The Politics of Skepticism: Montaigne and Zhuangzi on Freedom, Toleration, and the Limits of Government

by

Lincoln Edward Ford Rathnam

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Abstract:

Contemporary political discourse often centers on a shared set of normative commitments: freedom, toleration, and limited government. This dissertation examines the theoretical basis for these commitments, through a comparative study of two eminent skeptics: Michel de Montaigne and Zhuangzi. Both develop forms of skepticism that are rooted in analyses of the phenomena of diversity and disagreement. They contend that our inability to reach convergence on central philosophical questions demonstrates the fundamental limitations of human knowledge.

I argue that both offer novel and powerful arguments connecting these skeptical epistemological theses with the relevant normative commitments. In particular, both take skepticism to advance human freedom, by clearing away obstacles to effective action. As beings who are raised within a particular community, we inevitably acquire certain habits that constrain the forms of thought and action open to us. Skepticism helps us to recognize the contingency of those forms. In the interpersonal realm, both writers contend that skepticism generates an attitude of toleration towards others who live differently. This is because it undermines the theoretical claims upon which most forms of intolerance are constructed. I defend this claim with reference to the various forms of intolerance that existed in each writer’s context, Warring States era China and France during the Wars of Religion.
Later chapters examine the political implications of these forms of skepticism. I argue that both writers suggest that skepticism helps to eliminate potentially dangerous political passions, notably personal ambition and the desire for glory. This leads to a more constrained view of government that encourages us to focus our attention on avoiding extreme cruelty and violence rather than pursuing grand political projects.
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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1: Overview of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I contend that the ideas of freedom, toleration, and limited government can be derived from philosophical skepticism of a particular type. I defend this claim through an investigation of two great skeptics—the ancient Chinese Daoist thinker Zhuangzi, and the sixteenth century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne. In seeing how skepticism can ground these ethical and political stances under disparate conditions, we can better appreciate its practical significance. The positions of these thinkers are attractive not only because they defend ideas that remain of concern to us, but also because they root their accounts of these ideas in a theoretical analysis of diversity and disagreement, phenomena that remain as prevalent today as ever.

1.2: Contemporary Pluralism

One of the most striking features of the political and intellectual life of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the global diffusion of a set of ideas often associated with the Enlightenment, among them freedom, toleration, and limited government. While they may never have been purely European concerns, it is now evident that they are accepted, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees, all over the world. One practical manifestation of this is the spread of liberal democracy and its attendant ideals. Vibrant Asian democracies, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, can now be counted among the “stable liberal democracies of the industrialized world.”\(^1\) Although some countries, such as China and Singapore, may interpret these ideals differently, as surveys such as the East Asia Barometer indicate, their ubiquity is striking.\(^2\)

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In the theoretical realm, questions concerning freedom, toleration, and the limits of government have become deeply linked to the idea of modernity itself. As Habermas puts it, “the moral concepts of modern times follow from the recognition of the subjective freedom of individuals.” This is not to say that such concerns exist only in a normative realm isolated from practical politics. Part of the rationale for endorsing these concepts is in order to confront the central social, political, and economic challenges of the modern era. Jiwei Ci, for example, argues that “the profound social transformation of China in recent decades has overtaken us, to the point where we risk permanent moral crisis as a society if we do not begin to find a place for freedom in our moral and political culture.” He argues that only an acceptance of freedom can remedy the “crisis involving the right (or justice)” that has led to the widespread violation of basic social norms.

While the concerns of liberal societies are sometimes presented as fundamentally alien to Chinese culture and politics, there is a well-established discourse on these matters dating back to the nineteenth century. Many early twentieth century reformers argued, like Ci today, that a flourishing modern community could persist only when freedom was fully realized. Hu Shi (1891-1962), an influential philosopher and reformer trained in both classical Chinese thought and American pragmatism, for example, suggested the following aspiration for his country:

We can gradually inculcate the habit of cherishing our own human rights and respecting those of others, and thus gradually train ourselves to become a people who value the

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rights we should enjoy [as humans] and dare to struggle for what we believe is right.\(^7\)

Even earlier, during the last years of the Qing dynasty, the scholar Liu Shipei (1884-1919) urged his readers to accept that “freedom of thought and freedom of action…are definitely an individual’s rights.” He sought to ground this claim in China’s ancient traditions, declaring that freedom is what Zhuangzi meant by “let it be, leave it alone.”\(^8\) As this comment indicates, many scholars of the time attempted to reach new interpretations of the classical Chinese texts in order to understand modern life. Understanding modernity, in China as in the West, was taken to be a matter of understanding its distinctive relationship to what came before it.\(^9\)

The global diffusion of concepts such as freedom, toleration, and limited government would not have been a surprise to many of the foremost thinkers of the Enlightenment. Many believed that these norms could, in principle, become the objects of universal agreement, and that humanity would in fact reach such an agreement in due course. Kant, for example, argued that enlightenment “is even inescapable if only the public is given its freedom.”\(^10\) and that human history was directed inevitably towards a society that “possesses the most precise determination and enforcement of the limit of this freedom so that it can coexist with the freedom of other societies.”\(^11\)


\(^8\) Liu Shipei, Textbook on Ethics, 40 in Angle and Svensson (2001), 37-42.

\(^9\) Angle and Svensson (2001) contains many other examples of such statements from reformers across the political spectrum.


While these ethical and political ideals remain powerful, their philosophical foundations have been called into question by several related lines of thinking. It no longer seems inevitable that they, or any other principles, will secure universal acceptance. Among the most important causes of this loss of confidence in the universality of some of these ideals has been a new understanding of the phenomena of diversity and disagreement. The phenomenon itself is obviously not new. The great early modern thinkers were well aware of it. The works of, for example, Locke\textsuperscript{12}, Leibniz\textsuperscript{13}, and Montesquieu\textsuperscript{14}, among many other writers of the period, include detailed consideration of the diverse ways of living that prevailed within communities outside of Europe, both past and present. The doubts about universalism that have become more and more common since the Enlightenment cannot, therefore, result merely from an awareness of cultural difference.

The Enlightenment aspiration for convergence did not depend on the idea that everyone always agrees on shared moral principles, but it did depend on the idea that they would do so under the right conditions. John Locke denied that we had any innate moral knowledge simply in virtue of being human, largely on the basis of his own awareness of cultural diversity, but this led him seek a firm foundation that could ground moral agreement. He argued that, while we might not have immediate access to moral truth, it is nonetheless the case that “morality is


capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics.”

John Stuart Mill, similarly, believed that conditions of free debate would, over time, lead to progressively more accurate beliefs.

Many of the leading theorists within contemporary liberal democracies no longer find the hopes of Locke, Kant, and Mill reasonable. It has become increasingly clear that on many central questions concerning individual or communal purposes, we can no longer presuppose shared answers, whether religious, philosophical, or cultural. Jeffrey Stout observes that “many of our fellow citizens…enter public debate on behalf of settled convictions only to find themselves repressing a sense of bad faith when they can’t defend themselves beyond a certain point against people whose backgrounds and convictions differ from theirs.”

Alasdair MacIntyre laments that “the language and the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed” and notes that “there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”

Both writers describe the fear that disagreement on the deepest moral and political questions is not a temporary phenomenon, to be remedied through open debate, but rather an unavoidable fact of life.

These phenomena, as MacIntyre notes, can be traced back to Max Weber and, before him, Nietzsche. Weber argued in “Science as a Vocation” that “the different value systems of the world are caught up in an insoluble struggle with one another.” Nietzsche denied the

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existence of “the good as such,” and declared “perspective…the basic condition of all life.” Nietzsche and Weber, therefore, reject the aspiration of the thinkers of the Enlightenment to obtain a universal agreement on the central moral and political questions.

These forms of skepticism about the prospects for normative agreement have been strengthened by the increasingly obvious examples of deep disagreement all around us. Due to the importance of globalization in contemporary economic and cultural life it has now become evident that the existence of alternative regime types and ethical stances is a permanent fixture of global politics. Moreover, due to the frequency of international migration and the increasing diversity of many societies, it is also an ever more prominent feature of domestic politics. In both spheres, this has raised questions concerning the possibility of genuine agreement on matters of political significance.

While liberal democracies may at least be able to rely on a shared political culture to ground their norms, the international realm is the site of even more radical diversity. This has become evident, for example, in the debates surrounding the justification of the global human rights regime. While a basic set of human right norms has been widely endorsed, its foundations remain vigorously disputed. East Asia has been the site of many of these conflicts. This is, in part, because of its rapid economic rise during the late twentieth century.

Some had believed that economic development would inevitably produce liberal democracy. Contrary to this expectation, leaders of some of the most rapidly developing countries in East Asia, most notably former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, have claimed that the Confucian cultural traditions of the region both supported economic growth and

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justified abrogating the freedoms constitutive of liberalism.\textsuperscript{22} These developments have given rise to a robust debate concerning the viability of human rights norms in East Asia. Theorists have raised the question of whether or not such norms must be modified in each context, given the particularities of local traditions and cultures.

### 1.3: Post-Enlightenment Defenses of Freedom and Toleration

The cluster of ideas, including freedom, toleration, and limited government, that is presupposed by both liberalism and the human rights regime is thus in a state of foundational uncertainty. For this reason, various thinkers have attempted to reformulate them in ways that do not presuppose the universalist foundations sought by their predecessors. This general line of thinking is shared by the public reason liberalism of John Rawls and the moral minimalism of Michael Walzer. Both reflect, in different ways, the conviction that convergence through reason across different traditions and communities is either impossible or, at the very least, not to be assumed. Their attempts to vindicate their preferred ideals, however, each present certain challenges.

We might begin by considering Rawls’ position, as elaborated in *Political Liberalism* and subsequent works. The basic problem around which his view is oriented is the following:

How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?\textsuperscript{23}

This problem arises, for Rawls, because “a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the

\textsuperscript{22} Fareed Zakaria, “Culture is Destiny: An Interview with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs* 73 (March-April 1994): 109-126.

framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime.”

Rawls traces the basic problem of modern democracy back to the early modern conflicts between Christian sects. The Reformation involved new kinds of division, which gave rise to new questions about how society was possible among those deeply divided on fundamental issues. Rawls’ response to this problem is to restate liberalism as a “political conception,” meaning that it can “be presented independently from comprehensive doctrines of any kind.”

Gerald Gaus has referred to Rawls’ political liberalism as a “post-Enlightenment” doctrine. This is a reasonable appellation, given that it reflects a loss of confidence in the view, shared in different ways by Locke, Kant, Mill, and others, that convergence on central philosophical questions could be expected. Rawls’ eventually extended his general approach to the international realm, by attempting to explain how a “Law of Peoples” could serve as “a political conception of right and justice that applies to the principles of international law and practice.” We need not delve into the content of the Law of Peoples here. The central point, for our purposes, is that Rawls’ approach involves abstaining from controversial philosophical theses that might be obstacles to the kind of agreement for which he hopes.

This approach also served as an inspiration for contemporary theorists of human rights. Joshua Cohen and Kenneth Baynes, for example, have argued that international norms should

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26 This is actually one of three aspects of a political conception, although it is the one that is most relevant for our purposes. The other two are that it should apply to the “basic structure of society” and that it “can be worked out from fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a constitutional regime.” John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” in *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition*, 452.
not rest upon any particular philosophical foundation. Cohen refers to this as justificatory minimalism. Such writers often point out that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights seems to have been drafted in a way that produced a practical consensus without shared foundations.\textsuperscript{29}

While there may be cases in which such an approach is desirable, it is by no means clear that it is sufficient. As we have seen, the nature of freedom and toleration is not the object of universal agreement. Some East Asian societies, and surely many others elsewhere, understand these ideas in quite a different way than those prevalent in Western liberal democracies. This is not to suggest that there are no concerns that are roughly equivalent to these outside of the West. I will, in fact, argue precisely the opposite. The point is simply that we cannot assume that any convergence on norms will come about, except at a very vague and abstract level. A general concern for freedom is not of much use, as a norm, unless there is fairly robust agreement on what it would entail.

What is most plausible about Rawls’ position is his desire to avoid endangering a liberal consensus through an appeal to claims within some more controversial domain (religion, philosophy, etc.). This would seem to make more sense as a practical guideline, however, rather than as a fundamental principle of liberalism. There may be circumstances, including our own, in which such suggestions are inappropriate. This is because a liberal consensus may simply not exist within or across some communities. In such cases, appealing to some other domain might strengthen, rather than weaken the case. To this Rawls might respond that the non-foundational character of his liberalism is not primarily a pragmatic means to achieve political harmony, but rather a reflection of the moral equality of citizens. Be that as it may, unless we are willing to

\textsuperscript{29} For an account of the drafting of the UDHR that emphasizes this aspect, see Mary Ann Glendon, \textit{A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights} (New York: Random House, 2001).
put aside practical considerations entirely, finding shared foundations may be an unavoidable starting point for generating consensus given preexisting disagreement.\textsuperscript{30}  

Michael Walzer seeks a more substantive agreement on basic moral commitments. Walzer’s approach is to argue that all moral reasoning is specific to some community, but that the various communal moralities are sufficiently similar that we can find a shared “minimal morality” at the core of each. By this he means that, in spite of their many differences, there are some general rules that are no community actually rejects. The merit of this approach is it provides a genuine shared ground for moral agreement at a more fundamental level than the approach suggested by Rawls. The difficulty, however, is that the agreement involved is less straightforward and obvious than some of Walzer’s formulations would suggest. Moreover, as the term “moral minimalism” would suggest, it might force us to discard most of what we now take to be morality.

The first difficulty is tied to the varied ways in which seemingly related concepts can be articulated. Suppose that we want to justify a minimal set of human rights that will protect some limited range of freedoms for all human beings. We must then determine whether or not freedom and equality are part of the moral minimum. This would require inspecting various traditions and seeing whether or not their particular moral discourses uphold these commitments, or at least rough equivalents. Let us suppose that we do find common concerns across these communities. Would this amount to “a set of standards to which all societies can be held—negative injunctions, most likely, rules against murder, deceit, torture, oppression, and

tyranny”?31 Well, it would at least allow us to say that these societies too reject these evils. This would be a fairly significant discovery. It is less clear, however, that there would be sufficient agreement to lead to basic standards that could be applied in a uniform way.

Two examples may clarify the nature of this difficulty. Aristotle indicates that there is widespread agreement that justice concerns treating people equally.32 Different factions within the polis, and also different communities, however, turn out to have different views on what characteristics are salient to judging equality. Oligarchs, for example, claim that wealth is what is relevant, while democrats disagree and instead emphasize freedom and citizenship.33 Suppose that one is searching for Walzer’s moral minimum and looks at an oligarchy and a democracy. He or she finds that both share this kind of formal commitment to equality, while differing in their substantive ways of thinking about what is actually just. It does not seem that the moral minimum can provide a shared standard that can be used to judge particular cases. It is sufficient to justify our saying that the oligarchs and democrats both have views on justice, and even that they disagree in their views, but we cannot go much further. We surely cannot use the areas on which they overlap as an international standard of distributive justice.

Here Walzer would likely respond that questions of distributive justice do not fall within the moral minimum. He indicates, for example, that Rawls’ difference principle may be part of a certain community’s moral code, or its “maximal morality,” but it is not part of

32 Politics Book 3 Chapter 9. See also the treatment of distributive justice in Nicomachean Ethics V.3.
33 Politics, Book 3, Chapter 9.
the moral minimum.\textsuperscript{34} With regard to distribution, the moral minimum may require only that people are not allowed to starve or undergo severe material deprivation. This response, however, leaves the idea of a moral minimum interpreted as a shared set of standards viable only if whatever falls under it does not involve this kind of massive disagreement. The challenge is that almost every moral commitment, including those that Walzer believes are part of the minimum, is the object of analogous types of disagreement. He indicates that oppression and torture are precluded by the moral minimum. To be sure, if anything is going to count as part of the moral minimum, then these seem like plausible candidates. The question is whether or not they can be understood, in their minimal form, in a way that can guide actual application.

Judith Shklar argued that liberals are people who put cruelty first. This would suggest that those who uphold other systems of thought put different principles first. Shklar herself notes that pre-modern European societies put salvation first.\textsuperscript{35} Cruelty would also seem to be prohibited by the principles contained within Walzer’s moral minimum. This presents a puzzle, since cruelty then seems to be both a specifically liberal concern and a universal concern, at least if we accept the claims of both Shklar and Walzer. There need not be any contradiction here. It could be the case that all communities abhor cruelty, but that liberalism places a special emphasis on its elimination.\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps the idea is that various societies can agree that cruelty is bad, but they disagree on how bad it is in relation to other

\textsuperscript{34} Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 21-25.
\textsuperscript{36} Even the claim that all communities abhor cruelty, which would have to be the case for it to be part of the moral minimum, is questionable. As we shall see, the reason why Montaigne places such a great emphasis on the elimination of cruelty is because it was so prevalent in his own time.
relevant concerns such as religious purity, social order, and so forth. This raises a problem for Walzer’s account, however, because it suggests that the moral minimum cannot guide us in weighing different human concerns, even if they are universally shared. Once it has been admitted that the moral minimum only demands some concern for cruelty, but not a particular account of how it is to be weighed in our political deliberations, it becomes unclear whether or not we are talking about shared standards at all. There seems to be a tension between two goals: finding a moral minimum that is actually shared by all communities and finding one that can be used to make substantive judgements.

Walzer’s approach presupposes a high degree of quite substantive agreement, in spite of its minimalism, and it is not clear that such an agreement exists. The “political” approach to human rights norms suffers from a related difficulty. It tries to avoid taking a stand on metaphysical questions so as to facilitate the broadest possible agreement, but it provides no reason why any particular individual or group should join the agreement. Both approaches avoid arguing for the conclusions that they want to uphold, albeit for somewhat different reasons.

Comparative Political Theory as an Alternative

I have argued that the Rawlsian and Walzerian approaches provide little reason for confidence in the supposed agreement to which they aspire. This suggests that it may be impossible to sidestep the problem of foundations when defending our most cherished norms. The question, however, is how to begin an argument that can ground freedom and toleration across traditions. Certainly any such argument would require some agreement on premises. It seems to me, however, that we cannot assume the agreement to exist at the level
of community-wide commitments to these norms. As we have already seen, it is far from clear that such an agreement would be substantive and specific enough for our purposes. We might more profitably, I will argue, begin by trying to find specific thinkers in other traditions who do share these concerns. This would, at the very least, show us how they can be articulated within quite different contexts. We cannot, of course, assume that there are precisely equivalent concepts in every tradition. Nonetheless, insofar as such concepts are responses to human needs and problems that may arise in many different contexts, there may be rough equivalents.

My aim is to find some roughly equivalent concepts and concerns not in the Chinese and Western cultures considered generally, but instead in particular writers. I will not claim that ancient Chinese thought universally, or even generally, affirms the positions in question. I will argue, instead, that Zhuangzi did, that he offered compelling reasons for doing so, and that his views on these questions offer a powerful and distinctive alternative to their European counterparts. In making his case, he had to appeal to arguments and concerns that were shared more generally within his context. For this reason, studying Zhuangzi can help us to see how a cluster of questions surrounding diversity, disagreement, freedom, and toleration can be articulated under conditions quite different than those to which we are accustomed.

The comparative aspect of this project allows us to see that such there are equivalent concerns in the early modern European context. This does not establish that such concerns, the arguments that these writers develop from them, or their conclusions are universally shared or valid. Demonstrating that they are applicable within our own context would, of
course, require further argument. That being said, the argument developed here would suggest, at the very least, that they are not confined to the particular situations out of which they emerged.

The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to understand how two great thinkers have articulated arguments for freedom, toleration, and a more modest view of government. Given that Western thought has been preoccupied with these concerns since early modernity, it may seem superfluous to return to a Western thinker in examining their justification. What is original or surprising, one might think, is finding them in a different context. While this line of thinking has a certain plausibility, the comparative approach is necessary in order to locate the shared foundations that we seek.

It is certainly true that such concerns are widely endorsed, at least within contemporary liberal democracies. Nonetheless, returning to a thinker such as Montaigne, who articulates them at a point in time at which they were not taken for granted, allows us to bring their foundations back into view. I will argue, in particular, that skepticism can play a more powerful role as a foundation for freedom, toleration, and limited government than has often been thought. The re-examination of Montaigne’s arguments allows us to move from the commitments that we share with him to the foundational concerns from which they arise.

Once we have uncovered such foundations, however, we might begin to wonder whether they are in fact sturdy. It is possible that Montaigne was able to use skepticism to defend these concerns only because of particular features of his own context. One might think, for example, that it was the background of intra-Christian religious conflict that made skepticism relevant. Examining the work of a thinker from a very different context allows us
to test this suspicion. If Zhuangzi, as I shall argue, also derives similar conclusions from his own skeptical premises, then we have better reason to regard skepticism as a suitable foundation. We may, of course, after undertaking this investigation conclude that the connection is not in fact a robust one. At the very least, it may turn out that we have to modify our understandings of the relevant concepts in order to offer a fruitful cross-cultural account of them. To some extent, this is the case with regard to these thinkers. Zhuangzi and Montaigne each affirm concerns that are similar enough to our own concept of freedom to label them as such, but sufficiently distinct so as to call for careful attention to their differences.

1.4: Comparative Political Theory and Traditional Foundationalism

The approach to comparative political theory just summarized must be understood in relation to three alternatives: the post-Enlightenment liberalism of Rawls, traditional foundationalism (Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment), and other understandings of comparative political theory. Its contrast with Rawlsian political liberalism has already been explored in the preceding sections. This section and the one that follows take up the next two possibilities.

In spite of the influence of non-foundationalist modes of theorizing, recent defenses of human rights have also invoked more traditional philosophical foundations. Some have argued, for example, that we ought to return to the work of canonical Western thinkers such as Aristotle and Kant. Martha Nussbaum’s work, for example, purports to ground human rights in a quasi-Aristotelian “capabilities approach.” Alan Gewirth has appealed to a broadly Kantian

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understanding of human agency for the same purposes.\textsuperscript{38} Such strategies may seem more natural than the one that is adopted in this dissertation. Human rights, at least if we trace them back to thinkers like Locke and Kant, or to events such as the American and French revolutions, were originally defended in a foundationalist manner. Departing from this tradition requires some justification.

It is reasonable to ask why we should reexamine the nature of freedom, toleration, and limited government through an investigation of two thinkers whose connection to contemporary discourses about liberalism and human rights is, to say the least, unclear. If we want to understand freedom, why not just study Kant, Mill, or Locke (or even Aristotle)? What could the comparative approach possibly contribute? A distinct but related objection to the comparative approach concerns the nature of argumentation in political theory. If we are looking for good arguments, it is not clear that their point of origin makes any difference. If Kant (or Montaigne, or whoever) provides a sound argument, then what does finding a similar argument in a different context add?

In responding to the first objection, it is worth returning to a point that has already been discussed. Nietzsche cast doubt on the idea that thinkers like Kant had in fact penetrated to a universal moral core, and suggested that they had instead simply devoted themselves to one particular, and contingent, way of looking at the world.\textsuperscript{39} This doubt about the universality of

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\textsuperscript{39} Consider, for example, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, Aphorism 211: “Those philosophical laborers after the noble model of Kant and Hegel have to determine and press into formulas, whether in the realm of logic
\end{flushright}
the claims of the most eminent Western philosophers has been given further force, more recently, by the postcolonial critique of modern Western thought. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Western philosophers have "read into European history an entelechy of universal reason." His suggestion is that “universal reason” is merely a title with which to aggrandize our parochial habits of thought. The consequence of all of this is that, for better or for worse, the foundational principles from which thinkers like Aristotle and Kant reasoned will necessarily be called into question.\footnote{Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?” 
\textit{Representations} 37 (1992): 1-26, 3.}

A comparative approach can help us to respond to these lines of criticism. By examining works originating in very different times and places, we can search for concerns that transcend one particular context. This may obviously involve an unsettling of our understandings of particular human needs, goods, and concepts. Nonetheless, those that can survive this process will have a correspondingly greater claim to being genuinely human rather than merely parochial.

Consider, for example, one line of argument that has been developed in both China and Europe. In a famous passage that I will discuss in the next chapter, Mencius claimed that all human beings share a concern for others in harm’s way. He supported this claim by offering a thought experiment in which a baby is about to fall into a well, and he claims that all human beings would immediately feel concern for the baby. This is supposed to demonstrate that such or political (moral) thought or art, some great data of valuations-that is, former posittings of values, creations of value which have become dominant and are for a time called ‘truths’” (136).

\footnote{I do not mean to suggest that such critiques are correct, nor that Kantian or Aristotelian forms of foundationalism are untenable. I intend only to indicate that they cannot be presupposed without further argument.}
concern is a basic feature of human beings. Suppose that we encounter another work that seems to describe a human tendency of this sort, for example Hume’s account of sympathy in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. If we find that they are sufficiently similar, it seems reasonable to increase our confidence in Mencius’ claim, or at least to take it seriously as a significant interpretation of human experience.

The aim of this dissertation is to examine a cluster of ideas, most importantly skepticism, freedom, toleration, and the limits of government, in order to see how they are articulated in very different contexts. To the extent that we find that these concerns are manifest in both contexts, we have greater reason to think that they represent responses to genuinely human concerns, rather than the provincial concerns of some tradition. This is by no means an obvious or negligible conclusion, and it has certainly been rejected by many thinkers. Once we see the ways in which these concerns are articulated in these contexts, we will be better situated to assess the prospects for their application under contemporary circumstances.

**1.5: Varieties of Comparative Political Theory**

I have suggested that comparative political theory, as utilized in this dissertation, can help us to think about the theoretical foundations of some of our deepest normative commitments, among them freedom, toleration, and limited government. The label “comparative political theory,” however, has been attached to disparate projects, and it will be helpful to understand the ways in which its use here differs from some of the most prominent alternatives. “Comparative political theory” encompasses not only projects such as this one, which is comparative in the most literal sense, but more generally any effort to

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42 As we shall see in the subsequent chapter, Mencius qualifies this claim in some important ways. He suggests, for example, that our basic human capacities can be destroyed given sufficiently bad conditions.
examine works of political thought that have been created outside of the West. We can
distinguish between at least three clusters of motives and strategies that have been evident in
the existing literature on comparative political theory.

First, some hope that investigating unfamiliar texts will help us to reflect more
critically on our own beliefs by demonstrating their contingency. Even texts or ideas that are
not directly applicable to our own context may, in this way, prove useful in encouraging
more robust debates and reflective debate within that context. Loubna El Amine, for
example, argues that the usefulness of pre-modern bodies of thought from outside the West,
for example those originating in ancient China, is derived in large part from their capacity to
show us “paths we did not take.”43

While it is certainly worthwhile to understand the contingency of our own beliefs, this
approach naturally seems to point beyond its own basic premise. Once we see that our
beliefs are contingent, it seems natural to raise questions about whether or not they are in fact
the best that can be devised. This question, in turn, would lead us to consider both Western
and non-Western bodies of thought on their own merits.

Another approach seeks to vindicate some particular concern, generally already
present in Western political theory, through the study of non-Western ideas and texts. The
extensive literature that seeks Confucian or Islamic foundations for human rights is perhaps
the most prominent such example. Andrew March’s justificatory approach to comparative

43 Loubna El Amine, “Beyond East and West: Reorienting Political Theory Through the Prism of
Modernity,” Perspectives on Politics 14 (March 2016):102-120, 111. El Amine argues that virtually all
communities today confront a similar modern predicament, and thus that pre-modern thought is not
directly applicable, regardless of its geographic origin.
political theory also fits into this category. He argues, for example, that classical Islamic legal thought can support membership in a society governed according to the principles of Rawls’ political liberalism.44

While this may be a valuable task in its own right, it too seems to avoid the more radical questions raised by unfamiliar bodies of thought. The basic justificatory project March describes never really calls into question that which is supposed to be justified. In other words, even if it turns out that Islamic thought can ground membership in a liberal society, recognizing this does not, at least as March presents things, give the non-Muslim any reason to be more or less confident in the tenets of liberalism. This kind of justificatory political theory is non-universalistic in two senses. First, the norms to be justified are those of a particular kind of community (e.g. liberal democracy). Second, the particular texts employed have relevance primarily within another community, albeit one that may exist in part within the first community (e.g. a particular religious group). If one wants to know whether or not the basic principles involved should be compelling to human beings simply as human beings, however, this approach has little to say.

The foregoing difficulties are addressed in the work of Leigh Jenco. She argues that we must take non-Western texts as more than just sources of examples or supporting evidence for political theories originating in the West. Instead, she suggests, we should take non-Western thinkers as models of how to conduct ourselves as political theorists. In other words, they should be taken as a potential source for our fundamental methodological

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guidance.\textsuperscript{45} This could take many forms. It might involve engaging in textual scholarship in a way that takes Confucian thinkers like Kang Youwei as a model.\textsuperscript{46} It might involve considering how Chinese thinkers like Tan Sitong have engaged with the problem of cross-cultural learning.\textsuperscript{47}

There are at least two aspects of Jenco’s argument that should be kept separate from one another. First, she suggests that we should regard non-Western thinkers as sources of fundamental insight into ethical and political life. Second, she argues that we should turn to such thinkers for guidance on the proper method with which to conduct political inquiry. Both of these points are compelling, insofar as they challenge positions that place non-Western texts and thinkers outside of the conversations through which we seek to reach truth. There is, however, an attendant risk.

