her words will treat them as if they were a part of the very meaning she hopes to convey. When language and fishing become skillful, their activity becomes as important as their product. These skills eliminate the interval that exists between the tool and the result- they unite the action with the intention, creating an activity that is consistent with the flowing Dao that underlies the universe.

Throughout his text, Zhuangzi praises skill as a means of communing with the Dao. Two of Zhuangzi's most memorable stories, one about a Butcher named Cook Ding and the other about a wheelwright, praise skill as a means of gaining a better understanding of nature. Both stories praise simple craftsmen as individuals who have mastered their respective skills. The cultivation of a particular skill is heralded as a means of attaining a sagely understanding of the Dao. Implicit in these stories is a criticism of language's ability to communicate the skills of the butcher and the wheelwright. Neither Cook Ding nor the Wheelwright are able to fully explain their skills through language. Instead, they must cultivate their skills through years of habitual practice. While Zhuangzi seems to praise skill over language and habit over thought, he also leaves a space open for skillful and creative uses of language. Language, like wheelwrighting or butchering, can be cultivated as a skill, allowing the wordsmith to commune with the Dao in the same way as any other craftsman.

The importance of everyday, habitual and skillful experiences is of the utmost importance to Zhuangzi. His skill stories illustrate how our daily relationship with the world, the actions that we practice and habituate to, allow us to have a more solid relationship with the Dao. While skill and habit are related, they are not the same. Skill requires conscious attention while habit is capable of operating unconsciously. Skill, however, relies upon habit for its cultivation. Without habit it would be impossible to become skillful in anything. Habit and skill entrench us in the world that surrounds us and allow us to respond to life's particulars instead of life's abstractions and falsities. The benefit of skill is that it opens up the door to understanding a small aspect of the magnificent flowing Dao that underlies all of nature. With skill and habit, even the skillful use of language, we can tap into the Way and better adapt to the nuances of living.

The Story of the Wheelwright

The Zhuangzi is often thought to be the most beautifully written text in the Chinese language because it uses many genera, including poetry, logical analyses, dialogue, and narrative, to convey its message. It does not lay out its message in an ordered or structured fashion. Instead, Zhuangzi uses stories and poetry to point the reader in the direction of its meaning. Despite its eloquent and colorful use of language, Zhuangzi argues that language is limited because it is incapable of portraying a true vision of the Dao, which lies behind and within everything in the world. This paradox of language runs throughout Zhuangzi's text and is implicit in all of his skill stories.

The story of the wheelwright illustrates the tension that Zhuangzi feels between language and skill. While this story seems to suggest that action, and not language, is necessary for learning to live in a sagely manner, Zhuangzi chooses to deliver his message in the form of a cleverly written story, insinuating that language may be more effective at providing insights into the Dao than Zhuangzi literally lets on. This story begins with a scene of the noble Duke Huan, who is reading in his hall, and the common Wheelwright Slab, who is chiseling wheels in the courtyard below. The Wheelwright decides to approach the Duke, laying down his tools and daring to ascend to where the Duke is reading. The Wheelwright asks the Duke what he is reading and the Duke responds “The words of the sages.” Wheelwright Slab asks “Are the sages still around?” The Duke responds that they are dead. “Then what M’Lord is reading is nothing more than the leavings of the ancients,”⁴⁹ responds Wheelwright Slab. In response, the Duke becomes very angry, claiming that a Wheelwright has no business criticizing what a sagely man reads. To this the Wheelwright responds:

Your servant looks at it from the point of view of his own business. When I chisel a wheel, if I hit too softly, it slips and won’t bite. If I hit too hard, it jams and won’t move. Neither too soft nor too hard-I get it in my hand and respond with my mind. But my mouth cannot put it into words. There is an art to it. But your servant can’t show it to his own son, and he can’t get it from me. I’ve done it this way seventy years and am growing old chiseling wheels. The ancients died with what they could not pass down. So what M’Lord is reading can only be their leavings.⁵⁰

The insight of the audacious Wheelwright is that his own skill is no different from the skill of the sages. Both the great ancient sages and a common Wheelwright are incapable

⁴⁹ Zhuangzi 237

⁵⁰ Zhuangzi 237

of using language to pass down their understanding to future generations. The Wheelwright is unable to verbally explain his skill of wheel carving to his son, just as the sages are unable to pass on their skill of understanding the Dao through their writings. Sagely living, like wheel carving, is a skill that must be cultivated over time. Habitual practice is the only way that either a sage or a craftsman can come to fully understand his vocation. Much like James, who claims that we cannot “tell” or “describe” how we manage to brush our teeth, open a door or get dressed in the morning, the Wheelwright cannot describe the nuanced movements of his hands each time he goes to carve the wheel. These movements, like daily habitual movements, have been taken over by the force of habit. They, for the most part, no longer require the interference of conscious thought. Because of this, they fall out of the realm of what language can describe. It is impossible to explain what we are not aware of. His hands, and the habit that powers them, control the finer parts of his action, which are invisible and indescribable by language.

