

BOOK REVIEW

David Chai, *Zhuangzi and the Becoming of Nothingness*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019, 198pp., ISBN: 9781438472676.

David Chai's latest work delves into nothingness and becomes a groundbreaking rethinking of Zhuangzi's worldview. In *Zhuangzi and the Becoming of Nothingness*, Chai carefully explicates the metaphysics and cosmology underlying the *Zhuangzi's* philosophy. Chai breathes new life into Zhuangzi studies by showing modern scholars a way out of the narrow-minded, well-frog-like proposals that the *Zhuangzi* advocates nihilism or relativism, especially ethical relativism or epistemological skepticism. The text is comprised of acknowledgments, an introduction, six chapters, a brief conclusion, copious notes, a bibliography, and a thorough index. It focuses on the cosmology, cosmogony, and meontological foundation or abyss that makes the world and universe possible. This work is the first of a trilogy; subsequent works will unravel the ethics and epistemology of the *Zhuangzi*.

The Introduction outlines the historical background that led to the Daoists' focus on Dao rather than *tian* 天 (sky/heaven) as the immeasurable creative power of the universe, and sketches Zhuang Zhou's setting and the redaction of a 52-chapter text into the received 33-chapter text edited and commented on by Guo Xiang 郭象 (252 CE–312 CE). The character *wu* 無 is translated to mean both “nothingness” and “non-being” based on Chai's interpretation of the context. He also outlines the key points of the six chapters that follow.

The first Chapter, entitled “Nothingness and Dao: A Time before Being” and divided into five subsections, argues that in the context of Zhuangzi's cosmogony—where Dao generates existence—the character *wu* must have an allegorical “living presence” as “ontological nothingness” (9). He says that “nothingness is the milieu within which Dao moves and to which it turns in order to realize its onto-cosmological creativity” (9). *Wu* as nothingness is the “meontological material used by Dao,” whereas *wu* as ontic “non-being” is a correlative counterpart of *you* 有 (being) along with rest and motion, light and dark, and the other counter-elements that constitute existence (9). Chai proposes that nothingness is conceptually like the living ether (*qi* 氣), which

permeates the universe and all things. Similarly, nothingness is the meontological ether in which Dao permeates things. Human misconceptions bifurcate life and death, right and wrong, and so on without realizing Dao's cosmic oneness. The One poses the issue of monism.

Chai unpacks the nature of oneness or of naming Dao the One to show that it is not a monistic concept. The One refers to a metaphysical context wherein the myriad things transform into one another. The One designates the primal Dao's undifferentiated completeness. Being and non-being emerge from the Dao's womb and the myriad forms of existence come and go. Unrecognized, the primal Dao and nothingness persist in the world; underlying non-being, they nourish the myriad things by providing a meontological mobility regarded as the passage of time (24). Having explained the cosmogonic processes of Dao in the milieu of nothingness and its phenomenal designation as the One, Chai turns to explicate a cosmogonic circle of returning. Returning occurs on two levels: the returning via our mortality as the end of life, and the returning via our ontic reintegration of being into the One. Chai draws on Chapter 23 of the *Daodejing* to develop a "regressive intuition" in the process of return. Because the return ensures that each thing maintains its "holistic freedom," it does not degenerate into a nihilism. The return culminates in our death but with a renewed significance and meaning.

The second Chapter, "Dao, the One, and the Question of Being," is divided into five subsections and shows that the Dao generates what Chai calls the Thing, the primal creative principle. The Thing in turn generates the myriad things. Dao "imbues the Thing with the potential to replicate itself as other things," running their course they pass away and return to the Thing, and not to the Dao itself (62). The potential power of Dao in them is a unifying force that constitutes the One. Chai reviews several of the *Zhuangzi's* skills stories to see things from the holistic perspective of Dao. This opens questions of how the sage returns to the constancy of Dao while living in a world of flux, and the meaning of temporality.

"Dao and the Time of Nothingness," the third Chapter, is divided into three subsections. It sets out to establish that time is not only ontological but also that temporality has a meontological character. The Daoist sage lives in a non-temporal selfless hub from which she may shift perspectives to see the temporal order of past, present, and future. The sage's Dao perspective takes

time to become a non-temporal totality, freeing people from the moment to moment ties of the present to embrace and create a non-transcendent world of “non-deliberate doing, pervasive self-sameness, empty impartiality and returning to the One” (86).