Jenco criticizes Fred Dallmayr, Roxanne Euben, and other political theorists, often inspired by Gadamer’s idea of a “fusion of horizons,” who seek to bring about a cross-civilizational dialogue. Her objection to this project is that it is constituted by a substantive set of commitments that eliminates, right at the start, the possibility of actually learning from the views with which we are supposedly in dialogue.\textsuperscript{48} As a result, it ends up emphasizing “epistemological limitations of our own position” without actually encouraging us to change


\textsuperscript{46} Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say,’” 743.


\textsuperscript{48} She argues, for example, that dialogue creates a bias in favor of linguistic communication, and against “practices that capture what cannot be expressed adequately in words…” See Leigh Jenco, “What Does Heaven Ever Say?” p. 744.
that position. Jenco’s own view is that we must take each view on its own terms, as a potentially comprehensive guide to the practice of political theorizing.

Taking an unfamiliar thinker, text, or tradition seriously requires admitting the possibility that it is a decisive source of guidance for the conduct of one’s life, not just an interesting voice in the conversation. This should not, however, lead us to abandon the dialogical model entirely. There are distinct advantages to seeking to bring about a dialogue across traditions or between thinkers situated in very different contexts. By doing so, we clarify what is at stake in the decision to adopt one particular theoretical framework rather than another.

Taking seriously the possibility of radically transforming our own views is not a substitute for dialogue, it is rather a spur to dialogue of a certain kind. It is difficult to see how one would be rationally justified in taking a particular tradition as an authoritative source of guidance for one’s life without first comparing it, and thus bringing it into dialogue, with other potential guides. To borrow an example discussed at some length by

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50 For a critique of Gadamer’s account of the “fusion of horizons” from a very different point of view than that of Jenco, albeit one that raises some similar issues, see Stanley Rosen, “Interpretation and the Fusion of Horizons,” in Metaphysics in Ordinary Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 182-201. Gadamer’s account was developed, in large part, to help us understand how human beings experience great works of art, so Rosen attacks him on this ground. Rosen argues that Gadamer’s view places too much emphasis on the interpreter’s own experience, and not enough on the work being interpreted. As he notes, “if we cannot speak of the work of art in itself, how can we know which of its purported interpretations or performances are actually of the work in question?” (187). We might raise a related concern for comparative political theory. Placing too much emphasis on the experience of a modern reader of Zhuangzi might risk shifting the focus away from the challenging content of his work. This seems to be what Jenco is worried about. As shall become evident, however, I think that the general commitment to dialogue that is invoked by many comparative political theorists can be disentangled from Gadamer’s specific claims about the nature of interpretation.
Jenco, we must take seriously the possibility that Confucian classicism is the best way of practicing political theory, broadly understood.\footnote{Jenco, “What Does Heaven Ever Say?”} To assess that possibility, however, we must consider its relative strengths and weaknesses in relation to everything from Thomism to Rawlsianism.

Understanding the merits of competing traditions of thoughts requires understanding the ways in which the concepts and practices that constitute them relate to one another. We might illustrate this point with a familiar example from Western thought. In order to understand whether or not to take Hobbes as a guide, we must be able to understand the points on which he differs from, for example, Aristotle. This is, in part, because Hobbes formulated his thought in explicit opposition to Aristotle. That is not, however, the primary reason. Even if Hobbes had somehow formulated his teaching without any exposure to Aristotle, and yet had arrived at the same conclusions, the two views would nonetheless be inconsistent with one another. For this reason alone, we must decide between them.

If we are to adopt, say, Mencius as a guide then we are, implicitly or explicitly, rejecting Jeremy Bentham. An informed choice would require understanding what each one would expect from us, or from our societies, under various conditions. In this respect, a reasonable decision to adopt an unfamiliar theoretical framework for understanding political life, for example one rooted in ancient China, requires recognizing the ways in which it differs from the framework that we have inherited from our own context. How are we to do this in the absence of some kind of dialogue? As the anthropologist Louis Dumont has noted, the study of another culture is unavoidably comparative, because scholars themselves
necessarily occupy a particular culture.\textsuperscript{52} The dialogical approach simply brings this fact out into the open.

We might formulate the methodological conclusion here in a more general way. Whatever the merits of, say, Confucian classicism, it would be impossible to affirm it intelligently, under contemporary conditions, without some understanding of the respects in which it is similar or different than other methodological stances. For this reason, a “fusion of horizons” is always necessary, even if one ultimately wants, as we should, to leave open the more radical transformative possibilities suggested by Jenco.

Beginning from an examination of two or more texts from different traditions allows us to make the implicit comparisons that, as Dumont notes, are always going on, explicit. We can begin to understand the relationships, both similarities and differences, among the concepts within each tradition. This is a necessary condition for judging the adequacy of our own inherited conceptual schemes, and also for understanding what it would mean, in practice, to adopt an alternative one under contemporary circumstances.

1.6: Why Zhuangzi and Montaigne?

Whatever the merits of the comparative approach, these particular objects of comparison must also be justified. Why should we turn to Montaigne and Zhuangzi as a source for insight into freedom, toleration, and the limits of government? The question can be answered in a somewhat straightforward manner in the case of Montaigne. His contribution to the development of modern philosophy in general, and moral and political thought in particular, is

evident in his influence upon thinkers such as Montesquieu, Descartes, Voltaire, and Rousseau. Moreover, he is clearly a decisive influence upon many aspects of contemporary thought.\textsuperscript{53} Charles Taylor has explored the ways in which Montaigne contributed to the development of the modern understanding of the self.\textsuperscript{54} As Judith Shklar has argued, he helped to bring about a decisive reordering of human concerns, as a result of which liberal societies now regard cruelty in this world as a more significant evil than religious heterodoxy.\textsuperscript{55}

Montaigne, therefore, merits our attention as we consider these problems because he played an important role in their articulation. This does not, however, mean that his work is of purely historical interest. We should not assume that his presentation of these themes is less sophisticated than those of the writers whom he would later influence. It might well turn out that an earlier writer was forced, precisely because of the absence of historical predecessors, to defend the relevant ethical and political views with a greater degree of thoroughness than those who could later rely upon a general consensus in their favor.

Zhuangzi’s place in this narrative is more complicated. I will argue that he has much to teach us on the central subjects about which we can learn from Montaigne. His account of the limits of our knowledge, like that of Montaigne, leads him to endorse freedom, toleration, and a more constrained vision of government. In an important sense, therefore, this reading places Zhuangzi within the broad set of moral concerns that has dominated both Western modernity and, arguably, modernity more generally.

\textsuperscript{53} On the influence of Montaigne, see Alan Levine, \textit{Sensual Philosophy}, 16.
It would be presumptuous, however, to suppose that one can simply locate a few affinities between Zhuangzi and some interpretation of modernity and treat him as a modern thinker. This would fail to do justice to the distance that separates Zhuangzi’s concerns from those of most modern citizens. Just as importantly, however, we must take into account the ways in which the relationship between Zhuangzi and modernity has already been examined within the Chinese tradition.

Since the late Qing dynasty, Chinese reformers have reflected upon the ways in which the Chinese tradition should be modified in order to deal with modern conditions most effectively. One aspect of this process of reflection was determining the ways in which classical Chinese thought might support, or impede, the process of modernization. Some late Qing reformers had a positive view of the tradition, as reflected in their view that it could be combined with certain elements of Western thought in order to generate a stronger country than would otherwise be possible.

Many reformers, however, were concerned that traditional thought was an obstacle to moral, political, and economic modernization. This was particularly true of the modernizers associated with the May Fourth movement. Some regarded the tradition as an obstacle to progress and a source of China’s loss of power in relationship to the West.

Lu Xun, one of the foremost Chinese literary figures of the twentieth century, was among the most forceful critics of traditional Confucian culture. In one of his most famous short stories, “A Madman’s Diary,” he attacks that culture by describing a man coming to the realization that his family and neighbors are all cannibals, and have been for many years. In one striking passage, the man rereads an old history book:

There were no dates in this history, but scrawled this way and that across every page were the words BENEVOLENCE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, and MORALITY. Since I
couldn’t get to sleep anyway, I read that history very carefully for most of the night, and finally I began to make out what was written *between* the lines; the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE!\textsuperscript{56}

Zhuangzi, although he too deplored Confucian speeches about benevolence (or “humaneness” *ren* 仁) and righteousness, did not escape Lu Xun’s condemnation. This is especially evident in his essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry.” Lu Xun uses the term “mara poetry” to refer to a form of writing that strengthens individuals and prepares them for action as representatives of the spirit of entire peoples. He begins by quoting Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

> He who has searched out the ancient wellspring will seek the source of the future, the new wellspring. O my brothers, the works of the new life, the surge from the depths of the new source, is not far off.\textsuperscript{57}

Lu Xun goes on to praise many writers, among them Byron, Shelley, and Pushkin, whom he believes reach the spiritual and political heights that he most admires. At its best, what he calls Mara poetry enables not just a personal vitality of spirit, but also practical political success. He cites as an example the ways in which German resistance to Napoleon was spurred by the writings of Theodor Körner.\textsuperscript{58}

> While the classical Daoists shared Lu Xun’s quasi-Nietzschean rejection of conventional morality, he could not endorse their view because of its seemingly inactive and apolitical character. Lu Xun condemns Laozi for teaching the reader not to “disturb anyone’s mind” and to “make deadwood of his mind and propagate inaction [*wu wei* 無為].”\textsuperscript{59} While these lines were


directed against Laozi, the supposed author of the *Dao De Jing*, they could also apply to Zhuangzi, whose endorsement of purging the mind shall be explored in subsequent chapters.

Other reformers, however, were more optimistic about the prospects for reconciling at least some aspects of traditional Chinese thought with modernity. Some, in fact, even argued that Zhuangzi was in certain respects in agreement with modern thought. Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Yan Fu (1854-1921), for example, argued that Zhuangzi’s account of transformation resembled Darwinian evolution in crucial respects. This was because Zhuangzi draws attention to impermanence both in human life and in the world generally. While the attempt to associate Zhuangzi with Darwinism is, at best, a strained interpretation of the text, it nonetheless indicates the way in which some reformers sought to use his thought for distinctively modern ends.

Yan Fu associated Daoism with liberation from an overly dogmatic reverence for rulers. In the “Refutation of Han Yu,” an attack on one of the foremost intellectuals of the Tang Dynasty, Yan Fu drew on Zhuangzi to present a more skeptical and pragmatic approach to government. Han Yu, in his “On the Origin of the Way” (*Yuan Dao* 原道), argued that government was produced by the humane efforts of the sages, before which the people were living in a miserable and vulnerable state. Consequently, upholding the political order was necessary in order to avoid descending back into that state. This was tied to a critique of Daoist thought. He claimed, for example, that “what Laozi meant by the Way and Virtue abandoned

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60 For an account of some of the ways in which Chinese thinkers approached the question of modernity during the early twentieth century, see Vincent Shen, “In Search of Modernity and Beyond—Development of Philosophy in the Republic of China in the Last Hundred Years,” *China Review International* 19 (2012): 153-187.

benevolence and righteousness” and that “this is the private doctrine of a single person.”62 In other words, treating virtue too carelessly leads us away from the security of government.

Against this, Yan Fu argued that government is a product of human agreement. He drew on Zhuangzi in order to explain the rapacity of many actually existing governments. He refers to an “old saying,” according to which “those who steal hooks are killed, those who steal countries are lords.”63 This is a line from one of the outer chapters of the Zhuangzi.

Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936) argued that Zhuangzi’s thought could be used to develop a more compelling view of equality. This form of equality, for Zhang, is tied to refuting pernicious distinctions such as that between civilization and barbarism, which on his view led to imperialism.64

In the past at the end of the reign of Cang Ji the way of the world was lost. There were powerful deceitful people everywhere. The people in the world lived in hard times. Only Zhuang Zi knew that the knowledge of sages resulted in calamity. He attacked the superfluous nature of things such as rank and salary...Did not Zhuang Zi write this theory in a period of worries or crisis [He wrote] "After a thousand generations, one can see that there will definitely be a time when people eat each other. Today is precisely such a time."

The view of equality that Zhang draws from Zhuangzi is supposed to permit difference by avoiding the application of homogenizing standards. In this sense, it involves a form of forbearance towards other ways of living. As we have already seen, Liu Shipei also used

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62 This is the translation of Bryan Van Norden, which is available here: http://faculty.vassar.edu/bvannor/Phil210/HanYu/On%20the%20Origin%20of%20the%20Way.pdf.
63 Translation mine. The Chinese text of the “Refutation of Han Yu” (Pi Han) is available at https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/辟韓. For a useful overview of Yan Fu’s use of Zhuangzi, see Peter Zarrow, After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State: 1885-1924 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 83-87. On the way in which Yan Fu’s criticism of Han Yu relates to his broader effort to revitalize China, see Jenco, Changing Referents, 149-152.
Zhuangzi’s thought in order to motivate respect for others, arguing that it was in some sense equivalent to rights discourse.

While turning to Zhuangzi in order to understand and justify certain contemporary moral ideas may appear surprising, doing so is not entirely novel. Chinese intellectuals have sought to understand Zhuangzi’s relationship to modern thought for more than a century. The investigation undertaken in this dissertation, however, moves in a new direction by adopting the comparative approach already described. The goal here is not simply to determine the content of Zhuangzi’s normative vision, but also to examine the durability of the foundations of that vision. Because those foundations depend on the interpretation of a particular set of human experiences, it is only natural to consider whether or not the experiences, and the general kind of interpretation that is given to them, can travel beyond the cultural confines of ancient China. To the extent that we find our own experiences and concerns articulated, even if rather differently, in disparate contexts, we will be entitled to take them as more than merely parochial interests. As we shall see, the experiences of disagreement, diversity, and change, and the skeptical theses that are developed to interpret such experiences, far from being parochial, are in fact so powerful that they have been elaborated by thinkers separated by distinct continents, time periods, and traditions, and can still help us to make sense of our contemporary conditions.

1.7: The Problem of Context

I have argued that we cannot understand an unfamiliar mode of thought without, at least at first, also considering its relationship to our existing concerns (see 1.4-1.5). When that relationship is not made clear and explicit, it may nonetheless distort our understanding of the object of study. A project like this may provoke the reasonable fear that the interpreter’s presuppositions will be artificially overlaid upon an alien mode of thought. While this might
give us a superficial sense of familiarity, it would also distort the original meaning. This is an especially significant concern when, as is the case here, the aim is to understand an unfamiliar position precisely as a challenge to our own. This line of argument has been given its most famous articulation by Quentin Skinner. He suggests that an adequate understanding of the texts of the past will often reveal that their answers could not possibly be our answers, precisely because they depend on such radically different, and context dependent, presuppositions. He illustrates this difficulty through a discussion of Plato. When studying Plato, he argues, we encounter the following problem:

If we are to learn from Plato, it is not enough that the discussion should seem, at a very abstract level, to pose a question relevant to us. It is also essential that the answer Plato gave should seem relevant and indeed applicable (if he is "right") to our own culture and period… whenever it is claimed that the point of the historical study of such questions is that we may learn directly from the answers, it will be found that what counts as an answer will usually look, in a different culture or period, so different in itself that it can hardly be in the least useful even to go on thinking of the relevant question as being "the same" in the required sense after all.66

There is certainly a risk of superimposing one’s own problems or answers on the thinkers of the past. This difficulty is, perhaps, especially acute when one is dealing with multiple texts that arose out of vastly different places and times, as Montaigne's Essays and the Zhuangzi67 surely did. Ultimately, the only way in which to establish that such an effort does not distort each thinker’s view is to offer a persuasive interpretation of their positions. There are, however, independent reasons for optimism regarding the possibility of bridging contexts in general, and doing so with these contexts in particular. First, political and ethical theories are always attempts to transcend some particular situation. This is what makes them theories, rather than mere

67 The text attributed to Zhuangzi is generally referred to as the Zhuangzi.
observations. As Leigh Jenco puts it, “the specific claims that constitute a “theory” implicitly or explicitly articulate similarities between two or more otherwise distinct contexts in order to meaningfully apply an idea from one to the other.”⁶⁸ There are myriad ways in which theories seek to transcend contexts. One example, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, comes from *Mencius* (section IA7). There Mencius assures King Xuan of Qi that the ruler will be able to protect his people, because he (Mencius) has seen the way in which the ruler felt concern for an ox being led to the slaughter. Mencius seeks to draw a connection between a case in which a ruler has demonstrated concern in the past, and a new situation in which he might demonstrate it in the future. Moreover, Mencius is not simply making a point about these two situations. He is concerned with developing an account of the moral psychology of all human beings, given their shared human nature (*ren* 人性).

These grand theoretical ambitions were widely shared within the ancient Chinese context. As the twentieth century Confucian scholar Mou Zongsan has observed, Confucius also sought to say something with relevance for all human beings.

For example, consider Confucius talking about *ren* 仁 [humanity; humaneness]. Confucius was a man of the Spring and Autumn period [722-481 BCE], he was a Chinese man, but when he talked about *ren* he was not only talking to Chinese people. Confucius was a native of Shandong, but when he talked about *ren* he was not only talking to the people of Shandong. He was talking to all men. *Ren* being something all men should have, doesn’t the concept of *ren* have universality?⁶⁹

Mou is noting that Confucius believed that his ethical insight had applicability outside of the place in which he happened to have been born. The *Analects*, for example, indicate that Confucius believed that his ethical views were applicable to the tribes outside of the Chinese

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cultural orbit.\textsuperscript{70} We can only assume that, on his view, it would be just as applicable to us as to them.

None of these considerations establish definitively that a dialogue between Zhuangzi and Montaigne will prove fruitful, nor that they have something valuable to say to us, given our own concerns. That can be established only by assessing their arguments. Before turning to that task, however, it is worth pointing out some of the similarities between the three relevant contexts: Warring States China, early modern Europe, and our own time. Because they exhibit decisive similarities and present related challenges, it is not completely shocking that many similar concerns would find expression in them.

*Political and Intellectual Conflict in Ancient China and Sixteenth Century France*

Early modern Europe and China during the Warring States Period share several important intellectual and political characteristics. These include a system of competing states, cultural changes linked to the transition away from feudalism, a robust debate about how best to structure society, and the existence of various schools advocating the political inculcation of a particular way of life. Given these forms of political and intellectual conflict, it is not entirely surprising that both Montaigne and Zhuangzi were concerned with the significance of disagreement and the limits of political action. Victoria Hui, in her study of state formation in these two contexts, makes the following observation:

As the early modern European system did, the Zhongguo system experienced disintegration of feudal hierarchy, prevalence of war, conditions of international anarchy, emergence of sovereign territorial states, configuration of the balance of power, development of the centralized bureaucracy, birth of state-society bargains, expansion of

\textsuperscript{70} See *Analects* 9.14.
international trade, and other familiar phenomena of international and domestic politics.71

Furthermore, both societies had to deal with the consequences of the demise of feudalism. The basis for political authority was called into question, in each case, by the decline of the feudal order. Tongdong Bai interprets the practical problem of political theory in both Ancient China and early modern Europe as the search for “social glue for the ruling class and society as a whole.”72 Bai’s observation points towards the intertwined political and intellectual concerns of these periods. In each both case, political instability was accompanied by active theorizing about the relationship between government, good order, and human flourishing.

By the time at which Zhuangzi wrote, the Warring States period, the Zhou dynasty had lost its control over China and various local rulers vied to expand their influence.73 Under Zhou feudalism, those favored by the king had been given authority over various regions of the country. As Bai notes, this system was held together in large part by personal loyalty.74 As the Zhou rulers became weaker, however, the system broke down. The last Western Zhou ruler was killed during a rebellion in 770 BCE and the capital had to be moved eastward. The Eastern Zhou dynasty that followed was far weaker both politically and militarily. Local rulers grew in power relative to the royal house, to the point that the Zhou ruler became dependent upon the strength of the most eminent member of that group, the hegemon (ba 霸). While the power of

74 Bai, 21.
the hegemons was, for a time, sufficient to create a measure of order, eventually that system too broke down.

The rulers of the now largely independent states wanted sound advice as they sought to consolidate their own power and to increase their territory. The various philosophical schools, for their part, attempted to bring rulers under their sway. Confucius’ ambitions are, in this regard, representative. He hoped to be granted a ministerial position, and claimed that if he were given three years he could “carry the work to completion.” While Confucius did not find a ruler whom he could serve, he apparently thought that a scholar was obligated to make the most of it if the opportunity presented itself. This orientation was shared by the other schools of thought of the time. As A.C. Graham notes, “the Mohist [a member of the rival Mohist philosophical school], like the Confucian, seeks audience with princes and hope to be appointed to high office.” The particular teachings that these two schools sought to enshrine in government were quite different. The Mohists condemned the lengthy mourning periods endorsed by the Confucians, because they regarded the expenses involved as excessive. Nonetheless, they agreed that wise advisers should play a crucial role in guiding the state. As Burton Watson notes, the view that social groups must take their “standards of judgment” from those above them was “an assumption common to Mohists, Confucians, and, later, Legalists.”

These general features, political disorder and the presence of various philosophical schools vying for political influence, were also present in early modern Europe. During Montaigne’s lifetime France was riven by conflicts between competing religious and political

75 Waley, Analects, bk. 13, Ch. 10
76 Graham, 45.
77 Graham, 40.
authorities. The noblemen and their partisans were divided between the Catholic and the Huguenot factions. Violence, ranging from individual murders to open warfare, broke out regularly throughout Montaigne’s life.

In this state of disorder, various scholars and schools emerged who claimed to possess the knowledge necessary to restore political order. Montaigne’s humanist contemporaries, such as Louis Le Caron and Louis LeRoy, attempted to guide the state on the basis of their philosophical and literary studies. On their view, as Nannerl Keohane has put it, “the public good is understood to include the good of every individual, because in a well-ordered kingdom each individual sees how his own happiness flows from and depends on the public happiness, and identifies himself with the common good rather than regarding it as antithetical or opposed to his own good.” According to Le Caron, the right order of the community, and thus the human good, “flows from the right ordering of the monarch’s soul.”

This political manifestation of humanist scholarship was widespread. As Richard Tuck notes, “Since the Renaissance, all over Europe, the anterooms of princes and the council-chambers of republics had been filled with young men educated in the humanist manner who saw their role...as in some way implementing the ideals of humanist culture.” While many humanists looked to Aristotle and Cicero, the bloody conflicts of the sixteenth century led some scholars, such as Jacopo Corbinelli and Guy de Pibrac, to turn to Tacitus for lessons in the ruthlessness necessary for achieving political order. The latter, for example, wrote a defense of

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80 Keohane, 85.
the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, claiming that the public interest sometimes requires immediate action that supersedes judicial and moral constraints.\footnote{Tuck, 41.}

In both China and Europe, theory came to be seen not simply as a source of intellectual satisfaction or abstract knowledge, but as the key to restoring good order under volatile conditions. The projects of Montaigne and Zhuangzi bear striking similarities not only because their social and political contexts resemble one another, but also because their contemporaries responded to these conditions in broadly similar ways. Those contemporaries’ common approach, which unites them in spite of their disparate views on many other matters, is to overcome disagreement through the inculcation of a particular kind of theoretical teaching.

Zhuangzi and Montaigne, on the other hand, did not seek to remedy the pervasive disagreements of their times simply by staking out one more position within the already crowded intellectual field, but instead by probing the limits of human knowledge of the good and exploring the basis for persistent disagreement. Thus their cases against monism depend precisely on the possibility of comprehending any perspective within the bounds of their theories. For this reason, it is entirely appropriate to put them to the test in a comparative study of this sort. In understanding how each one sought to respond to these disagreements by affirming freedom, toleration, and a more modest view of government, we will also gain a richer understanding of the ways in which those concerns can be defended within our own context, which is no less dominated by disagreement.

1.8: Overview of the Subsequent Chapters

In the chapters that follow, I will examine the ways in which the skeptical arguments of Montaigne and Zhuangzi are connected to their accounts of freedom, toleration, and the limits of
government. Chapters II and III examine the ways in which Zhuangzi and Montaigne, respectively, used skeptical arguments in order to cultivate a free way of living. Both thought that human life, at its peak, involves a kind of responsiveness to the particularities of one’s circumstances. This is possible, on their views, only if one has achieved a form of spiritual freedom. Obtaining this freedom, however, requires the demolition of various theoretical preconceptions that impose arbitrary constraints on our lives. Their skeptical arguments serve to advance this aim. Chapter II examines the ways in which Zhuangzi used skepticism to undermine the claims of his primary rivals, chief among them the Confucians and Mohists. Chapter III examines Montaigne’s challenge to three competing sources of authority: culture or tradition, philosophy, and revealed religion. These skeptical arguments are, for both writers, necessary for cultivating the forms of freedom described later in Chapter V and Chapter VI.

In Chapter IV, I examine the ways in which these skeptical arguments serve to encourage toleration. I contend that the relationship between skepticism and toleration cannot be understood in a non-contextual way, for example by considering whether the concept of skepticism necessarily entails toleration. Instead, I suggest that skepticism encourages toleration under circumstances in which intolerance is linked to theoretical claims of particular sorts. In early modern Europe and ancient China, there were in fact such forms of intolerance tied to claims to knowledge of the best way of life, and thus skepticism advanced toleration.

Chapters V and VI explain how the forms of skepticism examined in the earlier chapters contribute to accounts of personal freedom, as well as the ways in which each thinker sought to understand political action. Both denied that the life of freedom could be fully achieved through political means or by participating in government. Nonetheless, both sought to articulate a more limited view of governing, one which recognizes the limitations on human knowledge. Neither
attempts to develop a set of universally desirable institutions or rules. Instead, both Montaigne and Zhuangzi, albeit in rather different ways, claim that the primary way of encouraging sound politics is through forms of personal cultivation, the most important aspect of which is purging oneself of unreasonable political hopes and devotion to attractive but ultimately illusory aims such as fame and fortune.

The concluding chapter, Chapter VII, explores some of the philosophical disagreements that distinguish the position of Zhuangzi from that of Montaigne, and argues that their views, while different on some fundamental issues, can ultimately provide complementary understandings of the ethical and political implications of skepticism. I argue, moreover, that they provide ways of grounding the ideas of freedom, toleration, and a constrained view of government that remedy some of the defects of the most prominent contemporary alternatives.
A Note on the Composition of the Texts

When one begins to study the works of Zhuangzi or Montaigne, some special challenges arise due to the complicated history and structure of each text. One way of approaching a text is to assume that its author has a coherent and fully worked out view of things that he or she seeks to articulate. We might suppose further that each part of that text is supposed to fit with the other parts, and thus to play a crucial role in conveying that view. Both Montaigne’s *Essays* and the *Zhuangzi*, as the text attributed to Zhuangzi has come to be called, appear to resist this way of proceeding.

The reason for this, in the case of the *Zhuangzi*, is straightforward. The *Zhuangzi* is a compilation of various texts that, most scholars agree, was not produced by a single author. Its parts differ in both style and substance. We know little about the historical Zhuangzi, aside from statements in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* indicating that he was employed as “an official in the lacquer garden” and that he lived during the reigns of two particular kings, King Xuan of Qi and King Hui of Liang. That would place him in the fourth century BCE. The version of the text that we now possess was redacted by the scholar and commentator Guo Xiang (252-312 CE), long after the supposed lifetime of Zhuangzi. It contains 33 chapters, which were apparently drawn from a much larger text that is no longer extant. Guo Xiang wrote a commentary on the text, although he also developed his own original views at length. Because of the differences between Guo Xiang’s position and the ideas presented in the *Zhuangzi* itself, we cannot appeal to one possible

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83 The nature of this role is unclear, so it does not tell us much about Zhuangzi’s activities.
solution to the problem of the unity (or lack thereof) in the latter. We cannot assume that Guo Xiang ensured that the text is unified because he selected material that would articulate his own views. The current version of the text has conventionally been divided into three parts: Chapters 1-7 are called the Inner Chapters, Chapters 8-22 the Outer Chapters, and 23-33 the Miscellaneous Chapters. It is widely believed that the Inner Chapters possess the highest degree of coherence, theoretical power, and literary elegance. For this reason, they have the strongest claim to represent the core thought of the Zhuangzi, and perhaps of Zhuangzi himself.

Because of these varying sources of uncertainty regarding the text’s unity and the identity of its author, there are two different ways in which an interpreter might proceed. One might either look for unity across the disparate material out of which the text is composed, or one might assume that the text is fundamentally heterogeneous, from a theoretical point of view, and thus seek to tease out the various positions contained in it. A.C. Graham, who claims to identify at least five different strata within the text, also grants that the Inner Chapters “bear the individual stamp of a thinker and writer of genius, commonly recognized as Chuang-Tzu [Zhuangzi] himself.” Even if, as Graham surmises, “it is likely that he left nothing but disordered jottings, which have been grouped in chapters by later editors,” this would be sufficient to treat at least the core of the Zhuangzi as a unified system of thought.86 My analysis of the Zhuangzi focuses primarily, although not exclusively, on the Inner Chapters. I have also drawn upon some material from the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters when it is relevant to the themes under discussion. For convenience, I have continued to refer to those passages as reflecting the thought of Zhuangzi, although it might be more accurate to think of them as one way in which some of Zhuangzi’s admirers developed the core thoughts of the Inner Chapters.