Although the Wheelwright cannot use language to fully impart his knowledge of wheel carving to his son, he can use language to guide his son towards an understanding of his skill. The Wheelwright claims that what Duke Huan reads “can only be their [the ancients] leavings.” The ancients have left only skeletons of their wisdom and experience in the form of writings. These writings, however, are valuable despite their skeletal nature – they preserve the ideas of past generations, guiding individuals towards a sagely understanding of experience. For Zhuangzi, however, language is ultimately less potent than actual experience. The habitual practice of wheel carving is a better

means of understanding the world than a discussion amongst the sages. The notion that action is more important than what one can say about it, runs throughout Zhuangzi's text.

Zhuangzi and the Dao

As we can see from the story of the wheelwright, a critique of language runs throughout Zhuangzi's writings and is intimately linked to his equation of skill with sagely living. Language is a problem for Zhuangzi because it interferes with the Dao, which is the natural force that underlies and powers the universe. The problem with language is that it carves up the Dao, chopping up what should remain intact. Zhuangzi's writings are, in some ways, a reaction against the Confucians, who believed in following a strict set of rites or rituals, intended to govern the majority of their followers' daily tasks and relations.⁵¹ Zhuangzi finds this type of ordering to be unnatural, and proposes instead that we develop a more spontaneous relationship with the world, suggesting that we forget the rigidity of the Confucian rites in order to open ourselves up to the flowing nature of the Dao.

An understanding of Zhuangzi's underlying philosophy illustrates why something like language limits understanding of the Dao while skill or practice has the ability to open it up. In the Zhuangzi, the Dao or the "Way" lies within or behind everything in the world. Chapter twenty-two states:

...Master East Wall asked Zhuangzi, "Where is this so-called Way?"
Zhuangzi said, "There's nowhere it isn't."
Master East Wall said "You must be more specific."
Zhuangzi said, "It's in an ant."
"How about even lower?"
"It's in the grass."

⁵¹ Graham, A.C. *Chuang-tzu- The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company: 2001. p. 3-26

“How about lower still?”
“In tiles”
“How about even lower than that?”
“It’s in dung and urine.”⁵²

The Way lies in everything, even in things as low as dung and urine. It exists in plants, animals, insects, objects, humans, and everything. Nothing is excluded from the Way. As Zhuangzi says, “There is no where it isn’t.” Later in Chapter twenty-two Zhuangzi states: “Don’t reject anything. The perfect Way is like this and so are great words. ‘Whole,’ ‘everywhere,’ and ‘all’ are three different names for the same thing, making a single point....”⁵³ Nothing is excluded from the Dao. Three different words are given to describe the Way, but none are adequate in completely defining it. The Way is behind everything and, since it is a part of everything, it cannot be easily summarized or captured using words. Language is incapable of naming things directly and, in order to be used successfully, must acknowledge the inherent failure of words. As we will see later, the individual who uses words skillfully acknowledges the interval between reality and language and, instead of taking language too seriously, accounts for this interval with a creative and metaphorical use of language.

For Zhuangzi, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The Dao cannot be carved up into different sections. It just is. Chapter two of the Zhuangzi states:

So we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists. Each calls right what the other calls wrong and each calls wrong what the other calls right. But if you want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, it’s better to throw them open to the light.

There is nothing that cannot be looked at that way.
There is nothing that cannot be looked at this way.
But that is not the way I see things;

⁵² Zhuangzi 242

⁵³ Zhuangzi 242

Only as I know things myself do I know them.⁵⁴

The judgments that we place onto the world, like the rites of the Confucians, carve the Dao into unnatural segments, cutting up what should remain whole. The goal, for Zhuangzi, is to get rid of these unnatural judgments and to tap into the Dao in a way that doesn't destroy its unity. The Confucians and the Mohists exist in the same world, with the same Dao. The difference between the two lies in their perceptions of the world. "Each calls right what the other calls wrong and each calls wrong what the other calls right." The solution that the text provides is to "throw them open to the light." This throwing open consists of knowing things as I experience them myself. If I get caught up in the perspectives of one group, my judgments about things will be guided by them and I will become unable to think for myself, to understand experience as it is given to me. The competing perspectives of these different groups reveals that their labels of "right" and "wrong" fail to correspond to the reality of things. Their reality is an illusion. Instead, we should pay attention to our own experiences, feel the way the world is to us and not get caught up in the nonsensical fights of others. As Zhuangzi says, "Only as I know things myself do I know them."⁵⁵

Language is a way that we carve the world into different perspectives, cementing the rightness or wrongness of different groups, like the Confucians or the Mohists. For Zhuangzi, the words that we speak are meaningless if disconnected to the way that we actually experience the world.

Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something. But
if what it says is not fixed, then does it really say anything?
Or does it say nothing? We think it is different from the

⁵⁴ Zhuangzi 212

⁵⁵ Zhuangzi 212

peeping of fledglings. But is there really any difference or isn't there? How is the Way obscured that there are true and false? How are words obscured that there are *shi*, "right," and *fei*, "wrong"? Where can you go that the Way does not exist? How can words exist and not be okay?⁵⁶

Zhuangzi compares the speech of humans to the twittering of birds. Both make a sound but we attribute more to the sounds made by humans because we attach fixed meanings to the words that humans speak. What Zhuangzi wants to assert is that the meanings of words are not as fixed as we imagine and that the sounds that humans make are actually as spontaneous as the peeping of fledglings. Words, to which we give such strict, stable meanings, are in fact unreliable as a method of understanding the Dao.

The problem, then, lies in learning how to act, or speak, without unnaturally carving up the Dao. How does one survive in the world without making distinctions? Is it possible to act without leaving a scar on the unity of the Dao? Zhuangzi's story of Cook Ding, a butcher, offers a solution to this problem. As we saw in the story of the wheelwright, skill is one method of understanding the Dao. While the practice of a skill does, in some ways, make distinctions within the unity of the Dao, it does so in a way that does not do violence to it. The practice of a skill allows the skillful to spontaneously respond to, but not necessarily understand or describe, the nuances of her particular experience. While the experience of the skillful could be considered a type of sorting, the distinctions made in skillful actions are in accord with the Dao. Skillful spontaneity frees one from the impositions on the Dao, like those of the rigid rights of the Confucians that Zhuangzi criticizes, and instead allows one to act in accordance with nature. While spontaneous activity associated with a skill may carve up the world in some ways, it does

⁵⁶ Zhuangzi 212

so without leaving a mark on the unity of the Dao, without digging so deeply that the natural flow of experience is ruptured.

The Tale of Cook Ding

Chapter Three of the Zhuangzi tells a story of Cook Ding, whose everyday, habitual practice of butchery has enabled him to become a master of his occupation. In this story, Cook Ding describes his occupation as follows:

When I first began cutting up oxen, I did not see anything but oxen. Three years later, I couldn't see the whole ox. And now, I encounter them with spirit and don't look with my eyes. Sensible knowledge stops and spiritual desires proceed. I rely on the Heavenly patterns, strike in the big gaps, am guided by the large fissures, and follow what is inherently so. A good butcher changes his chopper every year because he chips it. An average butcher changes it every month because he breaks it. There are spaces between those joints, and the edge of the blade has no thickness. If you use what has no thickness to go where there is space—oh! there's plenty of room to play about in. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my chopper is still as though fresh from the grindstone.⁵⁷

Through practice, habit, skill and effort Cook Ding has mastered his skill of ox carving. Like the wheelwright, who knows just how much pressure to apply to the wheel he is carving, the butcher knows exactly where to place his knife. He acts with such precision that his knife never gets dulled. His skill is ineffable, unable to be passed down through words, and only able to be mastered through practice.

Cook Ding, unlike an average butcher, approaches the ox with spirit, not with his eyes. Lord Wenhui is impressed by the butcher's skill and claims: "Ah, excellent, that

⁵⁷ Zhuangzi 220

technique can reach such heights!”⁵⁸ In response, the butcher states: “What your servant values is the Way, which goes beyond any technique.”⁵⁹ The skill of the butcher is not pure habit, not purely rote and mechanical, but involves a state of heightened awareness. Habit, according to James is automatic and unconscious. The technique of Cook Ding is an example of James’ “more important matters” that one is able to accomplish only because one’s other, simple and daily activities are already automated.