The fourth Chapter, “Zhuangzi and the Life Praxis of Being Useless,” has three subsections and argues that the *Zhuangzi*’s unique praise of the useless is turned into a life praxis. Spiritual freedom is realized now by shifting our perspective to focus on ontic non-being. Non-being or non-existence is commonly taken to be the epitome of the useless, and yet from the vast expanse of empty space to the void of our stomachs, the abyss makes our lives possible. To avoid the unnatural demise of war and court intrigue, Zhuangzi sought ways to live out our natural life span by deploying the use of being useless. The metaphor of the twisted gnarly tree stands tall as the champion to meet this challenge of forsaking our social usefulness so as to survive and complete the natural order.

The fifth Chapter, “Discovering Dao through Self-Forgetting,” is also divided into five subsections. It argues that the thought processes of the empirical-self block people’s access to the spontaneous changes of Dao and prevents them from returning to the One such that an alternative path of forgetting is presented. This chapter paves a triad-path from ontic self-forgetting, to finding one’s way through the ontological level, to returning to cosmological freedom. Chai argues that sitting in forgetfulness complements being useless; it provides another praxis focused on non-self and non-presence to empty the spirit, finding the quiescent cosmological freedom. “Freedom in Dao is a freedom that lets things be; in letting things be as they are, Dao ensures they will live out their allotted years in a manner most attuned to their way of existence. In light of Dao’s utilization of nothingness, the freedom it affords those who conjoin with it is both spiritual and cosmological” (137).

“Wandering Carefree in Nothingness,” the sixth Chapter, is also divided into five subsections. It discusses in detail the nature of cosmological freedom and the three heavenly principles of freedom, opening horizons to show how nothingness is the great harmonizer, culminating in the freedom of carefree wandering. People commonly think of freedom in the ontological causal terms of restraint and release. Chai moves the discussion to a

cosmological level. Dao's cosmological freedom is to be had in forgetting freedom, or at least forgetting the conventional notions of being free—a cosmological freedom of non-ordinary freedom. To enjoy carefree wandering a person embraces the cosmological harmonization of the myriad things. Having forgotten the self, freedom is not about personal freedom. "Freedom presents itself as a great awakening to the nothingness incipient in all things" (143). How does this spiritual awakening to freedom come about? Chai presents the three principles of heaven, that is, differentiation, measure, and harmony to be the means of actualizing this cosmological freedom. Heaven differentiates the non-differentiation of things. In other words, the linguistic conventions of affirming and denying, of right and wrong, and of yes and no are washed-out by heaven's unifying embrace. The heavenly measure is an equalizing measurement, but it is not imposed by heaven itself. Heavenly measurement is had when "things equalize themselves in harmonic accordance with Dao" (145)—the measurement of non-measurement, where the heavenly measure is an unquantifiable measure. The actualization of freedom in our lives, and that which makes the measure of heaven function, is achieved in the process of forgetting. Chai cites a passage from the conclusion of the Gengshang Chu, Chapter 23 of the *Zhuangzi*, to make his point: "forgetting other men, they are taken to be men of heaven ... they are so because they have joined with heavenly harmony" (148). The natural evolution or the becoming of nothingness of being is achieved in letting-things-be. All things abide in the heavenly harmony via the measure of heaven. Through the practice of self-forgetting, speaking without words, letting things be, and deploying the three (non) principles of heaven are some of the ways to experience cosmological freedom and discard the simplistic human-contrived notions of positive and negative (to X from Y) freedom.

Chai continues to elucidate how nothingness is the material used by Dao to construct the harmonization of the universe. The unifying meontological nothingness "balances the onto-cosmological oneness of Dao" (151). Returning to the One we are free, and this is to amalgamate with nothingness. Returning to the One is achieved by taking the first steps into carefree wandering. Carefree wandering is "the highest state of existence human beings can experience," i.e., cosmological freedom. The chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of how freedom is manifested and experienced in

carefree wandering (*xiaoyao* 逍遙), ending Chai's book where the *Zhuangzi* begins. Zhuangzi's cosmology is not based on a hierarchical chain of being; his cosmology is "Dao's symbiotically spontaneous creation realized through nothingness" (161). The art or dance of carefree wandering is to ramble in nothingness. This kind of meandering without a known or even knowable destination frees humans of social-moral-linguistic conventions, triggering the experience of cosmological freedom. Person-making achieves sagacious levels as we discard names and distinctions, living life in playful bliss and carefree ignorance. The empty mind, forgetting, being useless, not imposing judgments or distinctions or conventional measurements—all are maintained in carefree rambling. This kind of wandering takes a person to the infinite, the unbound realm beyond the six directions, returning to the root-nothingness. "In other words, carefree wandering is an expression of the [cosmological] freedom common to the entire universe insofar as it is the harmony inherent to yin and yang, non-being and being, heaven and earth, all of which are meontologically rooted in Dao" (167).