86 A.C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China, 173.
Montaigne’s life, unlike that of Zhuangzi, was recorded with copious documentation. We have a great deal of information on many aspects of his varied activities. He was born in 1533 on his family’s estate. His father’s family had been wealthy merchants in Bordeaux for many years, and his great-grandfather had bought the estate called Montaigne in 1477.\textsuperscript{87} His grandfather Grimon claimed to be a nobleman, because he lived in a noble manner on his estate, although the family nobility was ensured only by the military career of Montaigne’s father Pierre Eyquem.\textsuperscript{88} Montaigne’s mother, Antoinette de Louppes (or Lopez), came from a wealthy family of merchants with branches in Bordeaux and other European cities. According to one influential theory, her family had converted from Judaism to Catholicism, under duress, while in Spain.\textsuperscript{89} As a young man he received legal training, and when he was 24 he became a member of the Bordeaux Parlement. His father had occupied this position before him as was also the case with the Mayoralty of Bordeaux, which Montaigne took up in 1580. Throughout the later parts of his life he was an important advisor to kings and other notable figures, in spite of his tendency to present himself as having adopted a life of seclusion. It is an indication of the success of his political activities that when he was chosen as Mayor, as Frame notes, “all parties concerned -- Henry III, Catherine de' Medici, Henry of Navarre, and Margaret of Valois -- knew Montaigne and respected his loyalty, moderation and integrity.”\textsuperscript{90}


\textsuperscript{88} Eyquem is Montaigne’s family name, while Montaigne is the name of his estate.

\textsuperscript{89} See Donald Frame, Montaigne’s Discovery of Man: The Humanization of a Humanist, New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 13. On the basis of his private journal, which recounts a visit to a Jewish service while travelling in Italy, some have concluded that he was aware of this link. For a critical discussion of this possibility, see Elizabeth Mendes Da’Costa, “The Jews and Montaigne’s Journal de Voyage,” French Studies Bulletin: A Quarterly Supplement 69 (1999): 10-13. Desan, however, denies that our evidence on the religious origins of the Lopez family is conclusive. See Montaigne: A Life, 13-14.

\textsuperscript{90} Frame, Montaigne’s Discovery of Man, 124.
By 1571 Montaigne had retired from the Parlement of Bordeaux and begun writing his *Essays*. The first edition, containing Books I and II, was published in 1580. Another edition was published in 1582. Book III was introduced in the 1588 edition. After that edition, Montaigne continued to edit the *Essays* by hand in a manuscript known as the Bordeaux Copy. There is also a posthumous edition published by Montaigne’s adoptive daughter Marie de Gournay, which includes material that was omitted from the Bordeaux Copy. The translation of Donald Frame, which I use in this dissertation, brings together all of these revisions in order to provide the version of the *Essays* that, as far as we are aware, best reflects Montaigne’s final views.

The existence of so many different editions of the text, which included both new essays and revised versions of older ones, raises important questions for the interpreter. The fundamental issue is whether or not the final text should be seen as a unified whole, in which each part supports the others. The method that Montaigne uses seems to reinforce the sense that each part is disconnected from the rest. He jumps from topic to topic, even within individual essays. The most influential interpretation that emphasizes the changing character of Montaigne’s thought, and the differences across the theoretical stances outlined in the various essays, is that of Pierre Villey. The *Essays*, Villey argues, reflect Montaigne’s intellectual development, and thus some present a Stoic position, others a skeptical one, and so forth. David Lewis Schaefer, on the other hand, has argued that the *Essays* present a fundamentally unified position, albeit one that is presented in a complicated manner that involves many surface-level differences.

While both Montaigne and Zhuangzi are complex texts composed of many different arguments, I read each one as reflecting a consistent points of view throughout. There are both methodological and substantive motivations behind this way of reading the texts. As a matter of
method, it is most appropriate to begin by seeking to determine the extent to which a given thinker’s position might form a coherent whole. If we simply assume that what appear to be changes or inconsistencies within the text’s overall position are in fact such, then we may miss possible ways of reconciling the claims that are not immediately obvious. The opposite, however, is not true. If we try to develop an explanation of how the disparate statements might fit together but find ourselves unable to do so, then we are still free to conclude that the text reflects genuine contradictions or changes in the thinker’s substantive view.

I will argue that the substantive views contained in each text fit together in a coherent way, such that they reinforce rather than undermine one another. Both texts contain discuss a variety of ideas and experiences because both writers believe that change is among the fundamental phenomena of human life. The consistency that one can find in each text is, in part, a consistent attempt to do justice to these phenomena. Both believe that difference and change can be described and analyzed in a way that that has trans-perspectival validity. These core insights present radical challenges to the monistic assumptions of their contemporaries. The extent to which their analyses can be made plausible today will become apparent only in the subsequent chapters.
A Note on Editions, Translations, and Citations

For the French text, I have consulted the edition of Pierre Villey.

Villey’s edition is made available online by the University of Chicago: https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/montaigne/.


English quotations from the Essays are drawn from Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Works, trans. Donald Frame (New York: Everyman,).

All citations from the Essays include the book number, the number of the essay within that book, and the page number in Frame’s translation.

For the original text of the Zhuangzi, I have consulted Wang Xianqian, ed., Zhuangzi jijie (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1965). I have also utilized the electronic version of the Chinese text at ctext.org, edited by Donald Sturgeon: http://ctext.org/zhuangzi.


All citations from the Zhuangzi include the chapter number followed by the page number in Watson’s translation.
Chapter II: Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Equality, and Wandering

去國辭家謫異方，中心自怪少憂傷。
為尋莊子知歸處，認得無何是本鄉。

“While departing my country and leaving my home, exiled to a strange land,
Within my heart there is little sadness.
Looking to Zhuangzi, I know where to return,
I know it is "Not-Even-Anything land.””
- Bai Juyi (772-846 CE), “Reading Zhuangzi”\(^91\)

2.1. Zhuangzi on Freedom and Skepticism

Bai Juyi, one of the most eminent poets of the Tang dynasty, was also a prominent scholar-official whose career was spent in public service. While he enjoyed many successes, at one point he fell out of favor with his ruler and was exiled from his homeland.\(^92\) During this time, he wrote the poem above. It is an attempt to determine the proper stance for one who has been forced to leave behind many familiar comforts. Under such circumstances, one might well have expected Bai to be miserable. We see here, however, that, while he is forced to remove himself from his physical homeland, he still has access to a spiritual homeland, Zhuangzi’s enigmatic “Not-Even-Anything land.” Zhuangzi speaks of it as a place divorced from conventional ambitions and attachments, where one can think and act without such encumbrances. Given that Bai was forced to abandon many of his conventional ties while in exile, it is unsurprising that he turned to the unfettered way of life proposed by Zhuangzi. The attraction of Zhuangzi’s text, for Bai as for other readers, is in large part related to its promise of

\(^91\) Translation mine. The Chinese text is available at http://souyun.com/Query.aspx?type=poem&id=12935. I follow Watson’s translation of “Not-Even-Anything land,” which, in spite of slightly different phrasing, is a reference to the Zhuangzi, Chapter 1, "Free and Easy Wandering." See Watson, Zhuangzi: Basic Writings, vii-viii. Watson also provides a full translation of the poem. A distinct poem, also entitled “Reading Zhuangzi,” will be mentioned later.

\(^92\) For an account of some of the major events of Bai Juyi’s life, see Anna Shields, One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).
liberation from conventional ideas and constraints. It is for this reason that his work remains valuable to those concerned with uncovering the theoretical foundations of this form of freedom.

The *Zhuangzi’s* first chapter, *Xiaoyaoyou*, or “Free and Easy Wandering,” begins with a powerful image that captures the seductive yet enigmatic character of Zhuangzi’s thought. It also encapsulates the ways in which Zhuangzi’s idea of “wandering” (*you 遊*) presents a striking counterpart to Western conceptions of freedom. Zhuangzi tells us that in the mysterious “Northern Darkness” a huge fish named Kun undergoes a transformation (*hua 化*) and becomes an enormous bird named Peng. He goes on to recount a story about this bird:

> The Universal Harmony records various wonders, and it says: “When the Peng journeys to the southern darkness, the waters are roiled for three thousand li. He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand li, setting off on the six month gale.” Wavering heat, bits of dust, living things blowing each other about—the sky looks very blue. Is that its real color, or is it because it is so far away and has no end? When the bird looks down, all he sees is blue too.  

Zhuangzi does not dwell on the image, nor does he explain exactly how we are to look at Peng. We are left wondering whether he is supposed to be some kind of model for the sage, who one might think of as rising above ordinary human concerns and reaching a loftier perspective. On this view, Peng shows us that we must seek to transcend our existing condition. We might, as an alternative, think that Peng’s story reveals the limitations on our capacity to transcend our necessarily limited and contingent perspectives. Even as Peng reaches these lofty heights, he still remains within his own perspective. As Kuang-Ming Wu points out, there is something legitimate about the way in which “the common sense of small cicadas and doves chitchattingly

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93 *Zhuangzi*, 1, 1.
rejects the wild flight” in a later passage, where they wonder about the purpose of Peng’s lengthy journey.94

The puzzling character of the passage is by no means accidental. The term *kun,* from which the fish gets its name, refers to fish roe, and thus the passage simultaneously calls to mind both tiny eggs and a gigantic animal.95 Moreover, the passage brings out the central paradox at the heart of Zhuangzi’s position. Two seemingly self-contradictory aspects, in particular, stand out. First, Zhuangzi is recognized as a substantive ethical teacher in his own right. He valorizes a life of “wandering,” seeking out varied pleasures and experiences without the constraint of fixed commitments or expectations. Considering Zhuangzi from this point of view, he advocates independence from that which might constrain opportunities for fruitful action. His vision may be the closest thing to the Western concept of freedom in early China. He is concerned with overcoming constraints of all sorts, both physical and psychological.96

On the other hand, most commentators also draw attention to his radical skepticism. This is the vision of Zhuangzi presented in his most famous story, that of the butterfly dream. It is unsurprising that many scholars have concluded that the most important thing that we should

95 Watson, 1.
96 It must be recognized that the concept of *you* should not be equated entirely with any Western notion of freedom, ancient or modern. It does not, for example, have the connections with self-government that it possessed in ancient Greek world. Consider Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” It also lacks some of the connotations associated with the idea of the freedom of the will in Western thought. It is not, for example, contrasted with a deterministic view of causation.

It is also important to note that even scholars who agree that Zhuangzi endorses something like freedom are not in agreement about its precise location within his thought. Tao Jiang, for example, develops a Zhuangist account of freedom primarily with reference to the concept of *hua* (transformation). This may be a supplement, rather than an alternative, to an account centered on *you.* Instances of *hua* are discussed, for example, in the chapter entitled *Xiaoyaoyou,* rendered by Watson as “Free and Easy Wandering.” I understand *hua* as a feature of both the world in general and of the Zhuangist life of *you* in particular.
take away from this work is doubt. If we cannot even determine whether we are human beings or butterflies, then resolving questions about the best way of life is presumably also impossible. Taking this point to its logical conclusion, one might begin to think that, in spite of appearances, Zhuangzi cannot endorse any positive way of life at all. Bryan Van Norden, for example, sees what he refers to as Zhuangzi’s ironism, or his tendency to cast doubt on “final vocabularies” like the Confucian language of virtue, as inconsistent with any definite ethical or political project. Others, such as Chad Hansen, have claimed that Zhuangzi holds his preferred ethical position in some non-dogmatic spirit that obviates the need for any deeper theoretical support.

Understanding Zhuangzi’s thought as a whole, in a manner that does justice both to its skeptical and practical aspects, seems to require reconciling them in some way. In this chapter I suggest that Zhuangzi regards freedom, or at least “free and easy wandering,” and skepticism as consistent and, perhaps even more importantly, mutually reinforcing. This is because, on Zhuangzi’s view, we enter life in some particular human community, which teaches us both a normative vocabulary and the way in which to apply it. As we learn these things, we obtain a “completed” or “constituted” heart-mind (cheng xin 成心). The constituted heart mind is capable of making judgments, but it is constrained by the particular form of enculturation that makes them possible. Wandering requires an openness to new experiences and, consequently, new ways of thinking and judging. Zhuangzi’s skepticism opens up this possibility by demonstrating the dubitable character of the constituted heart-mind’s categories.

Wandering also serves to reinforce his skepticism. It calls our attention to the diversity of the world, thus helping to reveal the contingency of our ways of thinking. Zhuangzi’s

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opponents, such as the Confucians and the Mohists, argue that the human condition is characterized by certain definite experiences that can ground a particular mode of judging. Confucius argued that the experience of the ancient sage-kings provided an authoritative criterion for judgment. The Mohists claimed that an impartial calculation of benefits and harms played that role. They agree, however, that there is a particular mode of human experience that is fixed and that it determines a single best way of living.

Zhuangzi believes that human experience is fundamentally diverse, whether or not one has liberated oneself from the fixed standards of the constituted heart-mind. Wandering is the activity that reflects an awareness of, and brings one into alignment with, the variety within human experience and the world more generally. In this way, it also casts skeptical doubt on any claims about the fixed character of human experience and the theoretical claims that are said to follow from them.

This explains how wandering encourages skepticism, and how skepticism prepares the way for wandering. It also, however, leaves the precise status of wandering in some doubt. I suggested that skepticism is necessary for wandering because it is required in order to clear away the authoritative beliefs that reside in the constituted heart-mind. Consequently, skepticism may under most circumstances be a necessary condition for wandering. It is less clear, however, that it is sufficient. The demolition of one’s core beliefs might seem to lead to despair, rather than to the playful and experimental way of life suggested by Zhuangzi. There must be some other ingredient that gives his account its optimistic and even exultant flavor. If that ingredient

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98 The Mohists also assert that the example of antiquity is an important criterion of assessment. Nonetheless, their distinctiveness as a school is due in large part to their use of the standards of benefit (li) and harm (hai). These issues will be discussed in section 2.4.
99 It is necessary insofar as one has imbibed certain beliefs that must be undermined before one can wander. It is necessary, therefore, for anyone who has lived within a human society for any length of time.
turns out to be some kind of claim about human nature, however, then it would appear vulnerable to precisely the same objections that Zhuangzi raises against the Mohists and the Confucians.

I will argue that by attending to the character of Zhuangzi’s skepticism we can overcome this difficulty. He indicates that, precisely in cases in which we are not burdened by theoretical or cultural encumbrances, we recognize a wide variety of activities as good. This is not a claim that is vulnerable to skeptical attack, because it has few, if any, theoretical presuppositions. In this way, he begins from an experientially grounded claim about what is good for human beings. His skeptical doubts are not about the mere possibility of making reasonable judgments about what is good in some particular situation. They are about the possibility of either generalizing those judgments to all cases or finding a theoretical system that would allow one to do so. He denies that our judgments remain fixed across the various transformations that characterize our lives. Thus, his skepticism does not undermine the idea of goodness or even the good life. It undermines only the views that presumptuously suppose that they have found fixed standards that can determine the content of those ideas once and for all.

Defending this interpretation against the more radically skeptical readings of Zhuangzi will require further exploration of the text. In order to understand the precise nature of Zhuangzi’s skeptical arguments, however, we must first examine the kinds of views that prevailed among the philosophical schools of his time. It was in order to undermine their pretensions that he articulated those arguments, and we can understand them only within this context. As we shall see, Zhuangzi’s Confucian and Mohist rivals were committed to the idea that there is a single fixed way of living that we can know to be best, although they differed both on the nature of that way and the manner in which we come to know it.

\(^{100}\) Cf. Fraser, “Skepticism and Value in the Zhuangzi”
2.2. Confucius and the Authority of the Past

The heart mind is completed or constituted (cheng) insofar as it has been trained to apply particular standards of judgment. Those standards, for Zhuangzi, then serve as obstacles to the recognition of new sources of pleasure and insight. Some, for example our judgment that death is the greatest evil, cause misery. The standards involved will, of course, vary according to one’s time and place.

In China during the fifth century BCE, there were three fundamental ways in which one’s heart might be constituted by a set of standards. First, one might simply absorb the habits that prevail within one’s immediate surroundings. Many writers recognized that this was, in fact, how most people learned how to conduct themselves. Mencius emphasizes the relationship between a particular time and place and moral character when he makes the following observation:

In good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent. Heaven has not sent down men whose endowment differs so greatly. The difference is due to what ensnares their hearts (VI.A.7).

As the passage makes clear, the decisive factor here is the context into which these young men are born. Mencius, however, does not take the standards that prevailed during his time to be good. Indeed, the Confucians, the Mohists, and Zhuangzi himself all seem to agree that the prevailing norms of the Warring States Period were so deeply flawed that they should not be taken as authoritative. When one interlocutor suggested that Mencius was “fond of disputation,” he responded that he was forced to argue because of the debased intellectual conditions of his time, as manifested in the prevalence the egoistic teaching of Yang Zhu and the doctrines of the Mohists. He feared that if morality were not restored “sooner or later it will come to men devouring men” (3B9). Nor was Mozi an optimist about the existing order. He complained of
“great states attacking small ones, great families overthrowing small ones, the strong oppressing the weak, the many harrying the few, the cunning deceiving the stupid, [and] the eminent lording it over the humble” (Watson, 41).

For these thinkers, there were two distinct ways of finding guidance under such unfavorable conditions. They could seek out the practices of a bygone era, on the assumption that they were wiser than those that prevailed in the present. Confucius, by taking the practices of the early Zhou dynasty as authoritative, endorses this option. The alternative was to defend particular practices on the basis of theoretical disputation. Mozi and his school were among the first to place primary emphasis on this method, although Confucians such as Mencius and Xunzi also accepted the need to engage in disputation given the difficulties of the times.

Confucius’ effort to restore the glory of the Zhou dynasty was made possible, in part, by the texts and rituals that had been preserved. Figures such as King Wen, the dynasty’s first ruler, and the Duke of Zhou were revered as model statesmen who offered a stark contrast with the petty rulers of later times. The ways of these rulers were presented in works such as the Classic of Documents (Shujing 書經) and the Classic of Odes (Shijing 詩經). The rituals, on which Confucius believed that moral cultivation depends, were apparently particularly well-preserved in his home state of Lu. While Confucius does not offer an explicit theory of ritual, he does indicate that it plays the decisive role in nurturing a flourishing community. He claims, for

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101 These texts did not exist in the form in which we now possess them, but at least part of the material in each case is thought to be of genuine early Zhou origin. See Michael Nylan, The Five Confucian Classics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). On the classics and their status in education, see also Vincent Shen, “Introduction: Classical Confucianism in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” in Vincent Shen, ed., Dao Companion to Classical Confucianism (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 1-19.

example, that government by commands backed up with punishments will ensure only outward obedience, while ritual will lead the people to “reform themselves” (2.3, 63). Confucius developed these traditions into a coherent teaching. He and his followers seem to have been experts and advisors on ritual issues, as well as questions of government more generally. Many have argued that they were part of a broader class devoted to the study and practice of ritual. A.C. Graham has suggested that Confucius’ distinctive contribution was to develop a theoretical account of the practices and subject matter of importance to this class.

Confucius’ own way of life, which he also urged on his students, was characterized by a dedication to study. The objects of study included the great examples of the past and the great works from which one might learn about them, such as the *Classic of Documents* and the *Classic of Odes*. In studying and teaching such examples, he put into practice one of his most famous claims:

I transmit but I do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity (7.1, 86).

Confucius’ devotion to the great leaders of the past was so great that he apparently once lamented that he had gone too long without dreaming about the Duke of Zhou (7.5, 86). When his own son, Bo Yu, was asked what Confucius had taught him, he recounted admonitions to study the *Classic of Odes* and to dedicate himself to ritual (16.13, 141).

Confucius’ method was not to begin from a set of principles or standards and then to deduce ethical or political consequences. Instead, he sought to understand and restore a set of

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103 Regardless of whether or not this was his self-understanding, it seems clear that he was an original thinker in his own right who transformed the sources and ideas available to him. For an account of the debates surrounding the propriety of innovation in early China, see Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

104 A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), PAGE.
practices that had nourished the community during better days. As a consequence, he rarely made general statements about human nature and other more abstract considerations. He did argue that “men are close to one another by nature” but “diverge as a result of repeated practice,” but he did not choose to correct these deviations through an investigation of human nature (17.2, 143). 105 Ying-shih Yu has suggested that classical Chinese thought is primarily concerned with interpreting the Way, rather than discovering or inventing it. 106 This is certainly true of Confucius. As we shall see, however, Mozi and his school were more comfortable with defending new policies and criticizing the traditional ones. In response to their arguments, Confucian traditionalism had to be restated in a more theoretical manner.

2.3: The Mohist School

Confucian traditionalism was far from universally accepted among the intellectuals of the Warring States era. Mozi, and the Mohist school to which he lent his name, brought consequentialist arguments to bear on questions of government. Their appraisals of benefit and harm provided independent criteria for evaluating policies and actions. In this way, Mozi forced the Confucians to engage in theoretical disputation at a much higher level of complexity and abstraction. While Mencius and Xunzi presented powerful and sophisticated responses to his position, they always maintained that the need for such arguments, and indeed for arguments at all, was a consequence of the moral decay characteristic of the times. Xunzi, for example, argued that he would rather use punishments than persuasion in order to stamp out erroneous

106 Yu’s intention is to contrast the more radical twentieth century Chinese intellectuals who endorsed discovering or inventing new ways of living with their more conservative predecessors. He identifies an affinity between traditional Chinese criticism and the social criticism of Michael Walzer. Both, he points out, are concerned with interpreting existing standards and practices. See Ying-shih Yu, “The Radicalization of China in the Twentieth Century,” Daedalus 122 (1993): 125-150, 125-126.
views. Nonetheless, since they did not control the highest levels of government, the later Confucians had to respond to the Mohist challenge on their own theoretical terrain.

Mozi’s theoretical project aims at discovering standards with which to judge right actions and policies. These standards provide an independent means of judging traditional practices. Whereas Confucius seeks to reach the best possible interpretation of his tradition, Mozi is willing to call major aspects of the tradition itself into question. The Mohist school to which Mozi’s thought gave rise was not content to attack Confucianism on a theoretical basis. Its members actively sought out advisory positions. In addition to their studies in political theory, they were also experts on defensive warfare. The practical aspect of Mozi’s teaching is reflected in chapter titles such as “Preparing the Walls and Gates” and “Preparing Against Tunnelling.”

The need for standards, on the Mohist view, is made apparent once one has recognized that what is customary is not necessarily good. One example of this is to be found in the Mozi’s “Moderation in Funerals.” Confucians and other traditionalists were known for spending extravagantly on lengthy funerals and engaging in protracted periods of mourning. Mozi and his school, on the other hand, regarded these practices as a foolish waste of resources. In this chapter, Mozi is asked why, “if elaborate funerals and prolonged mourning are really not the way of the sage kings, how do you account for the fact that the noble men of the central states practice them and don’t stop them, implement them and don’t abandon them?” Mozi responds to this by noting that these gentlemen are simply “[considering] one’s habits convenient and one’s customs yi (right and proper).” He goes on to clarify the distinction that he is drawing:

Formerly, to the east of Yue there was the country of the Kaimu. When an eldest son was born, they cut him up and ate him. They called this “fitting for the younger brother”.

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107 Xunzi, Book 22.
When the paternal grandfather died, they carried the maternal grandmother away and abandoned her, saying, “We cannot live with the wife of a ghost.” If, above, these things are taken to be government practice and, below, they are taken to be customs, and are carried out and not stopped, implemented and not discarded, then how could this be the Way of true \( ren \) [humaneness] and \( yi \) [righteousness]. This is what is called “[considering] one’s habits convenient and one’s customs \( yi \).”

Mozi’s point, in part, is that some customs have remained in use although they are not good. The more important point, however, is that those customs are still taken to be good. This is because of a human tendency, which is manifest both among Confucian gentlemen and the people of Kaishu, to equate habit and custom with propriety and right.

Mozi is not endorsing some form of relativism. The relativist suggestion that each community’s set of customs are good for that community is precisely what he is denying. Nor is he arguing that we cannot think outside of customary categories. His claim is simply that our initial beliefs are decisively shaped by our communities and their norms. It is possible, and indeed necessary, according to Mozi, to find standards that will allow us to endorse ways of living and thinking that are better than those that are merely customary.

The most authoritative standard, for Mozi, is the intention of heaven. He notes that many people accept the authority of the ruler, the “Son of Heaven,” but they fail to recognize that it is Heaven (\( tian \)) itself that is the loftiest standard.\(^{112}\) Heaven’s intention (\( tian zhi \) 天志) provides the wise person with guidance that is “just like the compasses wheelwrights have and the squares carpenters have.”\(^{113}\) To take Heaven as our model, for Mozi, is to treat others in an impartial manner. This ambition is manifested in Mozi’s distinctive doctrine of “universal mutual love”

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\(^{111}\) Mozi, trans. Johnston, 123.
\(^{112}\) In defense of the relative priority of Heaven itself in this relationship, Mozi notes that the Son of Heaven needs to pray to Heaven, but not vice versa. See Mozi, trans. Ian Johnston (London: Penguin, 2013), 132.
\(^{113}\) Mozi, trans. Johnston, 130.
(jian ai 兼愛, sometimes also translated as “inclusive care”).\textsuperscript{114} While it is conventional to translate ai as love, many scholars have noted that in this context such a translation is slightly misleading. The love that is involved is not a passion or emotional state, but rather a reflective recognition of Heaven’s authoritative intention. As A.C. Graham notes, “the Mohist ai is an unemotional will to benefit people and dislike of harming them.”\textsuperscript{115} In any case, practicing this “universal mutual love” entails caring for all equally. In this respect, the Mohists depart decisively from the Confucian teaching on the moral priority of one’s own family.

The idea that one should follow Heaven’s intention and benefit all does not, by itself, dictate a particular course of action. We need less abstract standards to provide us with a basis for assessing policies. Mozi proposes three standards that can play this role: “the actions of the ancient sage kings above,” the “evidence of the eyes and ears of the common people below,” and “the benefit to the ordinary people of the state.”\textsuperscript{116} While he generally argues that all three standards point us in the same direction, the standard of benefit and harm seems to take precedence. We can see this by considering one of his chapter “Explaining Ghosts,” in which he claims that the political and moral turmoil of his age was the direct result of widespread disbelief in spirits that can dole out rewards and punishments. He claims that we can argue for the existence of ghosts using all three standards. He asks, for example, “if from antiquity to today, from the beginning of mankind to the present, there have been people who have seen ghostlike and spiritlike beings and heard their voices, then how can see say they don’t exist?” He supports the testimony of ordinary people with stories about the sacrifices practiced by the sage kings,

\textsuperscript{114} Mozi, trans. Johnston, 127.
\textsuperscript{115} A.C. Graham (1989), 41. Schwartz (1985) emphasizes that “if it [jian ai] is not an emotion, it is certainly an abiding moral disposition and Mo-tzu seems to believe that it is both possible and necessary to cultivate this disposition” (149).
\textsuperscript{116} Mozi, trans. Johnston, 172.
which he thinks make sense only if the sage kings believed in ghosts.\textsuperscript{117} There are, therefore, three distinct standards that have some claim to decisive significance in Mozi’s thought. For this reason, there is considerable dispute about his basic principles. Some take him to be a utilitarian, while others have suggested that he advances a divine command theory of morality.\textsuperscript{118}

Towards the end of the chapter, however, Mozi claims that the case for belief in ghosts does not depend on their actual existence:

Of course if ghosts and spirits do not really exist, then it would seem that we are wasting the materials we use, the wine and millet. But though we expend them, it is not as though we were simply pouring the wine in a sewage ditch and throwing the millet away. For the members of the family and the people of the community can all gather to drink and eat them. Therefore, though no ghosts or spirits existed at all, we would still have the opportunity to gather together a pleasant group and make friends with the people of the community.\textsuperscript{119}

Mozi’s line of thinking follows a similar pattern with regard to a number of different institutions. He condemns anything that does not provide a tangible benefit for the people, for example excessive spending on funerals and musical performances. He also argued for an expanded sense of concern for others, his doctrine of “universal mutual love.” He believed that peace and good order would prevail if “men were to regard the states of others as they regard their own” and “regard the families of others as they regard their own.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{117} Mozi, 103.


\textsuperscript{119} Mozi, 110-111. For an account of the practical utility of Mozi’s teaching on ghosts, as well as some of the ambiguities of his presentation, see Benjamin Wong and Hui-Chieh Loy, “War and Ghosts in Mozi’s Political Philosophy,” \textit{Philosophy East and West} 54 (2004): 343-363.

\textsuperscript{120} Mozi, 42.
As Chad Hansen has noted, Mozi’s challenge forced traditionalist thinkers to argue on behalf of their belief that the inherited traditions were good.\(^{121}\) His later followers developed his preoccupation with the standards by which we should assess our language and social practices. They argued that we can stabilize language only when it is based on genuine similarities and differences among things. Hansen summarizes Later Mohist thought, elaborated in a cluster of texts called the *Mohist Canon*, as follows:

The Mohist argues that the measurable differences in the world are the basis for making distinctions. Science, for example, does not fix the range of *mammal* merely by linguistic habit and custom. Reality fixes the range of natural kind terms. Hence, whether any culture realizes it or not, dolphins are mammals. A whole linguistic community can be wrong about its linguistic types.\(^{122}\)

The Mohists, then, argue that there is one particular way of intellectually dividing up the world that can be ascertained through human disputation (*bian 辨*). As we shall see, later Confucians such as Mencius would deny that such disputation was simply good, but they accepted its necessity under the circumstances that prevailed. Because Zhuangzi will challenge the assumptions of both Mohist and Confucian disputants, it will be useful to briefly examine the views of Mencius, one of the foremost members of the latter group.