Technique and habit, however, are intimately linked. While habit is simply the body growing accustomed to a particular activity, making the individual more dexterous and agile in completing the action, technique involves a spontaneous attention to the given situation. Habit is capable of occurring automatically, without the interference of conscious attention. While the automation of activity may seem to place habit in the realm of the less important, a skill could never be cultivated without it. Habits accustom our bodies to the actions we perpetually commit. Without habit, Cook Ding might be able to see the spaces between the oxen’s ligaments, but he would never be able to place his blade between them. Habit allows the attention to successfully carry out actions; allows the skillful to connect what they see with what they do. Thus, skill needs habit and likewise habit needs skill. Without a state of heightened attention, Cook Ding might carve every ox as if they were exactly the same, failing to decipher the nuanced differences between each carcass. This state of heightened awareness allows the butcher to successfully carve the ox, even when he encounters difficulties.

“Still when I get to a hard place, I see the difficulty and take breathless care. My gaze settles! My movements

⁵⁸ Zhuangzi 219

⁵⁹ Zhuangzi 220

slow! I move the chopper slightly, and I stand holding my chopper and glance all around, dwelling on my accomplishment. Then I clean my chopper and put it away.”

Lord Wenhui said, “Excellent! I have heard the words of a butcher and learned how to care for life.”⁶⁰

The skill of the Butcher enables him to conquer the difficulties that he encounters when carving the oxen. That Cook Ding is able to work through his difficulties successfully illustrates that his skillful activity is not completely habitual, but that there is an element of active engagement in his craft.

The active engagement of Cook Ding with the difficulties of ox carving is an example of *wu-wei* or effortless action. *Wu-wei*, which literally means “the absence of doing,” is often translated as “nonaction” or “effortless action.”⁶¹ While Cook Ding is certainly concentrating on carving, there is a definite ease to his movements. This ease, this *wu-wei*, is a result of approaching the task with spirit, of tapping into the flow of the Dao. The Butcher has replaced “sensible knowledge” with “spiritual desires.” Sensible knowledge, like the words of the Confucians, appeals to the logical categorization that Zhuangzi criticizes as carving up the world into unnatural perspectives. This rational or sensible approach forces the young Butcher to approach the oxen with his eyes instead of with spirit. When he approaches his task in this way, his actions require effort and concentration that is not aided by spirit. When his actions are aided by spirit, however, he is able to concentrate with effortless ease. His actions connect with the Dao, allowing him to forget the “sensible” categories and to commune with the Way in its unity. When aided by spiritual forces, actions require attention and concentration, but not effort.

⁶⁰ Zhuangzi 220

⁶¹ Ivanhoe 361-2

Additionally, actions guided by spirit, while connecting with distinctions and differences inherent to the Dao, refrain from unnaturally carving up the world. Unlike many actions, which require sensible effort, the activity of the Butcher represents a way of acting in communion with the way, tapping into its natural energies and flowing with the stream of the Dao.

Cook Ding's ability to effortlessly respond to the Dao is responsible for enabling him to carve the oxen without ever dulling his blade. His active engagement allows him to respond to the natural sections of each oxen. Without his connection with the Dao, without an active attention to detail, he would have to forcefully chop up each oxen, dulling his blade with each thoughtless movement. Since each oxen is different, Cook Ding must be able to react to the nuances of each carcass. A novice butcher cannot see the intricacies of the oxen, cannot see the empty space between the ligaments. The habitual practice of ox-carving allows the butcher to see the particularities of his medium, the nuances of his craft. These intricacies are ineffable because their fine grains slip through the coarse hands of language. Skills are unexplainable because they deal in a medium more specific, more wrapped up in particularities than language, which tends to generalize and group together, can handle. The more one practices a skill or a craft the more fine-tuned they become to the particularities of their situation. Because these particularities can only be seen by someone who has a heightened awareness of their craft, it is impossible for the skillful to describe their methods to the novice. Only after the novice has become a proficient can the student and teacher begin to have a conversation. The last line of Zhuangzi's story about the fist trap illustrates just this belief. He states: "Where can I find someone who has forgotten words so I can have a

word with him.” Only someone who has a skillful relationship to words is worth conversing with. Similarly, only someone who has come to understand the skill of butchery or wheel-wrighting can converse with someone else about it. That’s why the wheelwright can’t pass down what he knows to his son and the sages can’t pass down what they know to their followers.

While language is incapable of expressing the full depth and intricacies of experience, it is capable of communicating some essence of experience, some aspect of a skill. Cook Ding’s story ends with a statement from Lord Wenhui. He claims that the words of the butcher have taught him “how to care for life.” Words can convey some aspects of the Dao, some aspects of skillful living. Lord Wenhui is impressed by Cook Ding’s words, not by practicing ox carving himself. Without becoming an apprentice to Cook Ding, Lord Wenhui is able to understand, through words, the wisdom of Cook Ding. While the words of Cook Ding might, as the wheelwright suggests of the words of the ancients, be only his leavings, these remnants provide not only Lord Wenhui but also Zhuangzi’s reader with a guide for understanding “how to care for life.”