In the four-page Conclusion, Chai shows that his book collects the various scattered themes of the *Zhuangzi* together in a cohesive and consistent manner for the reader, elucidating its spiritual philosophy based on a threefold cosmology of Dao, nothingness, and being. In this triadic cosmology, Dao and nothingness are primary, while being and non-being are secondary. After summarizing the main points, Chai extols the subtle and profound value of the *Zhuangzi's* cosmogony and cosmology while praising its sublime poetry. Then, he raises a few criticisms of this early Daoist philosophy, notably its limitations, while offering counterpoints. First the writing style of the text is not easily accessible due to its profundity. The text seems to be written for sages, not common folk, and yet the text is not elitist, and promotes socially disenfranchised criminals and cripples as moral exemplars. In poking fun at the teachings of others for not improving the human condition, the text again appears to limit its access to the few who could afford to follow its arduous path. Chai proposes that actually the point is to find a form of natural action that is not dependent on social judgments for the measure of one's success. He notes again that his book does not wrestle with the allegations of relativism and skepticism because of his view that the reader must grasp the cosmological focus of early Daoism before

delving into its epistemological and ethical teachings. After recapping the main points of each chapter, Chai critically notes the limits of his book and thereby opens the door to the forthcoming works that will grapple with the allegations of relativism and skepticism that have dominated previous modern scholarship on the *Zhuangzi*.

A few issues with this book caught my attention. First, Chai treats the text as a unified work, which it is not. This is partly done for the ease and flow of referring to the text, and because he is studying the philosophy of the text itself rather than trying to separate the thought of the person Zhuang Zhou from the various other authors of the composite received *Zhuangzi* text. He is explicating what he considers to be the previously unnoticed cosmological aspects of the text missed by other interpreters. Some textual scholars may find his syncretic approach misleading at best given the documented different layers and diverse voices in the *Zhuangzi*. Their objections will document their narrow-minded understanding of Zhuangzi's cosmology. Second, this book is written in metaphorical, figurative, and symbolic language. Scholars perfumed in analytic philosophy will be unsettled. Those steamed in a functional theory of meaning will come to acknowledge that the context, both historical and literary, requires a figurative unfolding of nothingness because a true/false dualistic logic cannot clarify Zhuangzi's cosmology; let alone meontology.

The text opens with a question about discussing the truth of the world in terms of beings in the singular or plural. Chai cannot deny the plurality of "beings," the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物), while following Zhuangzi; he shows they are the One. When he uses the expression "the world and universe" he appears to miss the variety of perspectives that live in different worlds and even different universes. Yet his approach ameliorates expressions by going back to the undifferentiated, unnamed origin, embracing the pluri-verses.

Chai uses the anachronistic label "Daoism" that was developed later by court librarians to classify the texts and authors, which may be an easy handle but is extraneous nonetheless. Zhuangzi would not, and later day Daoists do not, like to be labeled, named, or categorized while dwelling in the unnamed origin that permeates life, and yet from time to time even they themselves need to name and label things to conduct daily affairs.

At times the metaphorical, figurative language seems to distort the author's intention, and the use of emotional and anthropomorphic expressions become distracting or open to misinterpretation. For example, "the *Zhuangzi* safely conjoined them into an undifferentiated whole without fear that doing so would deny nothingness its meontological constancy" (170). This writing style anthropomorphizes the text as an active agent with emotional feelings of fear. Another way to express this in a more accurate manner would be to say that the authors of the text conjoined these concepts to ensure that nothingness as a meontological concept remained intact and primary. Sprinkled throughout Chai drives home the point that Zhuangzi's worldview does not entail a transcendent, other-worldly realm or concept. In other words, the creative power of Dao is not to be confused with a creator God. Another example: he uses the expression "the eyes of Dao" (63). This kind of language is unavoidable for humans. Rather than dwelling upon its shortcomings, the next time you visit a temple with an anthropomorphic image of the Primordial Heavenly Worthy (*Yuanshi Tianzun* 元始天尊), then un-see it for what it is not, and recognize the idol as the Becoming of Nothingness.

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