### 2.4: Mencius, Confucianism, and Human Nature

Mencius was the foremost Confucian thinker of the fourth century BCE. His work also represents one of the most important attempts to ground Confucian thought in a coherent doctrine founded on definite claims about human nature. This effort was motivated, in large part, by the challenge presented by Mozi’s anti-Confucian position. He also confronted a second challenge, Yang Zhu’s egoism. Yang Zhu is an elusive figure about whom little is known, but

\(^{121}\) Hansen (1992), 234.

\(^{122}\) Hansen, 240.
Mencius describes him as an advocate of extreme selfishness. Mencius believed that Yang Zhu and Mozi were both threats to social order, albeit for opposite reasons:

Yang Zhu chooses egoism. Even if he could benefit the Empire by pulling out one hair he would not do it. Mozi advocates love without discrimination. If by shaving his head and showing his heels he could benefit the Empire, he would do it (VIIA26).

One can depart from what is right, for Mencius, either by giving too much weight to one’s individual wellbeing or to the benefits accruing to the community. The prevalence of these two opposing errors, he believed, presented a grave threat to the community. It is for this reason that he declared that “whoever can, with words, combat Yang and Mo is a true disciple of the sages” (IIIB9). Mencius articulates his arguments on morality and human nature in order to engage in such combat.

Zhuangzi, like Mencius, rejects the views of Yang Zhu and Mozi. Yet he also rejects Confucianism. His claim, it seems, is that Confucians, by failing to recognize the limits of our knowledge, ultimately make the same error as these other thinkers and their admirers. In the next section, I will offer a brief account of Mencius’ thought. This will help to clarify Zhuangzi’s position within the debates of the Warring States era. This is not because Zhuangzi necessarily intended to respond directly to Mencius. While Mencius’ life was roughly contemporaneous with that of Zhuangzi, there is only rather minimal evidence that Zhuangzi was familiar with his work.123 Be that as it may, Zhuangzi does attack certain intellectual assumptions that, while broadly shared, are stated with particular force by Mencius. For this

123 As Bryan Van Norden has argued, however, some passages from Zhuangzi’s Inner Chapters do seem to use Mencian terminology and to discuss Mencian themes. The most prominent is his reference to the “sprouts” or “tips” (duan) of benevolence (or humaneness) and righteousness in Qiwulun. See Bryan Van Norden, “Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the ‘Zhuangzi,’” Philosophy East and West 46 (1996): 247-268, 264 f. 15.
reason, it will be valuable to consider Mencius’ position in order to bring out more starkly the distinctive features of that of Zhuangzi.

Mencius defends teachings quite similar to those of Confucius, and he too is committed to upholding the invaluable teachings of a past age. He remarks at one point that “no one ever erred through following the example of the Former Kings” (IVA1, 76). Given the prevalence of the teachings of Yang Zhu and Mozi, however, he had to ground those teachings in independent argument. His most important claims, for our purposes, are the following:

(1) That there is a fixed human nature that is best completed through an education in the Confucian virtues (humaneness, righteousness, wisdom, and

(2) That all human beings possess certain “sprouts” or “tips” of the virtues that are evident in our most basic thoughts and feelings. These thoughts and feelings originate in the xin (heart-mind).\(^{124}\)

(3) That we cultivate these “sprouts” by the process of “extension.” Extension occurs as we apply our basic moral sentiments, such as commiseration with the suffering of others, to new cases by which we had once been unmoved.

Because some of Zhuangzi’s central arguments appear to be directed against Mencius-style views, regardless of whether or not he was actually familiar with the work of Mencius, it will be useful to discuss each of these points in greater detail.

*Mencius on Virtue and Human Nature*

The early Chinese term ren xing (人性), which can be translated as “human nature,” indicates the set of possibilities open to human beings as such. One particularly influential use of the term is that of Yang Zhu, who has often been referred to as an “egoist.” While there are no extant texts that can be attributed to Yang Zhu, his position was described by various writers,

\(^{124}\) The precise meaning of the term “xin” is much disputed. Some translate the term as “heart,” others as “mind,” and still others as “heart-mind.” What is clear, regardless of one’s translation of choice, is that the xin is the locus of both thought and feeling. See, for example, Andrew Plaks, “Xin as the Seat of Emotions in Confucian Self-Cultivation,” Chad Hansen, “Language in the Heart-Mind,” and Edward Slingerland and M Chudek, “The Prevalence of Mind-Body Dualism in Early China.”
including Mencius. He seems to have believed that we ought to preserve ourselves at whatever cost. We do harm to our nature, he argued, when we follow ethical injunctions. We preserve our nature, on the other hand, when we live out our full lifespan.125 The Yangist claim against which Mencius wanted to argue is that morality is unnatural because it threatens our safety and wellbeing.

Mencius’ claim is diametrically opposed to that of the Yang Zhu. Not only, on his view, does morality do no harm to our nature, it actually marks the culmination of its development. Mencius supports this view in a dialogue with a thinker named Gaozi. At least as he is presented in the Mencius, Gaozi endorses a position on human nature that is less hostile to morality than that of Yang Zhu, while still falling short of that of Mencius himself. Gaozi seems to believe that human nature is a neutral material that can, depending on how it is used, be developed in various ways.126

125 For a discussion of the sources in which Yang Zhu’s views are mentioned, and various possible ways of interpreting those views, see Bryan Van Norden (2007), 200-211.

126 Mencius is not entirely antagonistic towards Gaozi. In section IIA2, for example, he states that Gaozi had attained an “unperturbed mind” (budong xin 不動心, trans. Legge) earlier in his life than Mencius himself. Mencius goes on in the same passage, however, to claim that he distinguishes himself from Gaozi by nourishing (yang 養) his “flood-like qi” (haoran zhi qi 浩然之氣). Their disagreement here in VIA, however, concerns at least two distinct but related questions. First, they disagree on whether or not the virtues of humaneness (ren 仁) and righteousness (yi 義) are rooted in nature (xing 性). Second, they disagree on whether these virtues are “internal” (nei 内) or “external” (wai 外). Gaozi claims that humaneness is internal and righteousness is external, but Mencius argues that both are internal. How this dispute should be interpreted is itself a topic of scholarly debate, but one plausible suggestion is that a virtue is internal when it requires a certain kind of motivation. This view is defended by Bryan Van Norden, who follows the Song dynasty thinker Zhu Xi on this point. See Van Norden, Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy, 288-290. In spite of these disagreements, both are often associated with the thinking of Confucius’ grandson Zisi in what is known as the Si-Meng school. On Zisi and his relationship to Mencius, see Chen-Feng Tsai, “Zisi and the Thought of Zisi and Mencius School,” in Vincent Shen, ed., Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy, 119-138. The connection between Zisi and Gaozi can be grounded in the bamboo slip version of the “Five Forms of Conduct” (wuxing 五行) discovered at the Guodian tombs in 1993, which seems to take a similar position on the internal/external division as the one attributed to Gaozi in the Mencius. Many scholars have attributed this newly discovered text to Zisi, although its authorship remains contested. On the Guodian
He clarifies this vision with two analogies. First, he compares human nature to a willow tree that can be made into cups and bowls. As the cups are to the tree, righteousness (yi) is to human nature (VIA1). Mencius objects that this analogy suggests that morality is harmful, because a tree is certainly harmed if it is chopped up and made into cups and bowls. Gaozi could simply suggest the implications of his analogy and grant that humaneness and righteousness are indeed harmful to human beings.127 This would position his stance near that of Yang Zhu.

It seems, however, that Gaozi wants to suggest something rather different. He offers a second analogy, according to which human nature is like whirling water. This is because such water can flow either east or west depending on the openings available to it. Mencius accepts this analogy, at least to a certain degree. He admits that water can flow east or west, but he also observes that it also has a certain tendency to move downwards (6A2). Morality, if the analogy holds, is more like the existing tendency of water. He develops the analogy further by observing that water can be contained at the top of a hill or made to fly into the air, in spite of its general tendency to move downwards. He concludes his discussion of this point by noting “that man can be made bad shows that his nature is no different from that of water in this respect” (VIA2).

According to Mencius, all human beings share moral tendencies that can be either developed or suppressed. Because of the latter possibility, we cannot take the existence of bad

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127 The term ren (仁) is sometimes translated as benevolence and sometimes as humanity or humaneness. The term itself can be used in various senses, some narrower and some broader, because it is sometimes used to indicate a particular kind of concern for others and sometimes to indicate a much more general excellence of character. Mencius himself uses the term in both ways. I have generally left translations of the term unaltered, so ren is translated as “humaneness” and “benevolence” in different sections, although I have often noted that both translations are possible. “Humaneness” and “humanity” are likely the most plausible translations, given that they encompass both ways of using the term. For an account of these and other possible translations of ren, as well as a careful assessment of their merits, see Jiyuan Yu, “Translation of Ren in Van Norden’s Mengzi,” Journal of Chinese Philosophy 37 (2010): 660-667.
people as evidence that human nature is bad. In a remark recounted slightly later in the same section, he claims that “in good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent” (6A7). He explains this point by noting that the same barley seeds can flourish or fail depending on the soil and weather conditions around them.

The analogies suggested by Mencius, and for that matter Gaozi, do not settle the debate either way. Even if water and trees should really be understood in the ways suggested, we still need some reason for thinking that the analogies are apt. Moreover, even if they are, and thus human beings have some particular inborn directedness, we may be directed towards something other than Confucian virtue (e.g. Yangist self interest). As we shall see, Mencius confronts these difficulties by suggesting that all human beings share certain moral “sprouts” (duan), or experiences that manifest the moral sentiments in an inchoate form.

*The Sprouts of Virtue*

Mencius claims not only that we have a shared nature, but also that it reveals itself in a set of basic moral experiences. These experiences are manifestations of the moral sentiments.

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128 As Bryan Van Norden notes, “logically speaking, the structure of Mengzi’s [Mencius’] argument is modus Tollens. If human nature were like what Gaozi suggests, then becoming virtuous would be bad for people. But becoming virtuous is not bad for people. (This is a premise that Gaozi and Mengzi agree on.) Therefore, human nature is not like what Gaozi suggests.” See Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 281.

129 On the issue of analogical reasoning in Mencius’ work, see D.C. Lau, “On Mencius’ Use of the Method of Analogy in Argument.”

130 The ambiguities of Mencius’ argument here have led some commentators to suppose that he is not particularly theoretically sophisticated. Chad Hansen takes this view. Van Norden, on the other hand, suggests that this sort of analogical reasoning is perfectly legitimate.

These sentiments are not themselves fully realized virtues, but they provide the soil in which
virtue can be cultivated. Considering their force, for Mencius, also reveals to us that there is
nothing unnatural about moral virtue. These moral experiences are best understood as a
rudimentary counterpart to the virtue of the sage, and the development from the former to the
latter, while arduous, is entirely natural and desirable.

Mencius’ method is to suggest certain scenarios in which these our latent moral potential
manifests itself. His most famous such scenario is the following:

Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a
well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the
good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers
or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child.\footnote{Mencius, 38.}

The crucial point here is that any observer would feel compassion. This is the evidence that it is
part of human nature. Mencius also takes care to isolate compassionate concern for others from
other sorts of concern. While we might seek a good reputation or peace and quiet, both of which
could be obtained by saving the screaming baby, we need not posit either motive in order to
explain our concern. An unwillingness to see harm come to the baby is sufficient.

The conclusion that Mencius draws from the example is that the “heart of compassion” is
the sprout (duan 孫) of benevolence (ren 仁). Benevolence is the completed virtue that allows
one to respond appropriately to the needs of others. As we can see from the account of its
sprouts just given, it involves concern and action towards human beings generally. Nonetheless,
Mencius believes that it should be especially manifest within the family. He remarks elsewhere
that “the content of benevolence is the serving of one’s parents” (IVA27). The familial realm
does not, however, exhaust the scope of benevolence. Mencius observes, at various points, that
benevolence can characterize the ruler’s attitude towards the people (IA1), the attitude of a
diligent teacher towards his tasks (IIA2), and even the attitude of a human being (again, the
ruler) towards a sacrificial ox being led to the slaughter (IA7). This final example, as we shall
see, figures decisively in Mencius’ account of moral education.

From Sprouts to Virtues: The Process of Extension

The ox just mentioned appears in a dialogue between Mencius and a ruler named King
Xuan of Qi (IA7). That ruler asks for Mencius’ advice on ruling. Mencius responds that the
most important thing is protecting the people (bao min 保民). The ruler asks whether it is
actually possible for him to do this. To this Mencius responds by recounting a story that he has
heard, according to which the king once saw an ox about to be sacrificed and was moved to spare
it. The king confirms that he “could not bear to see it shrink with fear, like an innocent man
going to the place of execution…” (IA7, 10). Mencius infers that the king has the proper regard
for those in harm’s way. He just needs to “extend” his concern to the people. This process of
extension, Mencius suggests, proceeds if one can do the following:

Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend
this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in a manner befitting
their tender age and extend this to the young of other families, and you can roll the
Empire on your palm (IA7, 11).

Mencius, as he often does, supports his recommendation with a literary reference to the Classic
of Odes:

He set an example for his consort
And also for his brothers,
And so ruled over the family and the state (IA7, 11).

Mencius thus claims that his theoretical account of human nature is in line with the authoritative
examples of the past. The seems to be that we must begin our moral education by acting on our
moral sentiments where they most readily manifest themselves. This local sphere includes, most
notably, the family, although the story of the ox suggests that our concern is not confined within its limits. Such activity extends our concern in such a way that we begin to respond in the appropriate way to other situations. As Mencius notes, by treating our own families properly, we can come to cultivate benevolence towards other families.

The foregoing account of Confucianism and Mohism is not exhaustive. What I have sought to demonstrate is simply that both schools shared a set of assumptions against which Zhuangzi articulated his own skeptical arguments, and his own positive vision more broadly. The core assumptions of each school are that its members possess decisive knowledge of a single best life and that they can establish the authority of that knowledge through disputation. We will now see why Zhuangzi rejects both of these claims, whether in their Confucian or Mohist forms.

2.5: Knowledge and Skepticism in the Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi believes that the teachings of the Confucians and Mohists impose an arbitrary framework on human life, thus stifling our abilities to respond spontaneously to the manifold possibilities given to us by the dao. Zhuangzi regards life as a kind of freewheeling journey in which one makes no overarching commitments, instead preferring to pursue varied activities and pleasures according to one’s whims and the situations in which one finds oneself. This ideal is expressed primarily through imaginative images, for example that of the “authentic man” (真人) who

- did not rebel against want, did not grow proud in plenty, and did not plan his affairs. A man like this could commit an error and not regret it, could meet with success and not make a show. A man like this could climb the high places and not be frightened, could enter the water and not get wet, could enter the fire and not get burned.133

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What Zhuangzi is trying to do here, as in the passage describing the fish who transforms into the enormous bird Peng and flies around the world, is to undermine prevailing dogmas in order to achieve spiritual liberation.

Many of us live our lives, however, under much more constrained circumstances. We cannot enjoy the varied pleasures preferred by Zhuangzi because we are under the sway of dogmatic teachings that commit us to just one fixed way of living. These dogmatic teachings often involve claims to have decisive knowledge of human nature and the universe. Consequently, living a life of free wandering requires that we purge ourselves of these teachings. This is no easy task. Our communities may have taught us to accept all sorts of unreasonable claims. Moreover, even if we take a more refined theoretical view, such as Confucianism or Mohism, we may become personally invested in its success in a way that goes well beyond its intellectual merits. Zhuangzi’s skeptical arguments do more than provide theoretical clarity on human epistemic limitations. They are intended to liberate us from restrictive thoughts and practices, thereby enabling a freer way of life.

While Zhuangzi promises liberation from dogmatic claims to knowledge, this does not mean that he abjures knowledge entirely. He posits a kind of experiential knowledge that is an alternative to the theories of the competing schools. This form of knowledge, however, can be best understood once we have understood his reasons for rejecting the alternatives.

2.6: The Significance of Difference

I will treat Zhuangzi’s epistemological claims first, before turning to the normative conclusions to which they are connected. It is worth noting, however, that this division, while useful in some respects, is not always a clear one. This is because part of Zhuangzi’s skepticism about the sweeping claims of the Confucians and the Mohists is derived from his view that
different kinds of beings flourish under different conditions. In other words, his pluralist position entails skepticism about these forms of monism. He observes that our ordinary experience contains an implicit recognition of the plurality of good ways of living.

In the “Discourse on Making Things Equal,” he puts the point in the following way:

If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? ...Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Maoqiang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standards of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?  

Chris Fraser has referred to this as Zhuangzi’s argument from plurality. It shows that we do not have the knowledge necessary to make ultimate distinctions regarding what is truly benevolent, righteous, beautiful, ugly, right, wrong, and so forth. It does this by showing that these distinctions can be drawn differently in different situations. Fish, unsurprisingly, are not too excited by a beautiful woman like Lady Li. The criteria according to which a fish would regard something as beautiful, whatever they might be, would surely be quite different than those of a human being. To reach the conclusion that there are diverse legitimate forms of judgment, Fraser points out, we must also assume that these different species are making distinctions in a way that is right for them. In the cases given, this is reasonable. It is surely not as easy for a human being to live in a tree as would be the case for a monkey. Consequently, we must at least grant that there are many different ways in which different species could live. Each might have its own, quite legitimate, standards.

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134 Zhuangzi, II, 15.
135 Chris Fraser, “Skepticism and Value in the Zhuangzi,” 450.
It seems, however, that Zhuangzi intends to make a much stronger claim than this. If he were just pointing to the diversity that exists among animals, then his criticism might not apply to the Confucians and Mohists. They could simply point out that their teachings are directed at human beings. Indeed, this is the way in which Mencius presents his own position, which is why the concept of human nature is so central to his thought. These observations about the varied forms of animal life might, therefore, seem peripheral or even irrelevant.

The *Zhuangzi* suggests that there are varied forms of human life that are worthwhile, and thus that the life spent “wandering” will involve responsiveness to a wide array of possibilities. As Yong Huang has noted, we have little reason to believe that Zhuangzi is particularly concerned with animal life for its own sake.¹³⁶ We must assume that human diversity and animal diversity are, in some sense, analogous. The final lines of the passage confirm this. If human beings were fully up to the task of applying human distinctions in a reasonable way, then Zhuangzi would have no reason to express confusion about the *duan* (sprouts, germs) of benevolence and righteousness. He could simply go about his business applying those terms in the appropriately human way, while leaving fish and monkeys to do their own thing. The role of the passage, therefore, is in part to purge us of our existing beliefs in the fixity of our categories of judgment.¹³⁷

As Franklin Perkins has noted, however, the passage can also be understood as a rejection of Mencius’ claim that we should follow and seek to cultivate the particular tendencies that constitute human nature. Zhuangzi agrees that we must, in a certain sense, follow nature. His

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aim, however, is not to follow the distinctively human elements of nature. According to Zhuangzi, Perkins argues, we must transcend merely human tendencies in order to follow the dao, thus harmonizing with nature as a whole.\textsuperscript{138}

That being said, we must not go too far in claiming that Zhuangzi rejects the idea of natures specific to particular things entirely. The conditions under which two people flourish, Zhuangzi seems to be suggesting, may be as different as those of a monkey and a human being. The practical upshot of the plurality argument becomes more apparent in the story of Hun Dun, which was discussed briefly in the introduction. This tale involves a friendship between the lords of the Northern Ocean and the Southern Ocean. Hun Dun, whose name means “chaos,” was their friend and often their host. Noting that Hun Dun lacks the usual orifices, they generously decide to thank him by drilling them into him. Unsurprisingly, this proves fatal.\textsuperscript{139}

As Yong Huang has noted, this episode brings to light the dangers of the “tendency to regard one’s own standard of right and wrong as the universal standard.”\textsuperscript{140}

2.7: The Argument from Change

The passages on plurality just recounted provide an evocative view of human life, according to which it is characterized at the deepest levels by diversity among goods and needs. Purely as arguments, however, they leave many questions unanswered. They do not establish that human lives are different in the same way as animal lives. These passages hardly make any direct claims about human beings at all. In the same section of the “Discourse on Making Things Equal,” however, Zhuangzi does address the question of distinctively human diversity. He does not merely claim that human beings differ from one another, but also that a given person can


\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Zhuangzi}, VII, 59.

\textsuperscript{140} Yong Huang, “The Ethics of Difference in the Zhuangzi,” 79.
judge things quite differently at different times. This shows that our ordinary experience of
human life contains an implicit recognition of pluralism. What is important about this line of
argument is that it does not require any questionable analogies between the human and non-
human worlds.

The final section of the “Discourse on Making Things Equal” concludes with the famous
butterfly dream:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn’t know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn’t know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.\(^\text{141}\)

The passage suggests, to put the point very generally, that our experiences involve personal
transformation in such a way that our most basic assumptions can be called into question. If we
cannot know whether we are human beings or butterflies, then presumably there is much else
that we cannot know. As we shall see, however, this general formulation contains many
ambiguities.

The butterfly dream concludes a sequence in the final section of the chapter in which
various kinds of transformation are described. The section begins with a man asking someone
named Zhang Wuzi about a speech that he claims to have heard from Confucius. Supposedly
Confucius claimed that “the sage does not work at anything, does not pursue profit, does not
dodge harm, does not enjoy being sought after, does not follow the Way, says nothing yet says
something, says something yet says nothing, and wanders beyond the dust and grime.”\(^\text{142}\)

\(^{141}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 18.

\(^{142}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 15.
sage, in other words, reverses the most common modes of evaluation, according to which profit and reputation are the greatest goods.

Zhang Wuzi responds that “Even the Yellow Emperor would be confused if he heard such words, so how could you expect Confucius to understand them?”\textsuperscript{143} The view that Zhang Wuzi’s interlocutor has described seems consistent with many passages in the Zhuangzi, including those describing the sage. The interlocutor’s mistake is not, it seems, saying the wrong thing about the sage. It is, rather, supposing that the best life, the life of the sage lived in harmony with the \textit{dao}, can be easily put into words. Zhang Wuzi proceeds with a lengthy speech that emphasizes two central points. Taken together, they provide an account of why we cannot have complete knowledge of the best life. First, one cannot understand particular judgments without attending to the process by which we come to judge in one way rather than another. Second, when we attend to that process, we see that our basic cognitive frameworks are constituted in different ways at different points in our lives.

The first point is expressed by chastising his interlocutor: “you see an egg and demand a crowing cock, see a crossbow pellet and demand a roast dove.” He is, in other words, too preoccupied with the effect rather than the cause. This passage seems to indicate, in part, a kind of spiritual presumptuousness on the part of the student. He is too eager to impose an arbitrary framework upon himself, the validity of which he is in no position to assess.\textsuperscript{144}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{143} \textit{Zhuangzi}, II, 16. Lisa Raphals notes that these and other passages involving or invoking Confucius are often structured in a verse format. Unlike the Confucian use of the \textit{Odes}, she points out, these verses are used to undermine existing authorities. See Lisa Raphals, “Poetry and Argument in the Zhuangzi,” \textit{Journal of Chinese Religions} 22 (1994): 103-116, 106.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Ewing Chinn suggests a similar reading of this comment. His interpretation, however, is part of his broader attempt to demonstrate that Zhuangzi is concerned with demonstrating that we occupy fundamentally incommensurable perspectives, a reading that I will challenge later on. See Ewing Y. Chinn, “Zhuangzi and Relativistic Skepticism,” \textit{Asian Philosophy} 7 (1997): 207-220, 218.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The second point is clarified through a series of stories involving change, which reaches its culminating in the butterfly dream passage already discussed. They are prefaced with a question: “How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?” (47). Again we are reminded of the possibility of radically different judgments regarding what is truly good in life. The significance of the passage is clarified by the stories that follow.

We hear first about a particularly Lady Li:

Lady Li was the daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first taken captive and brought to the state of Qin, she wept until her tears drenched the collar of her robe. But later, when she went to live in the palace of the ruler, shared his couch with him, and ate the delicious meats of his table, she wondered why she had ever wept. This tale is followed by a reiteration of the question of death: “how do I know that the dead do not wonder why they ever longed for life?”

This story shares certain features with the butterfly dream. Both illustrate the possibility of radical diversity among judgments concerning human goods, and indicate this possibility by describing examples of radical changes in judgment. The changes involved, and the theoretical conclusions that they suggest, however, are rather different. The butterfly dream involves a very radical challenge to our judgment. We ordinarily think that we can distinguish between being a butterfly and being a human. When we attend to the vividness of our dreams, however, we recognize that we can be just as convinced of the opposite conclusion. Consequently, we have two equally plausible conclusions. One seems right while dreaming, and one seems right while awake. Nonetheless, the same person is waking and dreaming, so it seems like they must be either a butterfly at both times, or a human at both times. A reliable criterion with which to draw the distinction, however, must be present at both times, and this is precisely what is lacking. We

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145 Zhuangzi, II, 16.
must, therefore, conclude that Zhuangzi has no real justification for saying that he is either a human or a butterfly.

The story of Lady Li is somewhat different. She undergoes what L.A. Paul has referred to as a “transformative experience.” Paul uses that term to indicate an experience that “teaches you something new, something that you could not have known before having the experience, while also changing you as a person.” The possibility of such experiences set limits on what we can know at a given time, and also on our ability to make rational decisions about our futures. If we cannot know what an experience will be like, we cannot know whether or not it is desirable. Recognizing limitations like this is, it seems, part of what Lady Li’s example is supposed to show us.

She initially believes, reasonably enough, that being captured and taken away to Qin is undesirable. After living with the ruler of the state, however, she comes to see that there are goods available there that are well worth having. The core of the story, therefore, seems to be Lady Li’s progression from poorly grounded to better grounded beliefs about this particular fate. She does not conclude that one cannot really say whether being taken away to live with the ruler is good or not. Her new evaluation comes to seem obvious to her in light of her new experiences. Indeed, this is a case in which Zhuangzi’s emphasis on perspective clearly does not generate relativism. The second perspective is obviously broader, more accurate, and generally better than the first.

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147 Paul, 18.
148 Paul, 19.
Like the butterfly dream, this story emphasizes the uncertainty of our evaluations. It does so, however, by suggesting that we might always revise them in light of further evidence. In this respect, it seems only to indicate that we should hold our convictions with an attitude of humility, since we might learn more later. This story takes as one of its basic elements the possibility of reasonable judgment, since the way in which Lady Li’s old view is challenged is through her recognition of a more reasonable one.\(^{150}\) The claim is not, contrary to Fraser’s suggestion, that new schemes of evaluation become appropriate under new circumstances. That position would imply that Lady Li was right to mourn in the first place, but also right to rejoice once she actually arrived at court.\(^{151}\) A more natural reading seems to be that she mourned only because she did not know what court would be like and, upon arrival, updated her evaluations accordingly. The second perspective is, in an important sense, better than the first. The butterfly dream, on the other hand, revealed that our judgments cannot be grounded in a comprehensive sense. It seems to call into question the very idea of saying that one set of judgments is better than another.

These two stories seem to represent two different aspects of Zhuangzi’s position on transformation and skepticism. As the butterfly dream indicates, there may be certain cross-perspectival judgments that we are incapable of making. As the story of Lady Li indicates, it is

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\(^{150}\) It is important to keep in mind that the story is intended to justify the claim that death might turn out to be better than life. The point, both in the story and with regard to the broader claim, is not that our existing evaluations are wrong. Zhuangzi is only trying to show that they could be wrong. On this point, see Eric Schwitzgebel, “Death and Self in the Incomprehensible Zhuangzi.”

\(^{151}\) He could also be read as suggesting, instead, that the question whether or not one perspective is better can itself only be answered within a perspective. Both interpretations have trouble accounting for the details of this particular example. If Zhuangzi had wanted to indicate that we simply have two incommensurable perspectives, it seems to me, he would not have used a case in which the first situation is so obviously characterized by ignorance of the second situation. See Chris Fraser, “Skepticism and Value in the Zhuangzi,” 451.
nonetheless possible for us to learn and to expand our existing perspectives. Zhuangzi’s understanding of the diversity of good lives, therefore, seems to have three features:

(1) Living things flourish under different conditions, and their modes of judgement are, accordingly, different.

(2) We have no ultimate perspective for guiding action, although we may have a variety of non-ultimate perspectives.

(3) These non-ultimate perspectives may be more or less appropriate to particular circumstances. Zhuangzi does not regard all perspectives as equally valid.

2.8: Theories of Perspective

The arguments just discussed show, generally by bringing to light seemingly relevant analogies, that there are many different perspectives and ways of living. It is not enough, however, merely to show that there are various ways of living that seem fruitful. This might simply be an illusion. Presumably any Confucian would recognize that some people are not Confucians, and that some of those people believe that their ways of living are good and satisfying. Those people, on the Confucian view, are simply mistaken. The Confucian arguments of thinkers like Mencius and Xunzi are attempts to show us why this is the case. If they are right, then the differences between, for example, a human being and a monkey are not at all analogous to the differences among human beings. They offer theories of human nature that purport to show that what unites human beings is, from an ethical and political point of view, more relevant than what divides us. These shared features can ground an authoritative human perspective, providing us with an adequate means for deploying central ethical concepts: benevolence, righteousness, and so forth.
Zhuangzi offers skeptical arguments that aim to show the impossibility of any such authoritative perspective. These arguments support his argument from diversity by demonstrating that we do not, and indeed cannot, possess any final theoretical apparatus with which we could challenge the apparent goodness of the diverse ways of living that we actually observe. Zhuangzi’s skeptical arguments are tied to his theory of perspective. By perspective, I mean a way of dividing the world up for the purposes of both thought and action. Lady Li’s particular perspective after arriving in Qin is such that she judges life there good. The monkey’s perspective is such that it judges sleeping in a tree to be good. The Confucian perspective is such that benevolence and righteousness, understood in a particular way, are good.