Zhuangzi and Plato: Skillful Language

While Zhuangzi, in many places, seems to claim that language is incapable of fully expressing the nature of the Dao, he leaves a space for the skillful use of language. For Zhuangzi there are different types of language, different ways of communicating that are more or less in communion with the flowing nature of experience. A.C. Graham offers an interpretation of the different types of discourse that Zhuangzi identifies. The

first type of discourse is that which comes from a lodging place⁶². This type of discourse is used in argument or persuasion. A person using this type of language would choose one standpoint and attempt to argue from that point of view alone. In an argument “you temporarily lodge at the other man’s standpoint, because the meanings of words are for him the only meanings, and he will not debate on any other basis.”⁶³ This person does not acknowledge that language is changing and unreliable. Because of this, he places too much stock in arguing with only his version of language. Like the Confucians or the Mohists, this type of language forces itself upon experience, failing to acknowledge the true flowing Dao.

The second type of language that Zhuangzi acknowledges is a “weighted saying.”⁶⁴ Unlike a saying from a lodging place, a weighted saying comes from one’s own experiences. While a saying from a lodging place might be like the passing down of the rituals of the Confucians, a weighted saying stems from one’s personal experiences. It cannot be derived from others. An aphorism is a prototypical example of a weighted saying.

The third type of discourse is called a “spillover saying.”⁶⁵ This term is named after a vessel that tips when full and rights itself when empty and refers to everyday language that adapts itself to the situation in which it is being used. A spillover saying incorporates any verbal means available to portray a message, including stories, verses, and aphorisms. It resembles the language that Zhuangzi himself utilizes. This type of

⁶² Graham, A.C. *Chuang-tzu- The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company: 2001. p. 25
-26

⁶³ Graham 26

⁶⁴ Graham 26

⁶⁵ Graham 26

language responds to the particularities of the speaker's situation and accommodates for the nuances of experience. Unlike speaking from a lodging place, which is fixed in its meaning, a "spillover saying" can flow with the fluctuations of the Dao, adapting itself to the intricacies of life. Using language skillfully is no different from Cook Ding carving the ox or the Wheelwright carving wheels. The skillful speaker is able to tap into the flowing nature of the Dao, to understand the nuances of his situation and to adapt language to the fullness of his cup.

These three kinds of language reflect more than the different ways that we speak but also reflect three different approaches to the world. Whether we decide to lodge in one particular opinion, speak from experience or react to the flow of nature reveals how we approach life. Language, just like our approaches to life, can be skillful. Just as James acknowledges that volition and perception are subject to the forces of habit, Zhuangzi's discussion of language reveals that language can also be habitual. While the first two modes are capable of being purely habitual, the third requires an active attention to the world which is similar to skill. Nevertheless, just like action, effort and attention, all three modes of language are subject to the laws of habit. Language, then, is not so different from ox-carving or wheelwrighting; it has the ability to react and respond to the world in the same way as action.

In Plato's famous dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, Socrates uses the example of a butcher to illustrate how the successful dialectician uses language. His example, reminiscent of Zhuangzi's story about Cook Ding, illustrates that the wordsmith, like a good butcher, must pay attention to the natural distinctions of his argument. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the elements that make a speech successful. Like

Zhuangzi, Socrates emphasizes an attention to the particularities of experience as the only way to illuminate truth through speech. Much like Zhuangzi's "spillover sayings," Socrates' believes that a true dialectician must be able to adapt to his audience, noticing the changing particularities of truth in order to deliver a noble speech.

In his discussions with Phaedrus, Socrates enumerates two principles that must be present in a good speech. The first element is the ability to unite a scattering of particulars under one idea. This principle ensures that the speech giver has a clear, united focus and does not get distracted in the course of his speech. The second principle consists in dividing what has been united in the first principle. The speech giver must be able to take the main idea and divide it again according to its natural divisions. Socrates, invoking the image of a butcher, describes this second principle as follows: "That of dividing things again by classes, where the natural joints are, and not trying to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver."⁶⁶ Socrates suggests that the dialectician, much like a butcher, must follow the natural patterns of his argument, being careful not to force a truth where it does not belong. Just as Cook Ding is able to follow the patterns of nature when carving an ox, Socrates believes that the dialectician must recognize the truth that exists in the world. Just as the butcher is unable to carve the oxen by approaching it with "sensible knowledge," Socrates claims that the dialectician will fail to produce a good speech if he forces truth where it doesn't belong.