The concept that brings these ideas together in Zhuangzi’s thought is that of a dao (道). The term initially refers to a path or a way. It then came to mean the “way” of a particular kind of thing. It includes both how things actually work, and how they ought to work. The Zuo Zhuan, for example, describes a comet that was interpreted by an expert in divination as an omen that presaged a subsequent sequence of major fires in capital cities.\textsuperscript{152} An eminent official, Zi Chan, rejects this interpretation by claiming that human beings cannot know the dao of heaven, because “Heaven’s Way is distant; the human way is close. There is no access to the former.”\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{152} The Zuo Zhuan is an important commentary on a historical record known as the Spring and Autumn Annals. The commentary is also a description of historical events, and it includes many speeches of influential political actors. The events took place during the Spring and Autumn Period, by which point the Zhou dynasty was in decline. The text itself was likely compiled quite a bit later, although there is good reason to think that the speeches contain at least some material from the period described. On the composition of the Zuo Zhuan and the political views contained in the text, see Yuri Pines, Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{153} Quoted in Zhang Dainian, Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy, trans. Edmund Ryden (Beijing and New Haven: Foreign Languages Press and Yale University Press, 2002), 12. I have drawn on Zhang’s account of the evolution of the term “dao” in this section. Yuri Pines summarizes the significance of this passage of the Zuo Zhuan as follows: “Zi Chan did not believe that Pi Zao possessed real knowledge of Heaven. As Heaven’s intent was inscrutable, it should not influence political activities, and prayer should
Here the terms mean, roughly, the way in which celestial things work and the way in which human things work. The concept also, however, comes to have a normative dimension. It indicates a standard of conduct to which one can adhere. In this sense, it might be translated as “way of life.” In one passage of the Mencius, for example, an interlocutor asks Mencius whether or not the ancients’ way led them to hold political offices without compensation (2B23).

Zhuangzi utilizes the term dao in two distinct senses. In its generic meaning, it indicates a particular way of judging and living, as in the example just mentioned. Chad Hansen notes the variety of dao that are referenced in the Zhuangzi:

…great dao, extreme dao, mysterious dao, heavenly dao, the ancient king’s dao, its, his, or their dao, emperor’s dao, human dao, sage’s dao, the dao of governing, moral dao, the dao of long life, the master’s dao, the dao you cannot (or do not) dao, the the gentleman’s dao, this dao, authentic dao, artificial dao, my dao, ancient dao…

We begin life with the possibility of learning and following many different dao. By various means, for example study or enculturation, we learn one of them rather than the alternatives. This is closely linked, for Zhuangzi, to learning to express judgments in a particular way. One’s dao is linked in crucial ways to the things that one will accept (shi 是) and reject (fei 非). A refined Confucian gentleman, for example Mencius, will find many things unacceptable that prevail during his age, given its degraded character. The mind that has learned such distinctions and thus become set in its ways is referred to by Zhuangzi as the “completed” or “constituted” mind (cheng xin 成心).

In addition to these partial dao that are manifest in the lives of particular individuals or groups, Zhuangzi uses dao in a singular or particular sense, in order to indicate the highest reality not be substituted for practical preparations against firestorms.” See Yuri Pines, Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 69.

154 Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought, 268.
and way of all things. That being said, this *dao* is not some particular thing in the world, and cannot even equate it with quite general concepts already discussed, such as the *dao* of heaven and the *dao* of man. Zhuangzi indicates that it is the ultimate reality and the most basic source of all things:

The Way has its reality and its signs but is without action or form. You can hand it down, but you cannot receive it; you can get it, but you cannot see it. It is its own source, its own root. Before Heaven and earth existed, it was there, firm from ancient times. It gave spirituality to the spirits and to God; it gave birth to Heaven and to earth.

In this respect, his treatment of the *dao* resembles that of Laozi, the other great classical Daoist.

It can be thought of as the mother of the heavens and the earth.  
I do not yet know its name (*ming*).  
If I were to style it,  
I would call it *dao*.  

The *dao*, in the highest possible sense, is prior to heaven, earth, and their particular *dao*. It is also, therefore, distinct from, and prior to, the various small *dao* that guide most people in their ordinary lives. Moreover, it is also obscured by them. The narrow *dao* of the Confucians and Mohists, Zhuangzi argues, deny us access to the infinite possibilities of the great *dao*. The *dao*, rightly understood, allows for the flourishing of all things in their diversity, and thus resists the kind of rigid formulation that these schools seek.

The fundamental disagreement between Mencius and Mozi, on the one hand, and Zhuangzi, on the other, is whether or not there is a single human *dao* or way of achieving a “completed heart-mind” that is preferable to all others. Mencius and Mozi are in agreement that

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155 *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 25. I have followed the translation of Hall and Ames, although I have left *dao* untranslated rather than utilize their translation (“way-making”). *See* *Dao De Jing: Making This Life Significant, A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

there is, although they disagree about much else. Zhuangzi’s arguments from difference and change bring to light the extent to which we are already familiar with a broad range of different ways of dividing the world. In our ordinary lives, both in sudden transformative experiences and, more frequently, in dreams, we come to find delightful that to which we were once averse.

Zhuangzi’s arguments are powerful, so far as they go. A partisan of Mencius or Mozi, however, might readily grant that such experiences occur. Mencius himself was well aware, for example, that different animals have different natures and that human beings will often vary greatly in their fundamental outlooks. These phenomena could only indicate the need for standards that will help us to maintain our bearings through such upheavals. Indeed, both Mencius and Mozi assert that their theories will provide guidance of this sort.

In order to combat opposing views such as these, Zhuangzi must demonstrate that they fail to achieve their highest ambitions. The grand claims of each school, he will argue, are ultimately no better founded than those of their opponents. His skeptical arguments demonstrate that this is the case, and in doing so they provide a form of spiritual liberation. Our experiences are heterogeneous in such a way that we chafe under the constrictive dictates of the schools. Once we have realized that their pretensions are hollow, however, we can enjoy the infinite possibilities of the dao.

2.9: Zhuangzi’s Skeptical Arguments I: Naturalizing Disagreement

The Speech of Nanguo Ziqi

The most complete account of the limits of our knowledge is contained in the second chapter of the Zhuangzi, Qiwulun, or the “Discussion on Making Things Equal.” The title is ambiguous in that it can be translated more literally as “Equalizing Things Discourse.” This translation can in turn be understood in two distinct ways. It can either be interpreted as a
discourse on the topic of the equality of things, or as an attempt to show that discourses about things are fundamentally equal.\textsuperscript{157} Both meanings may well be present, but with regard to Zhuangzi’s relationship to Confucianism and Mohism he intends to show that their discourses are, in a crucial sense, equal. Because the force of their arguments is derived largely or even entirely from their claims to have found a privileged discourse, demonstrating their equality has skeptical consequences.\textsuperscript{158}

The “Discussion on Making Things Equal” prefaces its skeptical investigations with a conversation between a student, Yan Cheng Ziyou and a man named Ziqi of South Wall. The latter expounds several of the central arguments of the chapter, and also seems to exemplify their purpose. He seems to have been in some sort of trance, due to which he seemed “vacant and far away, as though he’d lost his companion.” Yan Cheng Ziyou exclaims “what is this? Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before.”\textsuperscript{159} Nanguo Ziqi thus seems to represent the fully realized skeptic. His mind, it seems, is like “dead ashes” because he has purified it of

\textsuperscript{157} As Chad Hansen observes, "we can read the title as either "Ordering thing-discourse" or "Ordering-thing discourse." It is either a pluralist account of the different ways of dividing the world into things in discourse or it is the single correct discourse that authoritatively orders things.” See A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought, 273. “Equalizing Things Discourse” is the title suggested by Vincent Shen. Shen argues that both topics are discussed in the chapter. See Shen, “Daoism (II): Zhuang-Zi and the Zhuang-Zi,” p. 264 f. 7.

\textsuperscript{158} To see how equalizing discourses can have skeptical consequences, at least with regard to the pretensions of some of those discourses themselves, it is helpful to consider the place of science in contemporary life. The natural sciences are taken by many to provide us with our best available means of accessing the truth about the world. When we explain our scientific beliefs, consequently, we want to say that we hold them because they are true, justified, etc. When we seek to explain why medieval alchemists believed in their particular theories, however, we refer to facts about their culture. One tradition within the sociology of science argues that we should explain all such beliefs, whether contemporary natural science or medieval alchemy, on the basis of the same kind of considerations, namely cultural ones. By attempting to establish that these two discourses are explicable in equivalent ways, they cast doubt on the special status accorded to modern natural science. See Barry Barnes and David Bloor, “Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge,” in Rationality and Relativism, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes.

\textsuperscript{159} Zhuangzi, II, 7.
superfluous beliefs and desires. The loss of his companion, subsequent lines indicate, is tied to the loss of the self through this process.

Rather than explain how he reached this particular point, Nanguo Ziqi instead gives his student a lecture on the basic features of the world. He begins, perhaps surprisingly, by discussing three kinds of sounds and their origins—the pipes of earth, the pipes of men, and the pipes of heaven. These pipes seem to represent the causes of the varied phenomena of the natural world. The image of pipes is apt because of the overarching attention to human speech. The account seems to naturalize human discourse by placing it on a level with other auditory phenomena. In doing so, it places all sorts of speech on the same level, since they are all ascribed to the same sort of cause, and also lowers the stakes of human intellectual life, because treating speech in this way renders the consideration of the truth or falseness of particular instances of speech irrelevant.

The pipes of men are pipes in the literal sense—“[the sound of] flutes and whistles.” The pipes of earth are the workings of the natural world, which manifest themselves as follows:

In the mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan and howl. … In a gentle breeze they answer faintly, but in a full gale the chorus is gigantic.\(^{160}\)

By anthropomorphizing these sounds as screams and moans, and thus calling attention to their nearly human quality, Zhuangzi is also calling attention to the opposite relationship: the resemblance between human sounds and the natural world. In this way, Zhuangzi seems to lead us to consider the possibility that human speech is also a natural phenomenon that must be treated like any other. Not only would this seem to involve forgetting about the truth and

\(^{160}\) Zhuangzi, II, 7.
falsehood of speech claims, it would also reorient our emotional reactions to particular instances of speech. As Zhuangzi will emphasize, we generally engage with those who disagree with us violently and angrily. Most would realize that acting in this manner towards, say, the wind, or a barking dog, is unreasonable. The stance that is being instilled here would appear to be tranquil acceptance.

It when they come to the “pipes of heaven” that Zhuangzi’s critique of the Confucians and Mohists becomes most apparent. Nanguo Ziqi begins by stating that these pipes involve “blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself—all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?” 161 The objects of investigation here are the theoretical schools. They, presumably, are the ones who take what they want. Zhuangzi, or rather Nanguo Ziqi, suggests that each one can “be itself” because of its place in the mysterious totality of things. There may even be the suggestion of a kind of harmony that results from complementary differences.

The puzzling question with which this line concludes, “who does the sounding?”, raises the question of the cause of these disputes. If the wind causes the sounds emanating from the trees, what causes the noisy debates of these schools? The suggestion is that we do not know. This presents a genuine problem for those schools. They purport to penetrate beyond the ordinary human world of thoughts and desires. They claim to know something about heaven and human nature. Zhuangzi’s suggestion is that they cannot even understand themselves, thus falsifying their claim to understand human life generally.

161 Zhuangzi, II, 8.
This problem is developed further in the section that follows, in which Zhuangzi provides a psychological explanation of the conflicts of the “hundred schools.” Nanguo Ziqi first draws a series of contrasts:

Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy. Great words are clear and limpid; little words are shrill and quarrelsome. In sleep, men’s spirits go visiting; in waking hours, their bodies hustle. With everything they meet they become entangled.\(^{162}\)

The essence of broad understanding, it seems, is its detachment. It is not invested in demonstrating its own superiority, its own breadth. In this respect, it is self-sufficient. Small understanding, on the other hand, is constantly concerned with demonstrating its own superiority. An example might be the official, mocked in the first chapter of the text, who is inordinately proud that he “has wisdom enough to fill one office effectively, good conduct enough to please one ruler, or talent enough to be called into service of one state.”\(^{163}\)

Ziqi then observes that every day the parties “use their minds in strife, sometimes grandiose, sometimes sly, sometimes petty.”\(^{164}\) Their fervor can be compared to “an arrow or a crossbow pellet” as they proceed forward “certain that they are the arbiters of right and wrong.” Rather than engaging in an impartial search for truth, “they cling to their position as though sworn before the gods, sure that they are holding on to victory.”\(^{165}\) While the conflicts continue unabated, they also exact their toll upon the disputants:

They fade like fall and winter—such is the way they dwindle day by day. They drown in what they do—you cannot make them turn back. They grow dark, as though sealed

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\(^{162}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 8.  
\(^{163}\) *Zhuangzi*, I, 3.  
\(^{164}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 8.  
\(^{165}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 8. Kim-Chong Chong claims that this passage reveals that Zhuangzi rejects the distinction between the cognitive and affective aspects of the heart-mind. He reads this section in tandem with the chapter *Renjianshi*, suggesting that they indicate that theoretical disputes are driven primarily by the desire for fame.
with seals—such are the excesses of their old age. And when their minds draw near to death, nothing can restore them to the light.  

Debate, on this view, is not an exhilarating quest for truth, but instead a rivalrous struggle leading to dogmatism and spiritual decay. Perhaps this is why Nanguo Ziqi does not begin making this speech of his own accord, but instead only when Yan Cheng Ziyou’s question brings him out of his trance. He shows little interest in arguing or even explaining himself.

Not only do disputes arise in part out of these basic desires, rather than a concern for truth, they lead us further and further away from an openness to the dao. We become committed to the path that we have taken and, consequently, less able to recognize the alternatives. The natural diversity of the world makes this path totally untenable.

2.10: Zhuangzi’s Skeptical Arguments II: Against the Self

The force of Zhuangzi’s psychological account rests in part on the extent to which one finds these motives plausible explanations of the conduct of the disputants. It receives significant support, however, from Zhuangzi’s skeptical arguments. Insofar as he is able to demonstrate that the disputes in question are irresolvable, we may be willing to consider alternative explanations for their persistence. It is much easier to see why people might continue engaging in a futile endeavor if they have an external source of motivation.

As we have already seen, the Confucians and the Mohists present pictures, either implicit or explicit, of the human self and human nature. Their claims to offer universal guidance depend on the plausibility of these pictures. After having provided his psychological account of the motives guiding the schools, he now provides a theoretical attack on their pretensions to knowledge of the self. They pursue their selfish aims by developing spurious accounts of the self.

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166 Zhuangzi, II, 8.
None of this is to suggest that Zhuangzi denies the reality of a certain kind of self. Even Nanguo Ziqi, the model of one who has been liberated from the self as conventionally understood, exists as a person in dialogue with other human beings. He does not just sit quietly, at least not when he is asked to share his wisdom. The positive view of the self, for Zhuangzi, seems to be a self that is centered not on our inconsistent emotional states, bodily experiences, or systems of drawing distinctions and making judgments.\textsuperscript{167} It is a self that is notable primarily for wandering, or engaging in the varied opportunities presented by the creative power of the dao. Abandoning these false selves and seeking guidance only from the dao is, for Zhuangzi, the highest form of spiritual liberation.\textsuperscript{168}

Mencius grounds his philosophy in a set of innate emotional reactions, the “sprouts” (*duan*) of the virtues, that point us towards the fully developed view of the good life and the good society endorsed by the Confucian school. The most famous of these is the innate compassion that human beings feel upon seeing a child in harm’s way. This response, through the process of extension, reaches its full glory only in the benevolence (*ren*) of the Confucian sage.

While Mencius does not draw attention to this fact, these sprouts are a mere subset, and perhaps a small one, of the full human emotional range. There is no need to deny that they exist. The question is whether they can provide us with any kind of authoritative guidance. In order to do so, we would need some reason establishing a hierarchy of emotions. Comprehending this

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\textsuperscript{167} The three-fold classification of false “selves” here follows the division suggested by Vincent Shen between the “bodily ego, the psychological ego, and the ji-xin (機心 mechanistic or instrumental mind).” See “Daoism (II): Zhuang-Zi and the Zhuang-Zi,” 252.

\textsuperscript{168} As Vincent Shen notes, Zhuangzi indicates that one must “lose and transcend the belittled self in order to discover and regain the greater self, that is, the de or dao in him or her as his or her authentic self.” See “Daoism (II): Zhuang-Zi and the Zhuang-Zi,” 254.
hierarchy would seem to require some further knowledge of the self. Zhuangzi denies that we have any such standard.

We have, for example, a diverse array of emotions:

‘joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, anxiety and regret, fickleness and fears, now slowly, now suddenly, unfolding in us’.\(^{169}\)

Zhuangzi draws our attention not only to their variety, but also to the way in which they appear within us without warning. He compares them to “music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness, day and night replacing each other” in such a way that “no one knows where they sprout from.”\(^{170}\)

Our emotional lives, for Zhuangzi, are both familiar and mysterious. We are all acquainted with such experiences to such an extent that they seem to constitute who we are. Ziqi suggests that “without them we would not exist; without us they would have nothing to take hold of.”\(^{171}\) Nonetheless, we are ultimately unable to discern their origin. They simply appear before us, and disappear just as suddenly.

Zhuangzi denies that we can find the source of such emotions in the self. The emotions seem almost to constitute the self, at least at this level of analysis. We are not able to articulate some separate stratum of experience that generates or governs the emotions. Mencius’ concern for the sprouts, on this view, would amount to ranking some of the emotions over the others. Without a clear view of the self, we lack any grounds for doing this.

There is some affinity between the understandings of the self developed by Zhuangzi and David Hume. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume makes the following remark:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or

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\(^{169}\) Shen, 253.
\(^{170}\) Zhuangzi, II, 8.
\(^{171}\) Zhuangzi, II, 8.
pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception...When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist” (I.IV.VI, “Of Personal Identity”).

Just as Hume cannot find a permanent “myself” amidst the flux of perceptions, Zhuangzi denies that there is any sign of a “True Master” governing our emotional lives.\textsuperscript{172}

We are left with the emotions themselves, ever changing and without any fixed hierarchy. This calls into question any attempt, like that of Mencius, to use particular emotions as a foundation for moral and political order.

\textbf{2.11: Zhuangzi’s Skeptical Arguments III: Authority in the Body}

Zhuangzi’s opponents might suggest that he has overlooked the obvious candidate when it comes to governing the emotions: the heart-mind (\textit{xin}). Confucius, for example, suggests that the perfection of the heart-mind leads to the right ordering of one’s emotional life. He describes his own ethical development as follows:

\begin{quote}
At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart [\textit{xin}] desired, without transgressing what was right.\textsuperscript{173}
\end{quote}

For Confucius, then, the well cultivated heart-mind is the authority which presides over one’s emotions, and the rest of one’s mental life. We have already seen that Mencius takes the heart-mind to be authoritative as well.

Seeking recourse to the heart-mind as a way in which to establish a stable source of normative guidance in our lives, for Zhuangzi, turns out to be fruitless. Moreover, it is fruitless

\textsuperscript{172} The relationship between Zhuangzi’s view of the self and that of Hume is also discussed in Kai-Yuan Cheng, “Self and the Dream of the Butterfly in the \textit{Zhuangzi},” \textit{Philosophy East and West} 64 (2014): 563-597.
\textsuperscript{173} \textit{Analects} 2.4, trans. James Legge.
for precisely the reasons already discussed. Just as our emotional lives are varied, and thus we cannot locate a fixed self within that domain, our bodily experiences are fundamentally diverse:

The hundred joints, the nine openings, the six organs, all come together and exist here [as my body]. But which part should I feel closest to? I should delight in all parts, you say? But there must be one I ought to favor more. If not, are they all of them mere servants? But if they are all servants, then how can they keep order among themselves? Or do they take turns being lord and servant? It would seem as though there must be some True Lord among them. But whether I succeed in discovering his identity or not, it neither adds to nor detracts from his Truth.174

The problem raised here is that our experiences of ourselves are fundamentally varied. We recognize ourselves as having different parts. Mencius needs to establish a hierarchy among these parts. He wants to establish the sympathetic reactions of the heart-mind (xin) as the root of the virtue of benevolence. To see the challenge this presents, consider one of the positions that Mencius wants to refute, that of the egoist Yang Zhu. Yang Zhu was famous for defending the value of one’s own bodily health as opposed to the common good.

Both Mencius and Yang Zhu are greatly concerned with our experience of the body. Mencius believes that our sensory experiences are largely shared and also that they point to common standards. We enjoy similar things and we can agree that there are experts who can help us to pursue these satisfactions. Mencius appears, analogously, to take the sages as moral experts who can guide our shared moral inclinations. Reflecting on our basic experiences, for Mencius, allows us to see that they have an internal moral direction. Yang Zhu’s reflections on his own bodily experiences, on the other hand, led him to a very different conclusion. Yang Zhu is said to have argued that he would not allow a hair on his body to be harmed even for the sake of benefitting the entire world. What Zhuangzi’s argument here reveals is that Mencius and Yang Zhu may both have bodily experiences that lend support to their positions. The difficulty

174 Zhuangzi, II, 8-9.
is in saying that one is more fundamental. To establish the proper hierarchy of these experiences, we would have to turn to some form of education that would allow one to assess them adequately.

2.13: Zhuangzi’s Skeptical Arguments IV: The Authority of the Completed Heart

Even if our emotions and the faculty of the heart-mind cannot provide a basis for the self, and therefore for normative reflection and judgment, one might still hope that an authoritative mode of thought or discourse could do so. After all, even if the emotions or our bodily capacities are supposed to play a decisive role in grounding ethics and political theory, they are presumably not sufficient all by themselves. Even Mencius, who emphasizes our innate goodness much more than other Warring States thinkers, believes that the baleful influences of his own time make argument necessary. While Confucius did not dedicate himself to elaborate disputation, he was at least as concerned with articulating an authoritative discourse as any of the others.175

What is at stake, here, is the extent to which education in a particular discourse, tied to a particular way of life, can provide us with an authoritative standard of action. Zhuangzi speaks of the “completed” or “constituted” heart (cheng xin 成心). While we must remember that he may not have had Mencius in mind here, Mencius will provide a convenient illustration of this point. For Mencius, we have the heart-mind and its innate responses, such as King Xuan of Qi’s concern for the sacrificial ox. A process of education will extend these innate workings of the heart-mind until he can properly manifest concern for his subjects (IA7). If the King were to carry out this process to the fullest possible extent, he would have what Zhuangzi refers to here as the “completed heart.”

175 Van Norden argues that Confucius’ position on human nature is actually closer to Xunzi than Mencius. Pointing to the “polished jade” passage, he suggests that Confucius believes that goodness is derived primarily from education rather than human nature.
One who has the completed heart has internalized some particular framework for understanding the world and acting within it. We might imagine examples corresponding to each of the schools: the Confucian “completed heart,” the Mohist “completed heart,” and so forth. Those who internalize some other set of goals, such as Huizi’s political ambitions, have also achieved a completed heart. One consequence of all of this is that the judgments of the heart are not independent of our aims or passions.\(^{176}\)

Much of this seems laudable or at least benign. It may seem difficult to see what could be wrong with cultivating our minds. Zhuangzi, however, brings to light two difficulties:

If a man follows the mind given him \([{	ext{ch} 	ext{eng} 	ext{xin}}, \text{the “completed mind”}]\) and makes it his teacher, then who can be without a teacher? Why must you comprehend the process of change and form your mind on that basis before you can have a teacher? Even an idiot has his teacher. But to fail to abide by this mind and still insist upon your rights and wrongs—this is like saying that you set off for Yue today and got there yesterday. This is to claim that what doesn’t exist exists. If you claim that what doesn’t exist exists, then even the holy sage Yu couldn’t understand you, much less a person like me!\(^{177}\)

The first problem is captured in Zhuangzi’s claim that “even an idiot has his teacher.” We each have a mind that has been formed in one way or another. The mere fact of having been transformed through the educational process is not, therefore, sufficient to demonstrate that one has found authoritative standards for action.

The second problem is that there is no standard independent of the cultivated mind to appeal to in order to justify some particular method of cultivation rather than another. Consider, for example, the Confucians and the Mohists. The Confucians claim that an education in which

\(^{176}\) Kim-chong Chong argues that this passage reveals a crucial difference between the way in which Mencius thinks about the heart-mind and its judgments and the way in which Zhuangzi treats these themes. Mencius, Chong argues, believes that the heart can remain independent or, as he puts it, autonomous from the rest of our experience. Zhuangzi, on Chong’s view, believes that the affective and cognitive aspects of its function are deeply intertwined. See Kim-Chong Chong, “Zhuangzi’s 

\(^{177}\) \textit{Zhuangzi}, II, 9.
we manifest special concern for those close to us, most importantly our family members, is the right one. The Mohists, on the other hand, claim that we ought to manifest “universal mutual love” (*jian ai*), which entails treating all equally. Suppose that they start arguing about the issue. They will inevitably appeal to standards that they have learned, which reside in and reflect their “cultivated hearts.” In doing so, however, each one is simply reasserting their own schools teaching at a different level of abstraction. There is no reason, under these conditions, to expect anything but further conflict. Moreover, as we have already seen, our basic bodily and psychological experiences are fundamentally diverse, and thus cannot serve as non-controversial starting points for such a dialogue.

The problems generated by the “completed mind” are not purely theoretical. I have already mentioned Huizi’s political ambitions, which, Zhuangzi suggests, make him miserable. Yong Huang has suggested that we might also see the harms wrought by Hun Dun’s friends as consequences of the “completed mind.” He argues that the “completed mind” is characterized by a tendency to make one’s own standards the universal metric, which is the reason why his friends inadvertently killed him.¹⁷⁸

2.13: Zhuangzi and the Significance of Language

As we have seen, Zhuangzi calls into question the idea that the competing schools have an adequate conception of the self or human nature. There are many facets of human experience from which one might begin to construct an ideal social and political order. Their very abundance, however, generates the fundamental problem of disagreement, both theoretical and political.

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Zhuangzi goes on to consider the implications of these considerations for human language. Language presents a challenge for his analysis. That is because his overarching point is that we must learn to accept the pluralism within the world. This seems to entail accepting the full diversity of theoretical schools, among them those of the Confucians, the Mohists, Yang Zhu, the School of Names, and so forth. Yet what it would mean to accept them in this way is not entirely clear. That is because each school makes claims, often universal claims, that conflict with those of the others. What would accepting all of them mean, if it does not involve accepting all of their contradictory positions?

Zhuangzi observes that there is something unique about human language and its place among natural phenomena:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn’t there?\(^{179}\)

The chapter began with an attempt to place human activity within a broader natural order. Our emotional upheavals were equated with mushrooms springing up overnight, and our projects were presented as part of a larger cosmic process in light of which they appear small and insignificant.

If we accept this broader perspective, we might come to see our petty squabbles as akin to, say, the barking of dogs. This would, presumably, have some therapeutic value for Zhuangzi. This is because his opponents are not only in error on a theoretical level. Their dogmatic commitments and conflicts also make them miserable. Consequently, lowering the stakes of their disputes by placing them within their natural context is desirable.

\(^{179}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 9.
At the same time, we must ask, and Zhuangzi does indeed ask, whether or not such a move can truly make sense of language. The “peeps of baby birds” carry with them no particular meaning, at least for human beings. They are just sounds, like the sounds produced by waves crashing on rocks. The crucial difference that human language makes is that it is constituted not simply by sounds, but by particular meanings transmitted by those sounds. A non-German speaker, for example, may well be able to hear the sounds that constitute a lecture in German, or even to reproduce those sounds. Even if he or she were able to do so, however, there would be no understanding of the underlying meaning. It seems that we are forced either to say that language does not fit into the natural world in the way in which other sounds fit, or that the meaning of language is ultimately insignificant.

Zhuangzi does suggest that the primary motive for disputation is often self-aggrandizement:

When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists.\(^{180}\)

This could indicate that theoretical disputation is more like the barking of dogs than it first appears, because the apparent meanings of each school’s claims are really just masks for these deeper motives. That being said, Zhuangzi provides so many arguments for his position, and does so in such a forceful way, that it is almost impossible to believe that he could adopt the latter position. On the other hand, his therapeutic aims do seem to require that language remain in some crucial sense akin to the peeps of birds.

*This and That*

The fundamental problem here is that Zhuangzi must both accept the teachings of the schools as natural and also regard them as deeply misguided, in encouraging their adherents to

\(^{180}\) *Zhuangzi*, II, 10.
depart from following nature in the same way. His response to this problem is to reveal how the flaws in the schools, rightly understood, lead us back to the unity of the whole, or in other words back to the dao itself.

He observes that the Confucians and Mohists simply reverse one another in their disputes:

What one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity.181

This is one of several passages in which Zhuangzi contrasts the limited knowledge of the schools with a higher form of knowledge. The question, then, is what this “clarity” (ming 明) amounts to, and how it addresses the fundamental problem that he has raised.

Clarity is achieved, for Zhuangzi, when one recognizes that the particular positions of these schools are simply arbitrary, or at least non-necessary, divisions imposed upon the world. This is evident because each of our judgments entails its opposite.

…“that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on ‘that’—which is to say that “this” and “that” give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth….Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of heaven.182

Zhuangzi’s argument here is condensed and enigmatic, but we can reconstruct its central elements. For any given judgment, for example that a particular course of action is right, we must have some idea of what is not right. It makes sense to call some people virtuous only if others can be called vicious. The first step in understanding “clarity,” therefore, is to recognize

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181 Zhuangzi, II, 10.
182 Zhuangzi, II, 10.
the way in which each term entails the other. The second step is to see that these distinctions must have been imposed on a unified whole, the *dao*:

…whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Xi Shi, things ribald and shady or things grotesque and strange, the Way makes them all into one. Their dividedness is their completeness; their completeness is their impairment. Nothing is either complete or impaired, but all are made into one again. Only the man of far-reaching vision knows how to make them into one. So he has no use [for categories], but relegates all to the constant.  

Beauty, in something, therefore, implies ugliness, in something else. Taken together, the elements of the pair cover all possibilities. What this suggests is that there must first be some prior whole that can later be divided in this way. Clarity represents this insight into the fundamental unity of things.  

*The Conventionality of Language*

The distinctions suggested by our language, and deployed in our particular judgments, for Zhuangzi, are not fixed or necessary. They rest upon a division of something that, in itself, is undivided. This does not, in itself, mean that the divisions in question are pernicious. It may well be the case that they are necessary, and Zhuangzi himself draws all sorts of distinctions. The essential point is that they are contingent. This raises the question of how they come into being. To return to some of the examples already given, we must consider how, on Zhuangzi’s view, we come to divide things into large and small, or beautiful and ugly.

There are at least four possible sources for these distinctions considered in the text: the nature of particular kinds of beings (humans, monkeys, etc.), customs, the characteristics of

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183 Zhuangzi, II, 11.
184 Thomas Radice has argued that Zhuangzi’s concept of clarity is also linked to a concern for survival. See Thomas Radice, “Clarity and Survival in the *Zhuangzi*,” *Asian Philosophy* 11 (2001): 33-40. Achieving clarity may indeed be useful for survival, but it also entails placing even one’s concern for survival in a broader perspective, as I shall argue in a subsequent section.
particular individuals, and the *dao* itself. He explicitly considers, and rejects, the second possibility, grounding distinctions in the varied natures of different kinds of beings. In a passage discussed earlier, he observes that humans and other animals flourish under very different conditions. We could hardly expect a human, he notes to enjoy living in a tree like a monkey.  

Zhuangzi’s conclusion in that passage, however, is that “the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled.” From his observations about the differences across species, he draws a conclusion about the ambiguities of human judgment. Whatever he thinks about species-level differences, they do not provide us with clear guidance in the human realm. Moreover, Zhuangzi is aware of differences in customs across communities. He tells the story, for example, of a man whose business venture failed because he failed to recognize that the ceremonial hats that were popular in his own homeland would not sell well among the Yue people who treated their clothing and bodies in quite a different manner.

This story seems to suggest that we reject local custom as a basis for guiding our actions. It fits well with other passages of the text, in which Zhuangzi suggests that our distinctions are contingent products of human effort, rather than inevitable consequences of divisions within things themselves. Consider, for example, the following passage:

What is acceptable we call acceptable; what is unacceptable we call unacceptable. A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so makes them not so. Things all must have that which is so; things all must have that which is acceptable. There is nothing that is not so. Things all must have that which is so; things all must have that which is acceptable. There is nothing that is not so, nothing that is not acceptable.

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185 *Zhuangzi*, II, 15.
186 *Zhuangzi*, II, 15.
187 *Zhuangzi*, I, 5.
188 *Zhuangzi*, II, 11.
If the road analogy is to make any sense, it must be groups of people and their conventions grounding the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable. As a descriptive matter, Zhuangzi certainly thinks that our everyday distinctions are tied to the customs of our communities. It is clear, however, that he does not take those customs as binding on us. His attitudes towards, among other things, love, death, and government are anything but conventional. This is perhaps why the story of the failed-hat seller is paired with a story of the sage ruler Yao travelling abroad, meeting with some wise teachers, and then returning home and finding that he “had forgotten his kingdom there.” He forgot it, presumably, because his previous concerns seemed narrow after he had adopted a new and broader perspective. The suggestion, it would seem, is that custom can only be taken as an adequate guide so long as we are unaware of its contingency and variability.

Individual characteristics, for Zhuangzi, are also unable to provide us with well-grounded standards for thought and action. While Zhuangzi does share some concerns with Western individualists, it would be incorrect to suppose that he regards individual particularity as the ultimate basis for human judgment and the distinctions between what is good and bad for us. The crucial difference between Western individualists and Zhuangzi is that the latter does not believe in the existence of a more or less fixed self that can be cultivated, provide guidance in action, and so forth. As we have already seen, Zhuangzi is most struck by the extent to which individual experience is heterogeneous, not uniform. Indeed, this sets him apart from pre-liberal individualists like Montaigne, who speaks of his own “ruling pattern,” and liberal individualists like John Stuart Mill, who raised the following question:

A man cannot get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him, unless they are either made to his measure, or he has a whole warehouseful to choose from: and is it easier to fit him with a life than with a coat, or are human beings more like one another in their whole physical
and spiritual conformation than in the shape of their feet.\textsuperscript{189}

Millian individualism presupposes a variety of particular natures. While those natures are quite different, each one must possess a certain definite shape. It would be preposterous to suppose that just because the same coat cannot fit everyone, it also cannot reliably fit any one person over time.\textsuperscript{190} Mill’s coat metaphor seems to presuppose a more clearly defined self, with particular characteristics that persist over time, than Zhuangzi could endorse.

On Zhuangzi’s view, we cannot draw an authoritative set of distinctions for guiding thought and action from species-membership, custom, or individual particularity. This leaves us with the \textit{dao}. In some sense, Zhuangzi clearly believes that the self that has become attuned to the \textit{dao} is the only one that can judge and act rightly. Reaching that point depends, as we shall see, on obtaining what he calls clarity (\textit{ming 明}), which is an insight into the limits on all perspectives. This raises the question of how, and even whether, the \textit{dao}, which Zhuangzi presents as fundamentally elusive and beyond our reach, can become an object of human knowledge. That question will be explored further in the final sections of this chapter.

\textbf{2.14: Is Zhuangzi’s Position Self-Contradictory?}

No matter how one understands the basis for Zhuangzi’s preferred mode of judgment and action, it is clear that he has a positive view of how one should live. This aspect of his thought coexists uneasily with his skepticism. One might be tempted to say that Zhuangzi has undermined his own claims just as much as those of his rivals. After all, he seems to be drawing his own distinctions. He has made claims about the psychological conditions of those who do


\textsuperscript{190} One could, of course, use the metaphor in a slightly different way to bring out a Zhuangist point. Zhuangzi’s version might emphasize the way in which the suitability of a particular coat for a given person depends on their stage of life, the time of year, etc.
not understand his wisdom as well as claims about the structure of judgment, e.g. that it depends on positing some initial set of distinctions. Presumably he wants his reader to take them as right or true, but he has already destroyed their basis for doing so. His theoretical stance thus appears just as poorly grounded as any other.

Zhuangzi is aware that his argument may appear self-refuting. Indeed, he discusses the possibility himself. He offers an account of the introduction of distinctions in the world which both instantiates the problem just raised and also calls attention to it:

The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some of them believed that things have never existed—so far, to the end, where nothing can be added. Those at the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and because the Way was injured, love became complete. But do such things as completion and injury really exist, or do they not?¹⁹¹

The passage offers a compressed Daoist history of human intellectual life. In doing so, it invokes a particular Daoist mode of judgment, relying on a particular understanding of “completion” and “injury.” At the final moment, however, Zhuangzi steps back and asks whether it is possible to maintain such distinctions, or whether their grounding is just as problematic as those between right and wrong or true and false. He does not provide a definite response.

Zhuangzi and Relativism

Perhaps the simplest way to resolve the inconsistency just described is to deny that Zhuangzi claims to possess a uniquely powerful way of looking at the world. He could simply take his own perspective as no better and no worse, from a cosmic point of view, than those of the Confucians and Mohists. This would leave us with thoroughgoing relativism. The most

¹⁹¹ Zhuangzi, II, 11-12.
powerful advocate for this reading is Chad Hansen. Hansen rejects the view that Zhuangzi is telling his readers that they should cease drawing distinctions and seek union with some undifferentiated pre-intellectual reality. Doing so would, he argues, contradict the fundamental point that Zhuangzi tries to convey. This reading, however, has difficulty accounting for some of the most powerful aspects of the text. On a practical level, it is difficult to read the Zhuangzi without receiving the impression that there is a particular stance that Zhuangzi wants his readers to accept, and many others that he wants them to reject, namely those that lead to dogmatism, pointless and interminable disputation, cruelty, and so forth. If one goes down the road indicated by Hansen, one has to abandon any hope of showing that those attitudes are bad in any trans-perspectival manner. Moreover, one would also have to abandon any claim to trans-perspectival validity for Zhuangzi’s theory of perspective itself, insofar as it too depends on a particular mode of distinction drawing.

We can better understand both of these difficulties if we consider Hansen’s understanding of the amorality of Zhuangzi’s theory of perspective. In response to the hypothetical objection that his reading of Zhuangzi amounts to saying that anything goes, he makes the following remark:

Zhuangzi’s relativism does not allow us to say that Hitler's perspective is just as good as our own. All it says is "Hitler happened." It was a consequence of natural laws that it happened. One cannot get any particular evaluation from the hinge of daos, the cosmic perspective.\textsuperscript{192}

As Hansen goes on to note, Zhuangzi would surely condemn Hitler from the points of view or perspectives that he generally adopts in the text. Nonetheless, “each would be a limited or partial perspective. The cosmic perspective neither approves nor condemns nor treats as equal.”\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{192} Hansen, 290.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid.
While this reading does preserve some moral or ethical content in the *Zhuangzi*, it severs the link between that content and the theory of perspective. Ultimately, it seems, Hansen’s *Zhuangzi* simply leaves everything as it is. Thus, we end up with a bifurcation within *Zhuangzi*’s thought. The *Zhuangzi*, as Hansen understands it, gives us both *Zhuangzi*’s theory of perspective and an account of some of his favorite perspectives, for instance those of the mystic, the skilled craftsman, the maimed beggar, and so forth. The latter, however, have little relation to the former. However consistent this reading may be, this division appears alien to the spirit of the text itself. Nanguo Ziqi’s speech, for instance, weaves together both the theoretical and practical aspects of *Zhuangzi*’s position, and certainly gives the impression that they are intimately related. He presents the theory of perspective as a response to a question about the mental and physical transformation that he appears to have undergone. If we assume that this theory of perspective cannot lead to the endorsement of any particular way of living, then the speech is a non sequitur. For this reason, it is best to accept Hansen’s position only if the alternatives prove untenable.

*Interrogative Skepticism*

Hansen eliminates the tension between perspectival relativism and *Zhuangzi*’s normative vision by denying that the latter is supposed to be understood in a non-relativistic manner. One might also, however, deny that he is really a relativist. His relativism is generally taken to be rooted in a skepticism about the possibility of locating ultimate, non-relative, sources of practical guidance. Those who seek to preserve the ethical content in the text have sometimes argued that he does not really deny the possibility of knowledge. If *Zhuangzi* is not a skeptic, then the relativist reading has little basis. The trouble with this line of thinking is that *Zhuangzi* makes so many claims that sound skeptical. One way of taking those claims into account is to argue that
Zhuangzi’s skepticism is more like a practice than an epistemological thesis. Eric Schwitzgebel has claimed that “Zhuangzi’s skepticism is “therapeutic”—he endorses it more with the desire to evoke particular reactions in the reader than as an expression of his heartfelt beliefs.”

On his view, skeptical questioning serves to advance his more particular goals: “a greater appreciation of uselessness, less fear of death and poverty, less dogmatism, less ambition, [and] less devotion to the state.”

David Wong has drawn on Paul K. Moser’s distinction between declarative and interrogative skepticism to suggest that Zhuangzi is a skeptic in the latter sense, which involves “engagement in troublesome questions about how claims to know how things are independently of what anyone takes them to be.” Wong’s Zhuangzi believes that reality exceeds any particular perspective, and thus uses skeptical questioning to open up new possibilities for thought and action. This is not in itself objectionable, but the distinction between interrogative practices and skeptical theses is difficult to maintain. There is certainly a conceptual distinction between the two, but the merits of skeptical questioning as an activity depend on the extent to which it locates genuine epistemic problems. If the claims to knowledge of the Confucians or the Mohists were compelling, then Zhuangzi’s skeptical practices would be pernicious rather than salutary. His practice, therefore, cannot be easily separated from his theory. The interpretations of Schwitzgebel and Wong are powerful, insofar as they call our attention to Zhuangzi’s practical aims, but they do not provide us with good reason to disregard the force of his skeptical arguments.

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195 Schwitzgebel, 88.
Zhuangzi on Practical and Theoretical Knowledge

A third way of reconciling Zhuangzi’s positive claims with his skepticism is to carefully delimit the kinds of claims to knowledge against which it is directed. Robert Eno, for example, has argued that Zhuangzi believes in the possibility of practical knowledge but not theoretical knowledge. He draws upon what are sometimes classified as the “skill passages” of the text, for example the story of the great Cook Ding. Zhuangzi reports that when King Hui of Wen came to observe Cook Ding working at his craft, he was amazed by the consummate skill with which Ding carved an ox. Ding explains his art as follows:

What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—I go at it by the spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop, and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

Ding’s knowledge, which requires no conscious effort or analytical thinking, may be immune to Zhuangzi’s skeptical onslaught. This is because he claims not to make any conscious distinctions while practicing his art. According to Eno, all such systems of practical knowledge are equally valid for Zhuangzi. Eno takes Zhuangzi to be attacking only those, such as the Mohists and the Confucians who responded to them, who believe in the power of theoretical discourse to guide human life.

It is clear that Zhuangzi does admire craftsmanship, and he certainly appears to admit that people like Cook Ding have genuine knowledge of some sort. There are good reasons, however, to reject Eno’s central claims. First, Zhuangzi offers theoretical arguments, and even if they

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198 Zhuangzi, III, 19.
serve a practical purpose they do so in part because of their intellectual force. Consequently, it is difficult to see how he can be a total skeptic about theory. At most, he rejects certain kinds of theory. Second, Zhuangzi does not accept whatever ways of conducting themselves people happen to follow so long as they do not get involved in intellectual disputation. David Wong points out that, when Zhuangzi questions whether it is right to love life and hate death, he is questioning attitudes that are more practical than theoretical.\footnote{Wong, 94. This is not to deny that one could defend these attitudes theoretically.}

Similar difficulties to those just examined arise when we consider P.J. Ivanhoe’s claim that Zhuangzi “is an epistemological skeptic, but only of a certain kind of knowledge, i.e. intellectual knowledge. He is not at all skeptical about intuitive knowledge.”\footnote{Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Dao,” \textit{Journal of the American Academy of Religion} 61 (Winter, 1993), 639-654, 648.} Again, Zhuangzi certainly praises intuitive knowledge, but it would be difficult to interpret all of his skeptical arguments as forms of intuitive knowledge. Ivanhoe himself notes that considering the relativistic arguments may serve to clear away intellectual obstacles to intuitive knowledge. This cleansing process, however, seems to occur at least in part through theoretical means.

We need to understand the relationship between theory and practice in Zhuangzi's thought differently. In particular, we must see how the theoretical skepticism avoids two difficulties. It must avoid undermining his practical recommendations, but it must also avoid undermining itself. To attain the latter aim, it must achieve some sort of trans-perspectival validity. For the former, it must leave room for judgments concerning the goodness of particular ways of living. The power of Zhuangzi's thought lies in its ability to achieve these seemingly contradictory aims.
2.15: Zhuangzi on Knowledge: Local and Universal

Zhuangzi’s epistemological position can be adequately understood only if several different kinds of knowledge are distinguished from one another. Roughly speaking, he affirms a form of local knowledge, tied to personal experience, and modes of judgment appropriate under particular conditions. He denies, as a general rule, universalistic claims to knowledge, such as those advanced by the Confucians and the Mohists. The exception that proves the rule here is his epistemological view, which he calls clarity (ming), itself. This is the insight that there are a number of different and equally reasonable perspectives, all of which are appropriate under some circumstances. This is a universal claim, but it is a universal claim of a special type. It gives rise to no skeptical problems, because it can be justified from within any perspective. I will treat each of these forms of knowledge in turn. I will conclude with a discussion of an episode from the text that illustrates the distinction between local and universal knowledge, as Zhuangzi understands it, that of the so-called “happy fish.”

Zhuangzi’s text is replete with examples of people who seem to know something. Cook Ding, the skillful butcher, is one of the most famous examples. He really knows how to find the most efficient paths through which to carve the carcass.201 Lady Li really knows about the pleasures of living at court.202 The first chapter, “Free and Easy Wandering,” establishes its claims about perspective on the basis of knowledge that we have of particular perspectives, for example our knowledge that what would seem large to a small quail would not seem large to an

201 This example might seem like an odd one with which to illustrate a purely local or situation-specific knowledge claim. While Ding’s expertise is specific to his occupation, the lord who observes him claims that he has “learned how to care for life” (51). As I read this passage, however, Lord Wen-hui is not claiming that Ding’s knowledge is all you need or that it can be readily transferred to every other set of conditions. He is, instead, claiming that other forms of situation-specific knowledge will be similar to the situation-specific knowledge of Cook Ding in a particular way.

202 Zhuangzi, II, 16.
enormous bird. As we shall see in Chapter 5, Zhuangzi even grants that some people understand something about political life. “Confucius,” or at least Zhuangzi’s representation of him, knows that his students face grave dangers by seeking political office. No matter how one understands Zhuangzi’s skepticism, it must at least allow for cases of knowledge like these.

What Zhuangzi is skeptical about, on the other hand, is any attempt to extend these more local and limited cases of knowledge to the universe as a whole. We might consider, for example, his argument about the internal diversity of the body, which has already been discussed. We cannot, according to Zhuangzi, suppose that there is some single locus of activity within our bodies that is suited to serve as the “true lord” over the rest. While there might be forceful experiences that suggest that the heart-mind, for example, is in control, there are other times at which this is not the case. Zhuangzi grants that the idea of a “true lord” readily arises out of these experiences, but denies that we can say anything useful about it.

We might also consider, as a foil to Zhuangzi’s position here, Mencius’ account of the sprouts of the virtues. These sprouts are the innate reactions, such as a concern for those in harm’s way, which can be developed into virtues like benevolence. These virtues then provide the universal standards by which we can assess the conduct of ourselves and others. Zhuangzi would deny that the “sprout” experiences have any precedence over others, but also that any particular way of proceeding from such experiences by cultivating the heart-mind in a particular way is privileged in relation to the alternatives. It is for the same reason that Zhuangzi mocks the official “who has wisdom enough to fill one office effectively, good conduct enough to impress one community, virtue enough to please one ruler, or talent enough to be called into

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203 Zhuangzi, I, 2.
service in one state.” It is the height of arrogance to assume that such provincial knowledge will carry over into vastly grander contexts.

Skepticism, thus understood, does not undermine the idea that there are good ways of living and thinking. It in fact begins from their existence. As Chris Fraser has persuasively argued, Zhuangzi’s skepticism about overarching claims about the good life results in large part from his acceptance of many different more limited, because context specific, claims about human goods.

As I have already noted, Zhuangzi’s “clarity” seems to be presented as an insight that can withstand skeptical scrutiny. In Qi wulun, Zhuangzi suggests that to obtain clarity is to recognize that one cannot establish the decisive superiority of one particular perspective. Where does this leave clarity itself? How can it be grounded without appeal to some specific perspective? Zhuangzi does not deal explicitly with this problem, but there does seem to be an implicit response. While human perspectives differ, all lives contain changes both large and small. Zhuangzi indicates that everyone is familiar with the experience of undergoing a radical change in one’s assessment of one’s situation, if only upon waking up from a dream and realizing that the goods or evils that one believed were present were purely illusory.

The argument for the notion that perspectives are diverse and each one is fundamentally limited rests on a particular interpretation of these experiences. While we might, at least potentially, have different perspectives than one another, we also have different perspectives at different points in our lives. Moreover, almost everyone would admit that some of our earlier

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204 Zhuangzi, I, 3.
205 Chris Fraser, “Skepticism and Value in the Zhuangzi.”
206 Zhuangzi’s use of the term “clarity” (ming) is more complex. For a thorough account of the various ways in which it is deployed in the Zhuangzi, the Dao de Jing, and the major Confucian texts, see Yuet Keung Lo, “To Use or Not to Use: The Idea of Ming in the Zhuangzi,” Monumenta Serica 47 (1999): 149-168.
perspectives were mistaken in decisive respects. The controversial step in the argument would seem to be the claim that our existing perspectives are in principle just as limited as, say, our dream perspectives.

The argument is nicely encapsulated in Zhuangzi’s conclusion to the story of Lady Li:

How I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back? Lady Li’s radical reassessment of life at court is understood here as an indication of a more general limitation on our judgments. We might even come to reassess the fear of death, surely one of the most persistent human concerns. The argument here should not be taken as dependent on the particular content of Lady Li’s experience. If it were, then it would have no force for anyone who lacks that experience. Instead, the story, and others like it in the Zhuangzi, invite us to reflect on our own experience of transformation. As long as we can adduce examples that share the basic structural features of Lady Li’s case, then the argument holds true and we can obtain Zhuangzi’s “clarity.” There is, therefore, a certain kind of trans-perspectival knowledge about the general structure of perspectives that is available to us from within any perspective. This kind of knowledge is not vulnerable to skeptical attack because it does not presuppose the content of any particular perspective.

Zhuangzi also suggests that there is another kind of knowledge which is not trans-perspectival, but which is nonetheless valid within its proper boundaries. This is a kind of context-specific knowledge that does not claim more general authority to govern human life. Because Zhuangzi’s skepticism is directed against such universalistic claims, it does not touch this more carefully delimited form of knowledge. We find one of the most prominent examples of this kind of knowledge in Zhuangzi’s “happy fish” story.

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207 Zhuangzi, II, 16.
2.16: Zhuangzi and the Two Kinds of Knowledge in the “Happy Fish” Story

The contrast between perspective-specific, contextual knowledge, which Zhuangzi accepts, and trans-perspectival, universal knowledge, which Zhuangzi subjects to skeptical scrutiny, is illustrated by an imagined dialogue between Zhuangzi and his friendly rival Huizi.

The story appears in “Autumn Floods,” one of the “Outer Chapters.” It describes these two friends “strolling along the dam at the Hao River.” Zhuangzi is driven to comment on some fish:

See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That’s what fish really enjoy.\(^{208}\)

The remark is presented as a simple observation, not necessarily as a philosophical thesis. Nonetheless, Huizi immediately subjects it to philosophical scrutiny, demanding to know how Zhuangzi can know what fish like, given that he himself is not a fish. Zhuangzi is able to immediately turn the question on him:

You’re not I, so how do you know I don’t know what fish enjoy?\(^{209}\)

Huizi remains unimpressed:

I’m not you, so I certainly don’t know what you know, On the other hand, you’re certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don’t know what fish enjoy!\(^ {210}\)

Zhuangzi concludes by approaching the status of his knowledge in a different way:

Let’s go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao.\(^ {211}\)

This passage calls our attention to a more playful side of Zhuangzi’s relationship with Huizi. Their repartee is friendly, while it also brings to light serious theoretical disagreements. The

\(^{208}\) Zhuangzi, XVII, 137-138.
\(^{209}\) Zhuangzi, XVII, 138.
\(^{210}\) Zhuangzi, XVII, 138.
\(^{211}\) Zhuangzi, XVII, 138.
passage is so charming, in fact, that its full significance for Zhuangzi’s epistemology might easily be missed.

The brief dialogue can be divided into three parts. We have, first, Zhuangzi’s initial observation on what fish enjoy. Second, we have Huizi’s challenge and Zhuangzi’s response. Third, we have Zhuangzi’s explanation of how he knows what he knows. The first and third parts fit together naturally, insofar as they clarify what Zhuangzi thinks he knows and why he knows it. The middle section brings to light an internal contradiction that arises if one accepts the view of knowledge that Huizi presupposes in this passage.

I will treat the critical middle portion first. The internal tension in Huizi’s position comes about because he holds both that (a) people cannot know the perspectives of others and (b) that he can understand the limits of Zhuangzi’s perspective. These claims are inconsistent, because (a) rules out the possibility of (b). Huizi might reasonably respond, although apparently he did not do so, that the obstacles to knowing what it is like to be a fish are of an entirely different order than those connected to knowing what it is like to be another human being. Be that as it may, Zhuangzi evidently thinks that there is a contradiction here.

In context, this point is part of Zhuangzi’s friendly mockery of Huizi’s ideas. It also helps to clarify an important aspect of Zhuangzi’s own position. It indicates an awareness that contradictions arise when one attempts to ground skepticism without any substantive claims to knowledge whatsoever. Huizi needs to know something about Zhuangzi if he is to say anything about the limits of Zhuangzi’s knowledge. Otherwise, he simply falls into the contradiction above. Zhuangzi himself must overcome similar difficulties. If he were really to say that no perspective can prove superior to any other, even his own, as some readings suggest he does, then he would fall victim to these difficulties. As I have already suggested, however, he does
not, and this passage suggests that he, or at least his later admirers, were well aware of the problem.212

We must now consider his claim to know what fish enjoy. When he suggests that fish delight in swimming around freely, there is no obvious indication that he understands himself to be advancing a distinctive philosophical thesis. It seems, instead, like a casual observation from one friend to another, of the sort that might not call for any response at all on Huizi’s part. When pressed, however, Zhuangzi does give an explanation of how he knows what he has claimed. He knows because he is next to the River Hao, where the fish are enjoying themselves.

At first glance, it may seem that he has simply ignored Huizi’s challenge. Huizi seemed to be posing a philosophical problem about knowledge, while Zhuangzi responds with more practical considerations. It is as if Zhuangzi does not realize that Huizi was trying to develop a theoretical challenge at all. If we consider Zhuangzi’s response within the context of the rest of the conversation, however, we can see how he is addressing Huizi’s concerns. He chooses not to advance any sort of epistemological theses that might explain how it is possible for a human being to know what it is like to be a fish. Instead, he simply explains the circumstances that led him to assert that fish delight in swimming. This story indicates that Zhuangzi’s skepticism does not commit him to refraining from all judgments whatsoever. We may make context-specific judgments, provided that we do not attempt to draw universal conclusions from them.213

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212 The passage, as already noted, is not part of the Inner Chapters, and may have been written by a different author than the earlier material.
213 Zhuangzi’s desire to avoid complicated philosophical explanations of what he knows, and instead to give a very ordinary explanation that remains within everyday discourse, resembles some aspects of the later Wittgenstein. In *On Certainty*, for example, Wittgenstein addresses the question of whether we can have knowledge of the external world. He considers a variation on this problem from G.E. Moore, who attempted to prove that he could know that his own hand was really in front of him. Wittgenstein responds that “If e.g. someone says ‘I don’t know if there’s a hand here’ he might be told ‘Look closer’.—This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language game. [It] is one of its essential
We might put this point in a slightly different way, in order to link Zhuangzi’s response to Huizi to his account of perspective in *Qiwulun*. Huizi seems to want an account of how Zhuangzi has achieved a universal perspective that encompasses the fish’s perspective, thus allowing him to know what fish enjoy. Zhuangzi has demonstrated that this kind of perspective cannot be achieved. If his response to Huizi here is intended to appeal to such a perspective, therefore, the two chapters contradict one another. His response, however, can be read in a different way. He is indicating that within his own perspective, which includes his general ways of thinking about the world, his location at this particular river on this particular day, and so forth, it makes sense to him to say that fish enjoy swimming. It just seems right, even if it cannot be grounded in a deeper epistemological argument. Once one has achieved “clarity” one recognizes the ubiquity of perspectival difference. One will nonetheless maintain a particular perspective on the world, even once it is recognized to be one among many.