Plato's point, that we must know the particularities of that which we speak, agrees with the idea that the master cannot communicate to the apprentice the full knowledge of a skill. Like Zhuangzi, Plato asserts that it is only when we know the truth ourselves,

⁶⁶ Plato. "Phaedrus." Trans. H. N. Fowler. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990. p 135

through practice, that we can represent it through words. It is only after the apprentice has become a master himself that he can have a true conversation with his teacher. Socrates asserts that we must adapt certain speeches to certain individuals, being careful not to speak about the wrong things to the wrong people. Without a close attention to our surroundings, without paying attention to the flow of nature, we will fail to produce an effective communication.⁶⁷ Much as the Butcher was able to move through the difficult parts of carving the ox, an individual who understands the minute and detailed patterns of the world and language will be able to use words with grace and ease.

It seems contradictory that the Butcher was able to teach Lord Wenhui “how to care for life” through words. Much of the Zhuangzi is focused on the inability of language to convey the Dao. This contradiction can be dissolved into the conclusion that language is just another skill that can be mastered. Zhuangzi himself was a master of language – practicing the skill of placing words in a creative fashion that allowed readers to be guided towards an understanding of the Way. His mastery of language, however, also requires a masterful understanding of the world. Like Plato’s dialectician, only a sage could communicate such wisdom. Zhuangzi’s understanding of the world paired with a keen way of placing words allowed him to write in a way that has affected many individuals and has worked towards the creation of the Daoist school of thought.

⁶⁷ Plato’s *Phaedrus* contains the famous myth of Theuth, which questions the benefit of the written word. In this parable, Socrates claims that our words, when written down, are free to be bandied about because they have no one to anchor them to their intended meaning. They have little means of adapting to their particular circumstances. Socrates’ claims in this myth are interesting in regards to Zhuangzi’s “spillover saying” which, while certainly capable of existing as an act of speech, seems equally capable of functioning in the written form. Zhuangzi’s language goes out of its way to remain mobile, adaptable and fluid. His writings might be a good example against Socrates’ claims about the inadaptability of the written word in the *Phaedrus*.

Section 3

Language, Pure Experience and the Dao

Unlike many in the history of philosophy, Zhuangzi and James come together to emphasize the importance of everyday, simple and common actions. They prioritize the actions of the skillful over ruptive moments of insight, epiphany or realization. James and Zhuangzi's shared belief in the importance of habitual and skillful action may be a result of their similar beliefs in the flowing nature of experience. Both thinkers believe that there is a sort of pure or untainted experience that underlies the conceptual matter that language imposes on the world. In his essay "How Two Minds Can Know One Thing" James describes how we carve up experience, which initially appears in the form of chaos, into abstracted groups that are compatible with language.

Experiences come on an enormous scale, and if we take them all together, they come in a chaos of uncommensurable relations that we can not straighten out. We have to abstract different groups of them, and handle these separately if we are to talk of them at all.⁶⁸

Talking about experience requires the categorization and abstraction of it. While a skillful use of language may circumvent the problem of language's inveterate categorization, both James and Zhuangzi ultimately link the carving up of pure experience with the effects of language.

Over and above their agreement on the importance of daily, habitual experiences, James and Zhuangzi share a similar belief in the metaphysical structure of nature. Both thinkers view experience as a flowing, gushing stream, ever changing with the currents of nature. James' *Principles of Psychology* centers around the analogy of a stream of

⁶⁸ James, *The Writings of William James*. 231

consciousness. This flowing stream is characterized by the perpetual flow of thoughts through the mind. Consciousness is always unique and unrepeatable. As we saw in the first chapter, James believes that what one perceives, what populates one's stream of consciousness, is selected out of the undifferentiated chaos that is pure experience. One carves up pure experience into sections which resemble the formation of language. Perception tends to focus on the noun-like aspects of experience while passing over the verbal portions. James calls the noun-like aspects "resting-places"⁶⁹ and the verb-like aspects "places of flight."⁷⁰ The categorization and abstraction inherent in language focuses on the solid and stable "resting-places," while neglecting the transitive and fleeting "places of flight". This emphasis on one part of consciousness over the other fails to capture the true "flight" of experience, substituting a stagnant pond for a flowing stream.

Much like James, Zhuangzi's Dao can be aptly described through the metaphor of a stream. Zhuangzi scholar A.C. Graham describes Cook Ding's experience of ox-carving as tapping into the flowing stream of the Dao. This stream is what Cook Ding connects with in the process of carving the ox. It is what directs and guides his sage-like movements.