2.17: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Zhuangzi seeks to liberate his readers from dogmatic intellectual constraints, notably those provided by custom or the theoretical schools. He does so using a two-pronged strategy. The first aspect begins from an observation concerning what we recognize as good. He suggests that, in ordinary life, we are accustomed to regarding different

features” (S. 3). See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Major Works* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 320. The imagined response to the problem here is a non-philosophical response within the ordinary language game of talking about our bodies. Similarly, Zhuangzi, in the happy fish passage, eschews philosophical theses about knowledge in his response to Huizi. Instead, he responds as if the question is an everyday one. The two thinkers differ, however, on the grounding of this everyday response. For Wittgenstein, the claim about the hand is appropriate because that is just how we ordinarily use language. Our conventions are the ultimate standard here. For Zhuangzi, on the other hand, one need not limit oneself to conventionally appropriate language. Consider, for example, his references to “wild and flippant words” (*menglang zhi yan* 孟浪之言) and reckless words (*wang zhi yan* 妄言之) (II, 16). Zhuangzi’s suggestion seems to be that the adequacy of speech depends not primarily on social convention, but instead on its attunement to the *dao*. 
things as good under different circumstances. This occurs when we recognize different species as flourishing under different conditions. It also occurs when we recognize that our own judgments have changed over time. Zhuangzi accepts that such judgments have a certain validity within their proper sphere. The danger arises when we try to universalize them, thereby taking them outside of that sphere. When we do so, we impose an inappropriately rigid and harmful standard upon human life. In order to demonstrate why this is the case, Zhuangzi musters an array of skeptical arguments that seek to show the inherent limitations of all perspectives. As we shall see in Chapter V, these more critical aspects of his thought undergird his positive vision of life, one that is encapsulated in his idea of wandering (you). Dogmatism presents an obstacle to seeing life as a freewheeling journey, which is why skepticism plays a decisive emancipatory role. As we shall see in the chapter that follows, Montaigne’s skepticism has a similar practical function.
Chapter III: The Infinite Diversity of Human Actions: Montaigne’s Skepticism

“All others, and even the ancients, have as their goal the exercise of intellect [l’esprit]; that of judgment [jugement] is a matter of chance. He, on the contrary, has as his design the fencing that sharpens judgment, and perhaps intellect, the perpetual scourge of common errors. The others teach wisdom. He un-teaches foolishness”

- Marie de Gournay, Preface to the Essays of Michel de Montaigne by his Adoptive Daughter, Marie le Jars de Gournay (1595).

3.1: Introduction

For Montaigne, like Zhuangzi, skepticism liberates us from dogmatism and enables us to enjoy the pleasures of free thought and action. As I shall argue in this and subsequent chapters, Montaigne provides a new vision of how to live peacefully and happily within a world of diversity and change. The central obstacle to peace, on his view, is the human pretension to final knowledge on what is best in life, regardless of whether that pretension is rooted in religion, philosophy, or custom. Human beings violently seek to impose their own standards, rooted largely in their own imaginations rather than on genuine wisdom, on others. Montaigne’s skepticism plays a crucial role in his attempt to develop a distinctive defense of tolerant attitudes and a new way of thinking about political affairs. Both seek to avoid some of the greatest ills that human beings inflict upon one another, especially cruelty, by discouraging the wild ambitions to which human beings are subject. We must understand our own limits and the limits of government, according to Montaigne, if we are to live decently together. Montaigne’s

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214 Marie de Gournay, Preface to the Essays of Michel de Montaigne by his Adoptive Daughter, Marie le Jars de Gournay, trans. Richard Hillman and Colette Quesnel (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies), 83. Marie le Jars de Gournay belonged to a prominent family based in Picardy. Her father, Guillaume Le Jars, was a treasurer for the king. Gournay became Montaigne’s “adoptive daughter” (fille d’alliance) as an adult, after reading the Essays at age 19 and contacting their author. She helped Montaigne to revise the Essays and, after his death, played a major role in the publication of later editions. She also published works of her own, among them the novel Le Proumenoir de M. de Montaigne, as well as works on gender equality (e.g. Grief des Dames) and the education of princes. This account draws on Philippe Desan, Montaigne: A Life, trans. Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 531-539.
skeptical arguments, which provide the theoretical underpinning of his account of these limits, begin from the phenomenon of diversity within and across human lives.

The character of the *Essays* is intimately linked to the phenomena of difference and change. The subject matter, literary form, and philosophical method of Montaigne’s writing all call our attention to the diversity of human life. They depict the changing thoughts and moods of a particular individual, Michel de Montaigne. He claims in his note to the reader that he presents himself “quite fully and quite naked.” Moreover, the *Essays* jump around, discussing varied subjects. Montaigne himself claims that the text is “pieced together of diverse members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental.” While this claim cannot be taken entirely at face value, this impression has proven extremely influential. Finally, because they aim to do justice to the multiplicity of human beings and human circumstances they provide, according to Montaigne, the first way of accessing human nature as it truly is. As Erich Auerbach puts it, Montaigne believes that “if one wishes to produce an exact and factual description of a constantly changing subject, one must follow its changes exactly and factually.”

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216 Schaefer (1990), 5.

217 On the way in which Montaigne attempts to create a text that will match the diversity of its author and the world generally, see Francois Rigolot, *Les Métamorphoses de Montaigne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), especially Chapter 8 (pp. 176-193).

In all of these respects, the *Essays* have exerted a tremendous influence upon modern philosophy and literature.\(^\text{219}\) It is unsurprising, then, that when we study Montaigne’s work we find an intellectual world which is in many respects familiar. His preoccupation with the seemingly minor details of his own life has proven tremendously influential on subsequent literature. He is also intensely interested, like many theorists today, in differences across individuals and customs. While such distinctions were by no means unrecognized by his predecessors, Montaigne gives them a new philosophical significance.

It is, in part, a mark of his immense influence on subsequent Western thought that these categories are now thought to be of obvious moral and political importance. Montaigne, like many contemporary theorists, chastises his readers for their parochial dogmatism and urges them to recognize the reasonableness of other ways of living. He is also an early and eloquent advocate for what Charles Taylor has called “the affirmation of ordinary life.”\(^\text{220}\) He is preoccupied with the minute details of his everyday experience—eating, drinking, talking, traveling, and so forth. The self-knowledge that he seeks is rooted in his individual particularity, as shaped by the experiences that he has undergone. Moreover, Montaigne’s version of the good life is in crucial respects more widely accessible than those defended by the classical philosophers.\(^\text{221}\) Montaigne, therefore, shares the concerns for diversity and equality that prevail within many contemporary liberal democracies.


This emphasis on difference and particularity has two crucial moral and political consequences. With regard to others, it suggests toleration, insofar as those who live differently may be responding to genuinely important aspects of their own needs, characters, or situations. On a personal level, it suggests a desire for freedom. We must liberate ourselves, Montaigne teaches, from all monistic doctrines concerning the good life. Such doctrines, whether religious, philosophical, or simply customary, will inevitably constrain our ability to respond fruitfully to the particularities of our own experience. Montaigne teaches that we can pursue the available opportunities for self-exploration when we are not constrained physically or intellectually. The exploratory and varied character of the text reflects Montaigne’s view of reality itself, which in turn supports his ethical and political stance.

He cannot, however, take for granted that his readers will see individual or cultural particularity as the crucial subject matter for moral and political theory, rather than as superficial distractions from what is truly important and dignified in humanity. Nor can he assume that his readers will see differences in custom as anything other than evidence of widespread errors. He must demonstrate that human nature, and nature generally, are such that difference is legitimate. Montaigne’s theory of difference has both critical and constructive aspects. He seeks to demonstrate that monism, which I take here to be the view that human action is judged in all cases by a fixed standard, is not true to our experience of ourselves and the world. Having established this, he attempts to offer a new view of life that will allow us to engage fruitfully with a world characterized by difference and change. Only in this way, he suggests, can we avoid the overwhelming temptation to fall victim to monistic ambitions that lead to violence and cruelty.
In this chapter, I will examine both the critical and constructive aspects of Montaigne’s epistemology. His skeptical arguments clear away obstacles to the cultivation of judgment through experience. I will assess his challenges to three rival sources of wisdom: religion, classical philosophy, and custom. Before he can expect his readers to engage in the kind of self-examination upon which his positive view is based, he must purge them of their monistic preconceptions, which are grounded in some combination of these three sources. I will then examine the alternative standard that he proposes, which he calls experience. Experiential thinking, as opposed to *a priori* deduction of basic truths about human nature or the universe, attempts to draw limited inferences from the particulars of a world understood as fundamentally diverse. Individuals and communities bound by shared custom take on a particular importance because they are the limited points of stability within this flux, and thus the appropriate units of analysis given the weakness of our rational powers. In developing this account, Montaigne develops a powerful defense of free thought and action, unconstrained by dogmatic commitments.

### 3.2: Montaigne and the Wars of Religion

The most politically salient monisms in Montaigne’s day, by far, were various forms of Christianity. Montaigne’s thought was formulated against a background of constant sectarian bloodshed. Both Protestants and Catholics were certain that the eternal fates of themselves and their countrymen would be imperiled if the state were to fall under the control of what they took to be a false faith. The French Wars of Religion erupted intermittently throughout the last half of Montaigne’s life. The most famous incident, the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, in which the Huguenot leader Gaspard de Coligny and thousands of other Protestants were murdered, took place just one year after Montaigne had retired from his position in the Parlement of Bordeaux.
Religious conflict permeated all levels of society. The Catholic and Protestant nobility confronted each other on the battlefield and ordinary people massacred those of other confessions in the streets. Montaigne himself was often in considerable danger during these conflicts. The proximity of Protestant regions such as Béarn left the Catholics of Bordeaux in “a state of almost constant alarm.” Even Montaigne’s own family was divided along religious lines after his brother and sister became Protestants. As a political actor and as a private individual, therefore, Montaigne was forced to determine how to minimize the harm done by these sectarian conflicts.

3.3: Philosophy, Faith, and Skepticism: The “Apology for Raymond Sebond”

Given the religious character of the political problem which dominated Montaigne’s day, he was compelled to offer his own assessment of the claims of Christianity, as well as their political consequences. He sought to mitigate the pervasive violence and cruelty that he saw by offering his own pluralistic account of human flourishing. This required him to challenge Christian monism. Doing so was a delicate task, given that he believed that shared custom provided the basis for social peace. Consequently, he could challenge prevailing beliefs only with caution. Montaigne proclaims himself a Catholic, and comported himself as such, but he also offers an array of skeptical arguments that aim to humble the pride of his Christian readers.

Montaigne’s personal religious views are much debated, in large part because of the variety of contradictory claims that he seems to make on the subject. Those who regard him as a sincere Christian can point to passages in which he expresses pious sentiments, while those who regard him as an agnostic or atheist note his claim that we have no access to truths beyond those

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223 Frame, 15.
of ordinary human life. Interpreters such as André Gide, Arthur Armaingaud\textsuperscript{224}, and David Lewis Schaefer\textsuperscript{225} have understood Montaigne as a critic of Christianity. Gide, for example, remarks that “every time Montaigne speaks of Christianity, it is with the strangest (sometimes, one might almost say, with the most malicious) impertinence.”\textsuperscript{226} Many others, such as Donald Frame, Olivier Naudeau, Biancamaria Fontana, and Ann Hartle regard Montaigne as a sincere Catholic.\textsuperscript{227}

My purpose here is not to offer a comprehensive account of Montaigne’s stance towards religion. In discussing his epistemological position, however, it is impossible to avoid that question. I shall argue that his skepticism about both human reason and divine inspiration indicates that his Catholicism, such as it is, must be understood as part of his general deference to custom and circumstance. Whether or not one takes his religion, when understood in this way, as genuine Christianity, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

His skepticism is developed most comprehensively in his longest and most complex essay, the “Apology for Raymond Sebond.” The title of the essay alludes to a Spanish theologian who sought to rationally demonstrate the truth of Christian doctrine in a work entitled

\textsuperscript{225} Schaefer (1990), 45-46, n.5.
\textsuperscript{226} André Gide, “Montaigne,” \textit{The Yale Review} 89.1 (January 2001), 53-71, 63.
\textsuperscript{227} While they agree that Montaigne is a religious man, these scholars disagree about the nature of his religious stance. Frame (1955) understands him to be a fideist, Fontana (2008) emphasizes his affinities with the moral concerns of the Franciscan tradition, while Hartle (2003) regards Christianity as “the pretheoretical background in terms of which the Essays are intelligible” (6). Olivier Naudeau, who as I have noted regards Montaigne as a Christian, notes “the discretion that one discovers in the religious attitude of Montaigne is also a tactical question where good sense plays a part” (translation mine). His suggestion seems to be that Montaigne has pedagogical reasons to speak of religious issues in a complex and confusing manner, even though this reading takes him to be less unorthodox than many others. See Olivier Naudeau, \textit{La pensée de Montaigne et la composition des Essais} (Geneva: Droz, 1972), 9.
Theologia Naturalis. Montaigne claims that his father Pierre ordered him to translate that work, which provided him with the impetus for his reflections. Sebond’s book had been recommended by Pierre Bunel, who Montaigne describes as someone who was thought to be a learned man.\textsuperscript{228} Montaigne claims that Bunel foresaw the chaos that would ensue after the Reformation, and therefore sought to provide this book as a bulwark for orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{229} This kind of rationalistic Christianity is one of several forms of monism that will appear in the Essays. Bunel’s thesis, and that of Sebond himself, appears to be that social order and the good life can be grounded in the rational demonstration of religious truths. By demolishing Sebond’s claims, Montaigne also destroys this view of authority.

The title presents several puzzles, as many have noted. First, it is misleading with regard to the substance of the essay. Montaigne does not engage with Sebond’s arguments in any detail. Instead, the essay provides a wide ranging assessment of the uses of religion and philosophy for improving human life. Moreover, to the extent that Montaigne does defend Sebond, he does so in an extremely insulting and dismissive manner. He argues only that Sebond’s argument are not bad as such arguments go. His crucial claim is that natural theology itself is a hubristic enterprise that fundamentally misunderstands the limits of human reason. Sebond fails because natural theology is impossible.

While Montaigne's oft-stated admiration for his father may have inclined him to accede to the proposed translation project, he must have had some further reason to use Sebond’s work as the pretext for his longest essay. The most compelling attempts to explain why Montaigne

\textsuperscript{228} David Lewis Schaefer (1990) suggests that Montaigne’s whole account of this episode is intended to be humorous rather than serious (47). There certainly does seem to be a disparity between the haphazard way in which Montaigne claims to have been led to translate the work and the centrality that his essay on it occupies within his thought.

\textsuperscript{229} Montaigne II.12, 389.
occupies himself with Sebond are those of David Lewis Schaefer and Alan Levine. Both agree that Sebond represents a particular form of religious rationalism. Schaefer suggests that Sebond is actually a stand-in for St. Thomas Aquinas, whose prestige was sufficient to deter a direct attack. On this view, Montaigne is actually striking at the heart of Catholic orthodoxy under the guise of dismissing only a minor scholar. Levine, on the other hand, argues that Sebond is actually a worthy target in his own right, because his attempt to unite reason and revelation is far more ambitious than that of Aquinas. Sebond holds that the truths of Christianity are totally accessible to reason, while Aquinas maintains the distinction between truths of reason and those of revelation. Nonetheless, Montaigne’s arguments undermine the teachings of both Sebond and Aquinas. By demonstrating the weakness of reason, Montaigne shows that Sebond’s hopes vastly exceed his capacities. On the other hand, Montaigne also calls into question claims concerning revelation, thus also undermining Aquinas’ more modest project. Montaigne presents religion, Catholic and otherwise, as a fundamentally human enterprise, which is therefore subject to the usual human frailties.

3.4: The Question of Faith

Montaigne at first appears unstinting in his praise for the stylistic merits of Theologia Naturalis. He “found the concepts of Sebond to be beautiful, the structure of the book well executed and his project full of piety.” Nonetheless, Montaigne’s most emphatic praise of Sebond’s rational theology is that it is about as good as can be expected, given the limits under which any such project necessarily operates. It fails not because Sebond is especially inept, but rather because it relies upon a false assessment of human reason. His assessment of its

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intellectual worth takes the form of a defense of Sebond against two lines of objection. One set of critics claim that Sebond should not use reason to defend revelation, on the grounds that “belief is grasped only by faith and by private inspiration from God’s grace.” Montaigne initially presents himself as unfit to assess this claim. He observes that those who uphold it do so from “pious zeal” and avers that he does not know anything about theology. Immediately, however, he advances four puzzling claims. First, he says that reason cannot arrive at theological knowledge. Second, he claims that faith requires that we receive “something infused, beyond the natural order.” Third, he asserts that we do not in fact hold this “lively faith”. Fourth, he says that we thus require human means to buttress our faith, thus justifying the use of human reason in religious matters.

The first two claims make Montaigne sound like a fideist, who believes that religion must depend on faith rather than reason. This reading has been advanced by interpreters such as Donald Frame and Herman Janssen. The third, however, indicates that the necessary faith is

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232 Montaigne, II.12, 389.
233 Montaigne, II.12, 390.
234 See Herman Janssen, Montaigne Fidéiste (Nijmegen: N.V. Dekker & Van de Vegt en J.W. van Leeuwen, 1930). For Frame’s argument, see Montaigne’s Discovery of Man, 58. See also Frieda Brown, Religious and Political Conservatism in the Essais of Montaigne (Geneva: Droz, 1963) and Craig Brush, Montaigne and Bayle: Variations on the Theme of Skepticism (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1966). As I shall argue, Montaigne does seem to adopt the conclusion that a Christian fideist would defend, namely that one should accept Christianity. Moreover, he agrees that it should be accepted on a basis other than rational argument. The difficulty, however, is that for Montaigne accepting Christianity in a predominantly Christian state is just an application of the general rule of respecting the customs that prevail within one’s community. Furthermore, this general deference towards custom is not established on the basis of faith, but rather on a claim, grounded in argument, about the importance of habit for social order. This helps to explain a puzzle that comes out in the work of Hugo Friedrich. Friedrich notes that if Montaigne had been more aware of the fideistic aspects of Luther and Calvin’s thought, then he might have been less hostile towards the reformation, because he would have noted crucial affinities with his own position. See Friedrich, Montaigne, p. 96. This would be plausible if his objection to the Reformation were based primarily on his theological stance. We might more plausibly explain this stance, however, with reference to his political views rather than his theological ones. What is objectionable about the reformers for Montaigne is that they recklessly sought to change established custom, not the desirability or lack thereof of the changes themselves.
not present among us. The fourth provides a remedy. He urges us to use reason to whatever extent it assists faith. These claims are in considerable tension with one another, particularly the first and last. If reason is impotent in matters of faith, how could it be used to buttress faith? It is possible that faith is sufficient to tell us the truth about certain matters, but not sufficient to actually motivate us and maintain itself. Furthermore, it is possible that reading books of natural theology provides the necessary motivation, in spite of their logical defects. While this is, perhaps, a coherent if implausible position for one to defend, Montaigne undermines it throughout the essay. There is no indication that reading Sebond’s work has made him a more devout Catholic. Moreover, if he hoped it could strengthen the faith of others, attacking the very idea of natural theology would hardly be the way to advance that project.

Before long, Montaigne has dismissed the possibility that we have actually received revelation. Shortly after articulating the need for divine light in order to obtain religious truth, Montaigne suggests that there is no evidence that we have in fact received that light. He suggests that “if a ray of God’s light touched us even slightly, it would be everywhere apparent: not only our words but our deeds would bear its lustre and its brightness.” Here we see Montaigne’s empiricism. The “Apology” assesses the claims of religion and philosophy by looking at the lives of those who uphold them. When he inspects the conduct of Christians, he finds it no better than that of Muslims. He praises the wisdom of Saint Louis, who upon

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235 Ibid. Levine suggests that Montaigne is arguing that “if there were divine inspiration there would be only good action” (48). This is certainly consistent with what he says here, but it is also possible that he is suggesting only that those with true faith would be better than the people of his own day. The passage a bit later, in which he describes how St. Louis worried about the effect of inviting a “Tartar King” to Europe, given its moral state, suggests that he may judge Christian communities lacking even by ordinary human standards.
converting a “Tartar king” urged him not to visit the Christian states, “fearing that our disordered way of life would sour his taste for so sacred a belief.”

Montaigne thus maintains the highest praise for the Christian teaching, if not Christian practice, while simultaneously undermining all actual claims to revelation. While he does not deny that there could be a person whose conduct suggests sincere faith, he certainly finds it difficult to locate any examples. Montaigne's theoretical and practical concerns are interwoven here. The conduct of Christians during the Wars of Religion demonstrates that they are not truly faithful, but it also shows that individuals placing great confidence in the truth of their own religious judgments poses a threat to public order. He suggests that religion is so malleable that we can “take religion into our own hands and twist it like wax into shapes.” In practice, he finds that his countrymen use their religious fanaticism as a means for pursuing their “private concerns.” This is, he believes, the only way to explain why they change positions so frequently. Montaigne observes that the two sides of the “civil tumults” go back on forth even on the straightforward question of whether or not subjects may rebel against rulers. He attributes their varied conduct to changing interests rather than to changing theologies, or, rather, takes the former as the cause of the latter. The disparity between supposedly fixed religious truths and the varied actions to which religion gives rise indicates to Montaigne that these professions are due more to interest than to faith.

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236 Montaigne, II.12, 391.
237 Levine (2001) notes that Montaigne seems to distinguish between leaders who “do not believe but cynically manipulate their flocks” and “the flocks themselves” who “do believe” (49).
238 Montaigne, 392.
239 As I shall argue in the sixth chapter, Montaigne believes that many, if not most, great conflicts emerge out of misunderstandings among most of those who are involved about what is at stake. The partisans, on his view, often ascribe virtuous motivations to their leaders, who are in fact motivated by private interest.
Montaigne goes even further. He claims that religion is necessarily a part of the contingent customs of a particular community. This is the most important evidence that Montaigne challenges Christian claims to have received divine revelation. A Christian holds that there is a fundamental asymmetry between the origins of the Christian religion and all others. Christianity, on this view, is derived from an act of God himself while other religions are mere superstitions that can be attributed to any number of contingent causes. Montaigne makes all religions a matter of such causes. He remarks that “we accept our religion only as we would fashion it, only from our own hands—no differently from the way other religions gain acceptance.”

We trust in a particular religion because “we happen to be born in a country where it is practiced, or else we have regard for its age or for the authority of the men who upheld it; perhaps we fear the threats which it attaches to the wicked or go along with its promises.”

R.A. Sayce, while discussing Montaigne’s comparison between regional identity and religious identity, notes that “in the context of the Essays as a whole, with their continual emphasis on custom as a force which deadens reason, on the absurdity of turning our local customs into universal laws, it implies that religion, including our own, is a mere local accident.” This certainly appears to be the thrust of this part of Montaigne’s discussion. The comment in question comes in a part of the essay in which he expresses his view that his neighbors lack any true religious inspiration, and thus we can assume that the sense in which they are labelled “Christian” as a matter of course is not a particularly laudatory one.

240 Montaigne, II.12, 394.
241 Ibid.
Richard Popkin accepts that the comment is a criticism, but he draws the conclusion that Montaigne is exhorting his neighbors to do better and to exemplify greater piety.\(^\text{243}\) If the passage is taken in isolation, then this reading is plausible enough, but it fails to recognize the deep connections between Montaigne’s comment here and his remarks on custom in “Of Custom” and elsewhere. His point, in all of these passages, is that one’s native customs are rooted in pure accident of birth. While this is obviously true of a regional identity, such as being a Perigordian, it is less widely accepted that one’s religion is a matter of chance. Even if Perigordians believe that their customs are preferable to others, and it is likely that they do, many would presumably grant that their actual status as Perigordians is the result of an accident of birth (perhaps a fortuitous one). Christians, on the other hand, claim that their Christianity is not a matter of mere accident. It is a product of divine grace. In this way, the passage links a non-controversial case covered by his thesis with a much more controversial one. The claim is that religious identity is just as accidental as regional identity.\(^\text{244}\)

Marcel Conche has argued that, to the contrary, Montaigne is noting that he is very much a Christian just as he is very much a Perigordian. Montaigne, however, is simply treating both “Christian” and “Perigordian” as quasi-sociological categories. As David Lewis Schaefer points out, “Conche neglects to consider whether belief in certain doctrines is not a more essential


\(^{244}\) One might claim that, even if regional identity is accidental, one can sometimes take a reasonable pride in it. We might inspect our customs and see that they are good. The same might be thought to hold true for one’s religion, even if it were received as a result of various contingent factors. Montaigne’s response to this, I believe, would have two parts. First, he would point out that the relevant reason for thinking one’s religion superior in spite of these contingencies, namely some manifestation of divine gifts, is notably absent. Second, he might note that it is tremendously unlikely that a given set of beliefs produced in such a haphazard way are accurate.
criterion of membership in a religion (especially the Christian one) than of membership in a geographic or ethnic group (which, by necessity, is ultimately conventional).”

Much of the debate over Montaigne’s religion seems to hinge on the question of what exactly it means to be a Catholic. There is still an important sense in which Montaigne is a Catholic. He upholds Catholic practice as the custom of his community and the basis for social order. He even attempted to ensure that a young relative would not be educated as a Protestant and had Masses held within his own home during the Wars of Religion. Nonetheless, his position is a radical challenge to what many of his contemporaries took to be Christian orthodoxy. Virtually all of his contemporaries would have rejected this effort to transform the universalistic Christian religion into a creed limited to communities in which it is already customary. It is a mark of the complexity and rhetorical sophistication of the “Apology,” rather than its pious motives, that the work was not placed on the Vatican’s Index until the late seventeenth century.

3.5: Humbling Reason

Montaigne has decisively, if subtly, rejected the view that we can gain decisive guidance from faith. This leads him to the consideration of Europe’s other great source of guidance, philosophical reasoning. Having dispatched the objection that Sebond is impious because he

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245 Schaefer (1990), 52 f.29.
246 Fontana, for example, seems to claim only that he is driven by a set of distinctively Christian concerns, while Frame claims that he upholds Christian doctrine.
247 Frame argues that “Montaigne's fideism was acceptable to the Church of his time and was not even mentioned by the papal censors; he could not be expected to know that a hundred years later it would be unorthodox and the Essays placed on the Index (1676).” (58). It is important to note that, as Frame acknowledges, the Church did express some reservations about the text. Consequently, he could hardly be unaware that there were some potential causes for concern. Moreover, the work that he is outwardly praising, Sebond’s Theologia Naturalis, was itself the object of Vatican censure. That work was put on the Index, although all but the prologue was eventually taken off. See Frame, 32. On the topic of Montaigne’s experience with the Vatican censors more generally, see Malcolm Smith, Montaigne and the Roman Censors (Geneva: Droz, 1981).
fails to recognize the sufficiency of faith, Montaigne turns to the second argument raised against the *Theologia Naturalis*. Many of Sebond’s detractors, apparently, found his arguments unconvincing. Montaigne seeks to defend Sebond, but only by denying that we should have expected his arguments to have been sound in the first place. The core of Montaigne’s position is that we cannot blame Sebond for failing in his reasoning, because reason is unable to grasp permanent truths about God or the soul. This would surely be little comfort to Sebond. He still fails, although his failure is no more unexpected or egregious than that of any other natural theologian.

The consideration of this objection allows Montaigne to engage in a wide ranging reflection upon the power of human reason. This leads him to confront the teachings of the classical philosophers. Indeed, he spends far more time engaging with their claims than with those of Sebond. Even such figures as Crates and Asclepiades seem to interest him just as much as Sebond. His decision not to deal with Sebond’s arguments in a direct manner has at least two motives. First, he states that we must evaluate reason according to the standards set by its foremost practitioners. It is clear that, having found thinkers of the highest caliber unable to deliver genuine knowledge, he sees no need to see whether or not Sebond has fared better. Second, he may want to avoid calling into question arguments that may serve as the bulwark of faith for some in times of anarchic religious conflict.

While Montaigne ultimately finds their position philosophically untenable, he surely appreciates the political intention of Bunel and others who hope to use rational argument to maintain religious unity. Like them, Montaigne wants to undermine those who would use attacks on the established religion as a pretext for pursuing their own ambitions. His strategy, however, is not to offer a more robust defense of Sebond’s conclusions, but instead to humble
the arrogant critics by demonstrating the weaknesses of human reason. Bunel, on this account, fails to understand the true basis of sectarian violence. His view is premised on the idea that bad arguments ought to be refuted by good arguments, which will provide a rational basis for social order. Montaigne denies this possibility. Instead of convincing malcontents that our customs are good, we must convince them that they are in no position to make authoritative judgments about the goodness of customs. As he puts it, he aims to “trample down human pride and arrogance, crushing them under our feet.” This will “make men feel the emptiness, the vanity, the nothingness of Man, wrenching from their grasp the sickly arms of human reason, making them bow their heads and bite the dust before the authority and awe of the Divine Majesty, to whom alone belong knowledge and wisdom.”

Montaigne attack on human reason serves two purposes. It is directed against the fanatics who, because of their overwhelming confidence in themselves, upset society and engage in acts of extreme cruelty. It is also directed against the theoretical teachings of the classical philosophers. Montaigne presents his own position in explicit opposition to Aristotle and other philosophical authorities. As we shall see, however, he is more concerned with the abuse of classical philosophy than with the philosophers themselves. Montaigne believes that interpreters had erred in speaking of Plato or Aristotle’s doctrines on the soul, on God, and on other

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248 Montaigne, II.12, 397.
249 Ann Hartle observes that, while Montaigne makes reference to Aristotle less often than other classical thinkers such as Cicero, Seneca, and Plato, much of Montaigne’s thought is a direct repudiation of Aristotle’s position. As she puts it, “Montaigne breaks with Aristotle on every major aspect of his metaphysics: form, final cause, potentiality and actuality, perfection, the good, and the eternal and divine.” See Ann Hartle, *Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy*, 7. Hartle is disputing the claims of Hugo Friedrich, according to whom Montaigne demonstrates little familiarity or concern with Aristotle. Friedrich suggests that “traces of readings in Aristotle are weak in the *Essais,*” and attributes this in part to the diminution of Aristotle’s influence outside of theology in European intellectual life. See Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 55-56.
metaphysical matters. He claims that the philosophers themselves did not intend to make final claims on these matters, and instead engaged in philosophical disputation largely for the pleasure of thought itself. Nonetheless, Montaigne claims that a wrongheaded doctrinal reading of these thinkers has motivated an immoderate confidence in human capacities, which tends to undermine the basis for peaceful coexistence. An individual will see fit to upset a peace grounded in shared custom only if he or she is sure about having found the truth. Both religious and philosophical claims, when taken in an arrogant and dogmatic manner, serve to upset the fragile peace that allows people to live minimally decent lives together.