In responding immediately and with unsullied clarity of vision one hits in any particular situation on that single course which fits no rules but is the inevitable one... This course, which meanders, shifting courses with varying conditions like water finding its own channel, is the Tao or the "Way," from which Taoism takes its name; it is what patterns the seeming disorder of change and multiplicity, and all things unerringly follow where it tends except that inveterate analyzer and wordmonger man, who misses it by

⁶⁹ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 243

⁷⁰ James, *Principles of Psychology*. Vol. I. 243

sticking rigidly to the verbally formulated codes which other philosophical schools represent as the “Way of the sage” or “Way of the former kings.”⁷¹

Just as James compares consciousness to a stream, Graham compares the Dao to the flow of water through its natural channels. Just as habit creates flowing neural pathways, acting skillfully follows the hidden channels of nature. For Zhuangzi, the skill of Cook Ding is not simply a cultivation of certain neural pathways, but instead involves an ability to see the pathways that occur in nature. While James and Zhuangzi disagree about the location of this flowing sort of experience, either in the brain or in nature, they agree that the experience of life is indeed flowing, careening from one thing to another, resisting the categorization of the “inveterate analyzer and wordmonger man.”

Just as Zhuangzi sees the Dao as a unity which has the potential to be unnaturally cut up and categorized by language, James, in his later works on pure experience, views “pure nature” as a “big blooming buzzing confusion,”⁷² which we ultimately carve up. Pure experience is an undifferentiated chaos that can only be made sense of after it is categorized and named.

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple that.⁷³

The differentiation between subject and object happens second; pure experience happens first. The primordial flux of pure experience, however, soon gets cut up and categorized.

⁷¹ Graham 7

⁷² James, *Writings of William James* 233

⁷³ James, *Writings of William James* 177-8

As James states: “lines of order soon get traced.”⁷⁴ One begins to differentiate between one’s inner history and an outer, impersonal and objective world. What James wants to emphasize is that these distinctions of inner and outer are merely differences of degree, not of kind. One differentiates between a real fire and an internal imagining of a one because a “real” fire burns while a daydream of one does not. However, while this seems to indicate a real difference, what James wants to argue is that the difference is not something that can be felt in the actual experience of the object. An imagining of a fire can feel as real as an actual one. Without the circumstance of burning one’s hand, one might be incapable of telling if one experience is “real” and another is a dream. The distinction between objective and subjective, for James, fails to acknowledge that an undifferentiated, primordial, chaotic experience underlies everything. These categories fail to acknowledge the relatedness of experience.

Zhuangzi too questions the place of categories like objective and subjective, right and wrong, and “this” and “that.” He views these categorizations as an imposition on the Way.

For this reason the sage does not follow this route but illuminates things with heaven’s light. He just goes along with things. What is this is also that, and what is that is also this. That is both right and wrong. This is also right and wrong. So is there really a this and a that? The place where neither this nor that finds its counterpart is called the pivot of the Way. Once the pivot finds its socket it can respond endlessly. What’s right is endless. And what’s wrong is endless, too. This is why I say it’s better to throw them open to the light.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ James, *Writings of William James* 175

⁷⁵ Zhuangzi 212-213

In this passage, Zhuangzi questions the categories that one typically places on the world. Like James, he believes that primordial perceptions of reality become carved up into different “this’ and that’s.” Unlike James, who sees the categorization of the world as a natural and necessary aspect of experience, Zhuangzi hopes to offer a means of connecting to the underlying Way or Dao. This can be achieved by acting skillfully, by ignoring the categories that groups like the Confucians place on the world and attempting to rid oneself of rigid perspectives.

Language plays a large role in the inevitable categorization of experience. For Zhuangzi, what one is capable of learning about the Dao by talking to someone else is limited; words cannot portray its full breadth. Instead one must learn it for oneself. Language carves the world into unnatural perspectives, ignoring the richness of experience. For James too, language seems to play a large role in the inevitable categorization of pure experience. As James states:

But the flux of it [experience] no sooner comes than it tends to fill itself with emphases, and these salient parts become identified and fixed and abstracted; so that experience now flows as if shot through with adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions.⁷⁶

The categorization of pure experience is shot through with language. These grammatical particles represent the fixed and abstracted aspects of experience that lie on top of pure experience. Experience becomes shot through with resting places, nouns, adjectives, prepositions and conjunctions, forgetting the verbs, the places of flight. The imposition of these grammatical particles on consciousness creates blockages where there should be a stream.

⁷⁶ James, *Writings of William James* 215

For James, these blockages, in the form of nouns, prepositions and conjunctions, hinder the true feeling of the flow of experience. Describing what it might be like to feel the continuity of experience, he states:

Practically to experience one's personal continuum in this living way is to know the originals of the ideas of continuity and of sameness, to know what the words stand for concretely, to own all that they can ever mean. But all experiences have their conditions; and over-subtle intellects, thinking about the facts here, and asking how they are possible, have ended by substituting a lot of static objects of conception for the direct perceptual experiences.⁷⁷

Both Zhuangzi and James are concerned with the “over-subtle intellects,” “analyzers” “and wordmongers.” These individuals get caught up on the seemingly stable boulders that pepper the stream of experience. They hold onto these stable conceptual rocks and ignore the flowing water that surrounds them. Fighting against the current of perception in this way, these individuals fail to acknowledge the true, ever-changing nature of experience.

While language carves experience into unnatural categories, habit and skill allow one to tap into the flow of experience. Habit creates flow; it allows one to complete activities without the interference of language or concepts. Remember James' example of a piano player. When the novice first sits down to play, she must think through each step of each movement. As she learns to play a simple scale she must conjure up the name of the note she wishes to play, look towards the keys, locate the appropriate key and then press down on the appropriate key with the appropriate finger. While at first this process is laborious, the novice eventually habituates to this activity, allowing her to play the piano with less attention and effort. Once the novice has learned the song, she

⁷⁷ James, *Writings of William James* 198

can play without the interference of these abstract commands. She simply has to issue the cue: “Play twinkle twinkle little star” and the entire song follows forth. Repetition creates neural pathways, allowing us to commit these actions with skill and ease. Just like Cook Ding, who must focus when he encounters a difficulty, the piano player must focus in order to improve and perfect her skill. After all, she does not want to get stuck playing “twinkle twinkle little star” forever. While habits do not completely automate the practice of playing, they do allow one to move up the ladder of proficiency, perfecting slowly the practice of a particular action, so that one can free one’s attention to the difficult parts of one’s activity

While habits carve up the world in certain ways, shaping our attention, will and character, they also allow us to tap into the flowing character of pure experience. Committing and creating habitual actions allows us to travel unthinkingly through the majority of our tasks. This ability, which if taken alone would create a society of automatons, is more useful and meaningful than one might normally think. The automation that comes with habitual action frees us from the conceptualizing and naming that otherwise fills experience. In habitual actions we allow the stream of consciousness to flow unfettered. It is one realm where pure experience survives.

Ultimately James and Zhuangzi agree that what are often considered the dull, unthinking and common aspects of life play a more important role than we typically give them credit for. Habitual action and the practice of a skill enable the wheelwright and the butcher to connect with the underlying Dao. These craftsmen are praised as “knowing how to care for life.” Their skill allows them to live in a sagely way. James also claims that habitual actions are essential for “knowing how to care for life.” It is only through

the cultivation of good habits that we can create healthy and productive characters.

These seemingly rote and mechanical aspects of experience ultimately shape the people we become, molding our characters and allowing us to cultivate the best way of living.

Habit, pure experience and the Dao are all things that thinkers like Heidegger overlook. The pervasive influence of habit, pure experience and the Dao flies under the radar of philosophies that prioritize rupture because they are the aspects of experience of which we are hardly aware. Habit influences everything, yet tends to recede into the background of attention. Similarly, pure experience and the Dao are the often unnoticed foundation upon which perception and language are built. The importance of habit, skill, pure experience and the Dao lies in their underground nature, in the fact that they do not stand out as exceptional or special. Their pervasive ordinariness allows many to forget that they are there. Thus, it is important to highlight these aspects of experience and bring them into the realm of consciousness in order to create a full and rich notion of experience.

If we follow the advice of Zhuangzi, Plato and James, our goal becomes to connect more closely with the particularities of experience, focusing not only on the boulders of abstraction and language, but also on the flowing paths of flight. A close attention to the habit, pure experience and the Dao allows us to spontaneously respond to the particularities of our experiences. When we allow the categories and labels that we put on things fall away, we are able to react spontaneously to our environment, to respond to it in its fullness. The Wheelwright, Cook Ding and even Plato's dialectician all pay attention to the particularities of their experiences, respond to them in the moment and resist reacting in response to abstractions and labels. Their ability to actively respond

to their environment is linked to their ability to notice not only the resting places of experience but also the places of flight. Their ability to see what others miss in experience is the key to their success. They have all managed to capitalize on the unnoticed, to use their secret knowledge to the fullest and to live a life of flight.

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