Given the specificity of Montaigne’s stated intention, the array of phenomena that he proceeds to discuss may seem bewildering. Before he ever discusses any philosophical arguments, for instance, he engages in a lengthy discussion of the intellectual capabilities of animals. This is neither a digression nor a dry zoological disquisition. It is a crucial part of his attempt to humble human pride. A substantial portion of this pride, Montaigne’s approach suggests, is tied to our supposed ranking in the natural order. We are inclined to believe that we stand above other animals. On this point, Greek philosophy and the Biblical tradition are in agreement. Moreover, the supposed subject of the essay, Sebond’s *Theologia Naturalis*, overtly draws on these sources to emphasize the exalted rank of human beings within the natural order.\(^{250}\)

\[^{250}\text{On Sebond’s view of these matters, see Friedrich, 120.}\]

Aristotle teaches that human beings are superior to other animals with respect to our political nature. As he puts it, “man is much more a political animal than any kind of bee or any herd animal” (*Politics* 1253a).\(^{251}\)

\[^{251}\text{Lord, 37.}\]

For, as we assert, nature does nothing in vain; and man alone among the animals has speech. The voice indeed indicates the painful or pleasant, and hence is present in other
animals as well…But speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust. For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and other things [of this sort]; and partnership in these things is what makes a household and a city (Politics 1253a).

Aristotle, therefore, distinguishes between our capacity for speech and the capacity for “voice” possessed by other animals. The basis for this distinction is that human beings are able to move beyond merely expressing pleasure and pain, and can instead speak and think about what is advantageous and the just. Montaigne calls our attention to another passage in which Aristotle notes that partridges have different calls in different places, as evidence that the capacity to develop different languages is not unique to humanity.\(^{252}\) In this way, he suggests, using Aristotle’s own evidence, that the view of humanity’s place in the cosmos suggested by Aristotle and adopted by his later admirers is based upon an empirically unsound view of the animal kingdom.

Aristotle was the foremost philosophical influence on St. Thomas Aquinas and other medieval scholastic theologians. For this reason, by challenging Aristotle Montaigne is also challenging Christian theology. This is not, however, the most radical consequence of his demolition of the human-animal distinction. That distinction goes back to the Book of Genesis, in which God grants human beings control over, and use of, the animals.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so (Genesis 1.27-30, King James Version).

\(^{252}\) Montaigne, II.12, 407.
According to the Biblical account, human beings are created in the image of God and animals exist for their sakes. Consequently, Montaigne has challenged not just Aristotelianism but also Biblical religion.\(^{253}\)

His challenge to classical philosophy and Biblical religion does not depend on the accuracy of Montaigne’s empirical claims, or even his own belief in them. The fundamental point is that his intention is to undermine the attitudes that those sources have encouraged. Some readers have taken his claims literally. Descartes, for example, attempted to refute Montaigne’s claims in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, by arguing that animals lack language and act only mechanically.\(^{254}\) As many commentators have noted, however, Montaigne uses his accounts of animals to challenge humans’ pride in their own superiority within the natural order.\(^{255}\) David Lewis Schaefer has suggested, quite plausibly, that these claims are not just about the relative rankings of various species, but are instead intended to encourage humans to behave differently towards members of their own species.

The real purpose of Montaigne’s discourse on the beasts may be to combat people’s misjudgment of one another, rather than their failure to appreciate the merits of other members of the animal kingdom. To see ourselves as insignificant units in an ever-moving cosmos, rather than as elevated beings atop a fixed, meaningful, and purposeful order, would, he suggests, be conducive to greater tolerance in the way we treat each other.\(^{256}\)

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\(^{253}\) The conflict between Montaigne’s account of the human animal relationship and that contained in the Bible is exacerbated when Montaigne suggests that human imagination, which allows us to conceive of possible conditions very different than our own, and thus to imagine a heaven and a hell, is in fact a defect because it encourages us to ignore this world. See Levine, *Sensual Philosophy*, 57.

\(^{254}\) The letter is available at [http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/PhiloSophie/logphil/oeuvres/descarte/newcastl.htm](http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/PhiloSophie/logphil/oeuvres/descarte/newcastl.htm).

\(^{255}\) As R.W. Serjeantson notes, “Rorario, Montaigne, and Charron were really interested in the question of animal language for moral, not natural philosophical reasons. They belong to a tradition that George Boas seventy years ago christened "theriophilhy." The theriophilists use their discussions of the manifold capacities of animals to draw moral conclusions about the vanity and incapacity of humans.” See R.W. Serjeantson, “The Passions and Animal Language, 1540-1700” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62.3 (2001): 425-444, 437. Similarly, Jacques Derrida (1999) argues that Montaigne uses these claims about animals to mock the claim that we know what it is like to be an animal.

\(^{256}\) Schaefer (1990), 68.
This intention, however, is closely connected to, and in fact dependent upon, his point about animals. Monistic philosophical and religious doctrines are, for Montaigne, among the central causes of intolerance. They tend to nourish grand ambitions, which are dependent on claims about the special place of human beings within the natural order. For this reason, challenges to those claims have salutary practical effects.

Regardless of whether or not one understands his intention in precisely this way, these passages raise considerable difficulties for the interpreters who interpret Montaigne as a pious Catholic. They generally back up that claim through a particular reading of his epistemology. They claim that, as a skeptic, he denies that we can know God through reason, but also that he leaves room for faith. Donald Frame, for instance, argues that Montaigne’s followers departed from his intention when they applied the arguments of the “Apology” to Catholicism, because he had put his own religion “above the reach of reason.”

What the foregoing considerations reveal is that Montaigne’s investigation of religion is concerned with morality as much as epistemology. He discusses the capabilities of humans and animals in order to accomplish a practical aim. That aim is destroying our pride and preparing us to live peaceably together. We must determine, therefore, not only whether the tenets of a given religion can be known through either faith or reason, but also whether they conduce to peace. If distinguishing between humans and animals to the detriment of the latter is not conducive to peace, then no Biblical religion is conducive to peace. Montaigne urges his readers to accept the customs of their communities. At the same time, however, he subtly challenges those of his own. To a certain extent, this tension may be a necessary component of his project. Peace

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257 Frame, 57.
requires that we comply with the customs of our society. On the other hand, it is precisely those customs that have led to the situation of conflict to which we must restore peace. Consequently, Montaigne must defend a view that is widely shared enough that it can command wide assent, while also modifying that view to make it more peaceable.

Subduing human pride is not only a matter of challenging Christian or Aristotelian orthodoxy. The human desire for glory gives rise to some of the greatest acts of violence. Montaigne calls war “the greatest and most pompous of human actions,” but also states that here too we see our own “imbecility and imperfection.”²⁵⁸ He observes that even the ancient texts attribute the causes of war to petty causes. He describes the causes of the Trojan War as follows:

All Asia was ruined and consumed in wars for Paris’ lechery. The envy of one single man, a spite, a pleasure, a domestic jealousy, causes which should not move two fishwives to scratch one another—that is the soul and motive of all this great turmoil.²⁵⁹

Here Montaigne calls attention to the ugly origins of even the greatest conflicts. The great models for martial excellence, most prominently Achilles, are ultimately pawns being manipulated by the petty passions of others. The costly and often inglorious nature of the Trojan War was, of course, not absent from Homer’s own narrative.²⁶⁰ Presumably that’s exactly where Montaigne learned about these matters. Nonetheless, Montaigne seems to worry that even the harsh features of Homer’s account may be insufficiently appreciated by its readers, who may find themselves in the throes of a passion for glory. Here we see what will become a recurring feature of Montaigne’s thought. It is often the case that Montaigne is not so much criticizing the views of his great predecessors, such as Homer or Aristotle, as challenging the way in which their works have served to motivate human conflict. In this sense, Montaigne grants those

²⁵⁸ Montaigne, II.12, 422.
²⁵⁹ Montaigne, II.12, 423.
²⁶⁰ Consider also Herodotus’ presentation of the origins of the Trojan War.
thinkers a high degree of respect, while also indicating his own greater psychological acuity. He perceives not only the message that the writers wanted to instill, but also the messages that readers would likely receive and the dangers that they pose, given human nature.

3.6: Skepticism and Philosophical Disagreement

The status of human reason cannot, as Montaigne recognizes, be settled strictly on the basis of comparisons with other animals. After all, he grants that human beings do possess some sort of freedom to do what they think best. The value of that freedom, however, will depend on our ability to use it well. Here Montaigne turns to those who would have a most powerful claim to be taken as authorities on how we should live, the great philosophers of classical antiquity. He proceeds to engage with a disparate array of thinkers and doctrines, only to conclude that there is little there that can make us either happy or wise. In this way, he humbles those whose work might appear to be the pinnacle of human achievement, and thus to represent the most important evidence for a reasonable pride in humanity.

Montaigne’s demolition of human pretensions has both a political and a theoretical aim. The political aim is to convince some of the vainest and most foolish individuals to abandon their destructive projects, which are nourished by their pride. On a theoretical level, he wants to create a new way of living which reflects the limitations to which human beings are subject. This new way of living and thinking takes into account the impossibility of arriving at final guidance on a single best way of life, and instead urges flexibility and attention to the contingent features of one’s own experience. As we shall see shortly, this way of living and thinking is captured in his idea of “free judgement” and his preference for learning from experience rather than reason.
There is one crucial point, however, on which Montaigne accepts the verdict of the philosophical tradition. He observes that “all the philosophers of all the sects are in general accord over one thing: that the sovereign good consists of peace of mind and body.”\(^{261}\) This is his project as well. He denies, however, that philosophical rationalism has thus far made good on its promise. He adduces various examples of philosophers whose doctrines could not shield them from the brute force of bodily harm. Lucretius, for example, effused that “It was a god, noble Memmius, yes, a god who first discovered that rule of life which we now call Wisdom and who, through his skill, brought our lives out from storm and darkness and fixed them in such tranquility and light.”\(^{262}\) In spite of this supposedly divine tranquility, Montaigne observes, even a “minor accident,” by which he alludes to Lucretius’ supposed madness after drinking a love potion, led him to “a state worse than that of the meanest shepherd.”\(^{263}\) Similarly, Dionysius of Heraclea was forced to give up his “Stoical assertions” when he was “nearly driven out of his mind by stabbing pains in his eyes.” The weakness of reason, Montaigne suggests, is in part due to misfortune’s ability to render us incapable of reason and thus vulnerable. Against these high minded philosophers, Montaigne pits the ploughman who lets “himself follow his natural appetites, measuring things only by the present sensation, without knowledge and without prognostication.”\(^{264}\) This man, he argues, “has pain only when he has it; whereas the other often has the stone in his soul before he has it in his loins.”\(^{265}\) The philosophers, on Montaigne’s view, have failed in achieving mental and physical tranquility, which is both their aim and his own.

\(^{261}\) Montaigne, II.12, 437.
\(^{262}\) Montaigne, II.12, 438.
\(^{263}\) Ibid.
\(^{264}\) Montaigne, II.12, 440.
\(^{265}\) Montaigne, II.12, 440.
Moreover, they have failed to achieve knowledge. They are no better guides in theoretical matters than in practical ones.

Montaigne contends that an examination of the great philosophers will reveal that they have produced nothing that is truly certain. He divides the schools into three groups: those who believe they have found the truth, those who claim that it is impossible to do so, and those who refrain both from making positive claims and from claiming that knowledge is impossible. He counts the Peripatetics, Stoics, and Epicureans among the first group, the Academic skeptics among the second, and the Pyrrhonian skeptics among the third. Montaigne believes that even the seemingly dogmatic members of the first group were really skeptics at heart. Aristotle, who he calls the “Prince of the Dogmatists,” teaches us “that greater knowledge leads to further doubt.” The obscurities of Aristotle’s writings, according to Montaigne, are connected to his deliberate efforts to reveal this. Consequently, his teaching is “Pyrrhonism cloaked in affirmation.” Indeed, the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” becomes in large part a defense of Pyrrhonism, because it “shows us Man naked, empty, aware of his own weakness, fit to accept help from on hight.” As Schaefer notes, however, Montaigne’s exposition of Pyrrhonism is actually a description of the philosophic way of life in general,” as Montaigne understands it.

This defense of Pyrrhonism is political and ethical as much as it is theoretical. The Pyrrhonist stance purges one of unreasonable ambitions and fanaticism. The Pyrrhonist, Montaigne indicates, is because of his lack of certainty “no scoffer” and “holds no doctrine contrary to established custom.” Skepticism is the most politically salutary doctrine because it encourages humility rather than pride and provides no substantive teaching that can upset public

266 Montaigne, II.12, 451.
267 Montaigne, II.12, 456.
268 Schaefer (1990), 84.
269 Montaigne, II.12, 455.
order. The political uses of skepticism do not, of course, establish its intellectual validity. Indeed, David Lewis Schaeffer has argued that Montaigne’s skepticism is largely a rhetorical tool that serves to clear the way for his own positive philosophy. That being said, Montaigne does offer more detailed arguments in defense of skepticism, and we shall turn to them shortly.

Montaigne’s skepticism cannot be equated entirely with that of the Pyrrhonians. This is, in part, because he identifies skepticism as the legacy of not only Pyrrho and his school, but also the great philosophers in general. Montaigne’s skepticism is, in this respect, quite ecumenical. Many commentators have suggested that Montaigne is a Pyrrhonian skeptic, and there are certainly connections between his stated views and those that he ascribes to the Pyrrhonists. Alan Levine has noted a crucial difficulty for this view, which is that Montaigne does not seem to practice the suspension of judgment that is characteristic of the followers of that school. As Levine puts it, Montaigne “seeks to develop and refine his judgment, not eliminate it.”

Montaigne’s genuine sympathies, Levine suggests, are with the academic skeptics, who claim to know what they do not know. It is certainly true that Montaigne recognizes the limits of his knowledge, and thus resembles that school. That being said, he offers his own distinctive account of what precisely it is that we cannot know, an account that cannot necessarily be derived from the Academic skeptics. This will become clearer in my discussion of his account of experience later on. What is of fundamental importance is that his account of philosophy in general blurs the lines between the various schools, creating an ecumenical skepticism that could be endorsed by all of them in spite of the varied practical aims that shaped the more unique aspects of their systems.

*Skepticism and Disagreement*

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270 Levine (2001), 72.
Amidst the “tall tales,” to borrow Donald Frame’s expression, Montaigne does offer a rigorous defense of skepticism. That defense is rooted in the phenomenon of philosophical disagreement.\textsuperscript{271} Montaigne is interested in the great philosophers because they provide the strongest pieces of evidence with which to determine the strength of human reason. While his moral and political purpose is best served by demonstrating the lowliness of humanity, he must defend this view by first considering the most accomplished human beings. As he puts it, he wishes “to take man in his highest estate” by examining the “small number of excellent and select men who, having been endowed with fine and particular natural ability, have further strengthened and sharpened it by care.”\textsuperscript{272} We can study the philosophers to see “how far they have gone and where they have halted.” Given the exemplary character of these individuals, “the infirmities and defects that we shall find in this assembly the world may well boldly acknowledge as its own.”\textsuperscript{273}

The very fact that philosophers cannot reach any consensus indicates the limits of human reason. “How else,” Montaigne asks, “can we explain the obvious inconstancy, diversity and vanity of the opinions produced by such excellent and, indeed, awesome, minds?” His assumption is that these thinkers are comparable in intelligence and commitment to truth, and thus one would expect them to converge on a single set of answers if truth could really be achieved in this domain.

\textsuperscript{271} Friedrich (1991) offers a harsh assessment of Montaigne’s skeptical arguments: “the bases given for it are neither systematic nor original, they are highly variable and vague in their terminology, axiomatic, confessional, descriptive, but not philosophically compelling, though replete with the suggestive force of a personal conviction” (123). The argument that I will describe here is, on my view, neither confessional nor vague. Moreover, the fact that Montaigne’s fundamental concerns here, the practical and epistemic consequences of disagreement, are still much debated in in political theory and epistemology suggests that his discussion may be more substantive than Friedrich’s evaluation would suggest. For some of the relevant sources in contemporary epistemology, see footnote 254 in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{272} Montaigne, II.12, 450.

\textsuperscript{273} Montaigne, II.12, 451.
There is an empirical component to this stage of the argument as well. Montaigne compiles lengthy lists of philosophical claims about God and the soul, in order to prove that the greatest thinkers have reached no consensus. One such list runs as follows:

Thales was the first to inquire into such matters: he thought God was. Spirit who made all things out of water; Anaximander said that the gods are born and die with the seasons and that there are worlds infinite in number; Anaximenes said God was Air, immense, extensive, ever moving; Anaxagoras was the first to hold that the delineation and fashioning of all things was directed by the might and reason of an infinite Spirit.\(^{274}\)

He notes that that the statements of Socrates himself are no more unified, at least as he is presented by Plato and Xenophon. Socrates “is always asking questions and stirring up discussion, never concluding, never satisfying.”\(^{275}\)

It is probable, according to Montaigne, that the ancient philosophers recognized the consequences of disagreement just as easily as he does. They must have realized that they were extraordinarily unlikely to have found the truth when so many of their peers had failed. Montaigne finds that he “cannot really convince myself that Epicurus, Plato and Pythagoras genuinely wanted us to accept their Atoms, Ideas and Numbers as valid currency. They were too wise to base the articles of their belief on foundations so shaky and so challengeable.”\(^{276}\) The philosophers promulgated their doctrines in a playful manner, he argues, in full awareness of their provisional character.

It is crucial to distinguish between two of Montaigne’s claims here. The first point is an epistemic one. He suggests that when intelligent writers who are equally well positioned to address a given question offer radically different answers, then we must assume that the question is unanswerable, at least for them and for those who are less well positioned. A claim quite like

\(^{274}\) Montaigne, II.12, 463–464.
\(^{275}\) Montaigne, II.12, 458.
\(^{276}\) Montaigne, II.12, 460.
This has been defended in current epistemological research on what is generally referred to as “peer disagreement.” Montaigne’s second claim is that the great philosophers recognized the problem just described. If they were truly insightful and self-aware, on his view, they could not possibly have failed to recognize the ongoing disputes, and the epistemic significance of those disputes, surrounding the questions in which they were most interested.

Montaigne has offered a radical reinterpretation of the history of philosophy here. Skepticism, on his view, is the link between all philosophers of all schools. He takes even those he calls dogmatists, like Aristotle, to be skeptics in disguise. Many, however, have failed to recognize the significance of philosophical skepticism. Montaigne alludes to a group that appropriates philosophical positions in a dogmatic spirit, thus missing the intent with which they were put forward. Such views lead to overconfidence and extremism, and he has nothing but mockery for them. After listing the widely varied theological teachings of the philosophers, he makes the following exclamation:

So much din from so many philosophical brainboxes! Trust in your philosophy now! Boast that you are the one who has found the lucky bean in your festive pudding! Given the widespread disagreement of great minds, only a stroke of luck would allow any one of us to reach the truth of things. Only the most hubristic thinkers would suppose that they are so lucky.

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277 Hilary Kornblith, for example, argues that “when I find that others disagree with me on a certain question, this gives me, ceteris paribus, reason to be less confident than I was that I am right.” See “Belief in the Face of Controversy” in Disagreement, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010), 34. For another account of the ways in which we should revise our beliefs given disagreement among our peers, see David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” The Philosophical Review 116.2 (April 2007): 187-217. An overview of these arguments and the responses that they have generated is provided in Christensen (2009).

278 Montaigne, II.12, 465.
3.7: Culture and Ethnocentrism

Montaigne has cast doubt on the monistic claims of religion and philosophy. If we should not look to philosophical reflection or revelation, where should we turn? In much of the “Apology,” Montaigne suggests that the genuine Pyrrhonian skeptic simply follows local custom and personal inclination. When considered in tandem with “Of Cannibals,” one might begin to think that Montaigne is a thoroughgoing relativist. This has certainly been the way in which some interpreters have understood him. 279 Clifford Geertz claims that Montaigne seems to draw “relativistic, or relativistic-looking conclusions from the fact, as he heard it, that the Caribs didn’t wear breeches.” 280 Many scholars have shared this assessment and interpreted Montaigne as a thinker who refuses to judge communities by any standards but their own. 281 As I shall argue, this reading is based on misunderstandings of both his attitude towards custom in general and his claims about the customs of the cannibals in particular. Montaigne does suggest that all customs are equal, in the sense that their force depends primarily on habituation. This does not, however, mean that they are all equally good.

279 Richard Popkin (2003) has drawn a link between Montaigne’s appropriation of Sextus’ thought and his relativism: “…Montaigne went on to dwell on the theme of Sextus' tenth trope, the variations in moral, legal, and religious behavior. Armed with evidence about the savages in America, the cases in ancient literature, and the mores of contemporary Europe, Montaigne drove home the message of ethical relativism” (53).


281 Consider, for example, Handler (1986), Schiffman (1991), and Voget (1977). Sayce (1972) also refers to Montaigne as a relativist, but what he seems to mean by this is simply that Montaigne believes that all customs depend on purely contingent and local factors. He recognizes that this kind of relativism debunks custom more than it affirms it (195). We might say that he emphasizes the sense in which Montaigne is a descriptive relativist, meaning that he believes that people in fact make judgments in ways that are shaped by overarching systems of customs and practices. It is important, however, to emphasize that this is a generalization about how people usually behave, not a claim about the necessary features of judgment. He is not, unlike Wittgenstein, suggesting that there is no court of appeal outside of our practices in which we can judge them. “Of Cannibals” is, and is widely taken to be, an attack on European customs.
Montaigne’s praise for custom does, however, serve an important practical purpose. In a country riven by violent conflict, in which both sides hold that they have discovered truths that justified massacring their neighbors, it was necessary to restore a healthy respect for the customary ways of living. Nonetheless, Montaigne by no means believes that custom stands beyond criticism. Indeed, he decries the monism of his own community, as a result of which his neighbors assume that all ways other than our own are barbaric and unreasonable. This can motivate cruelty just as easily as excessive trust in our own individual capacities. Insufficient respect for custom prompts barbarity towards our neighbors, but unreasonable trust in the rightness of one’s customary way of life can lead to barbarity towards those outside of one’s community. Religious, philosophical, and cultural dogmatism are all to be avoided.

Montaigne’s examines the nature of custom throughout the essays, but “Of Custom” and “Of Cannibals” are especially important. “Of Custom” provides the argument that gives rise to the conservative interpretation of his thought. The argument is fairly simple. Customs seem to exert their force everywhere. They are, however, diverse, so their force must not be derived from the specific features of some local set of customs. It must, instead, result from something that they have in common. The most likely candidate is simple habituation. If custom relies on habituation, then novelty weakens the force of custom. Stability depends on custom, so novelty is a threat to stability. “Of Cannibals,” on the other hand, shows us that, for all his respect for

282 If the message of “Of Cannibals” were that all cultures must be judged on their own terms, it is unclear how Montaigne could find a position from which to condemn European practices, given that Europe’s own view is that Europe is good. Montaigne might also, on this reading, fall into a trap generated by relativism itself. As Joseph Carens has noted, there is a tension between two relativist claims. First, that all societies’ standards are equally valid. Second, some societies’ standards are themselves universalistic (for example our human rights standards). See Citizenship, Culture, and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

283 The argument in “Of Custom” is somewhat closer to relativism than that of “Of Cannibals.” “Of Custom” suggests that the way in which we should behave is determined by local custom. The
the importance of custom in maintaining peace, Montaigne is not at all averse to criticizing custom according to his own standards. That essay leads us to see that Montaigne’s position is not that we should never change our customs, but rather that we ought to approach such change prudently while subjecting them to the most radical possible intellectual challenges.\textsuperscript{284} The targets of the essay are European ethnocentrism, according to which non-Europeans are primitive barbarians, and the cruelty that such views help us to avoid confronting.

He offers not only a philosophical case against ethnocentrism, but also a psychological account of its origins. He begins “Of Cannibals” by undermining the distinction, prevalent in the West since the ancient Greeks, between civilization and barbarism. He tells the story of the Greek King Pyrrhus, who was at war with Rome. While he seems to have previously regarded the Romans as barbarians, when he beheld the Roman armies he was forced to recognize that they were nothing of the sort.\textsuperscript{285} Pyrrhus abandons his parochial prejudices only on when forced to do so by the practical exigency of assessing the forces opposing his own. Montaigne thus indicates that it is only when we face the most massive disruption of our ordinary ways of

\textsuperscript{284} Schaefer notes that the final section of the essay indicates that there are circumstances in which disorder makes a non-customary action necessary. He concludes that the conservative message of the essay is intended to conceal a more radical position. Montaigne, according to Schaefer, seeks to inaugurate a new approach to politics organized around the needs of the body rather than those of the soul. See Schaefer, \textit{The Political Philosophy of Montaigne}, 161, 169. This line of argument places Montaigne in a tradition that would later include thinkers like Hobbes and Locke. While this is an important insight, Montaigne’s crucial caveat in “Of Custom” does seem to leave open several senses in which he might take a more conservative position than, say, Locke. It is possible that, even if Montaigne thought that his own time was so disordered that radical change was necessary, under more peaceful conditions the status quo is to be preferred. It is also possible that Montaigne thinks that the necessary changes must be shaped primarily by local conditions, rather than more abstract or universal considerations.

\textsuperscript{285} Michel de Montaigne, I.31, 182.
thinking do we call into question the superiority of our own ways.\textsuperscript{286} He suggests that the most basic evaluative distinction is between “us” and “them.” The detailed prescriptions of any culture depend on the fundamental question of what is ours and what is theirs. Our clothes, our manners, and our habits are assumed to be correct and civilized, while those of others are held to be barbaric. Montaigne put the matter as follows:

\[\ldots\text{each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems that we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. There is always the perfect religion, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things.}\textsuperscript{287}\]

At times, this sort of cultural chauvinism may be straightforward. We deride the foreign as foreign. At other times, however, our cultural parochialism may have a more elaborate disguise. In this passage, Montaigne observes that we regard our religion as the perfect religion. This does not mean, however, that we explicitly assert that it is right because it is ours. Instead, we claim that we believe in a given religion because it is the true religion revealed by God. Custom, then, provides the hidden basis for our beliefs. If we grasp this link, Montaigne suggests, we will have to give up our overwhelming confidence in the rightness of our own ways. If our beliefs and those of others are attributed to the same cause, then we have little reason to assume that ours are any better justified than theirs. Custom, far from providing a

\textsuperscript{286} I take Montaigne to be offering King Pyrrhus as an example of someone who really learned something about the supposed barbarians and, consequently, was led to think of them differently. Zahi Zalloua, on the other hand, has suggested that King Pyrrhus was actually ignoring the distinctiveness of the Romans by acknowledging them only when it became clear that they satisfied Greek standards of military excellence. Zalloua understands Montaigne to be offering us an alternative to Pyrrhus, by trying to avoid assimilating the Brazilian cannibals to European standards. There is little reason, however, to think that Montaigne wants to preserve the “alterity” of the cannibals by suggesting that they cannot be comprehended using European categories. Their two distinctive cultural features, loving their wives deeply and fighting hard, would obviously have been familiar to Europeans. Moreover, Montaigne even compares them to King Leonidas as a way of clarifying the nature of their valor. See Zahi Zalloua, \textit{Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism} (Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 2005), 112.

\textsuperscript{287} Montaigne, I.31, 185.
refuge for those overwhelmed by Montaigne’s skeptical analysis, is shown by it to be dubious. The universal scope which reason and custom claim for themselves is undermined by their fundamental diversity. The fact that philosophers and communities, none obviously better situated than the others from an epistemic point of view, have endorsed such radically different ways of living calls the monist aspiration for one best way of life into question.

The interpretation of Montaigne’s account of custom just offered asserts only that we should not act on the basis of dogmatic assumptions concerning our culture’s superiority. This is a fairly moderate interpretation of his position. As Pierre Manent has argued, however, there is also a much more radical interpretation. While Montaigne’s position sounds conservative, its conservative implications arise from a radical reinterpretation of human life. Manent refers to this as the transition from the agent to the subject. Agency, and especially political action, for Manent, requires evaluations of better and worse. When we act in order to advance a particular end, we do so for a particular set of reasons. Those reasons indicate why the state of affairs at which we aim are preferable to the alternatives. Montaigne, by suggesting a kind of equality of all customs and perhaps even all standards, may undermine agency thus understood. The same objection, it is worthwhile to note, applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Zhuangzi’s “Equalizing Things Discourse.” Manent’s concern is that this leaves us with only the subject understood as a passive locus of bodily experience. As we shall see, there is reason to think that Montaigne endorses a more active view of life than this line of thinking would suggest, but it is important to keep these difficulties in mind as we proceed.

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3.8: The Search for Tranquility

If the claims of reason, religion, and custom, our most obvious sources for guidance, have been called into question, we must find another way of determining how to live. Montaigne posits a form of experiential knowledge that will avoid the difficulties involved with all of these authorities, while doing justice to the varied character of the human world. Its character is highly context dependent, as becomes evident in Montaigne's analysis of the Brazilian community in "Of Cannibals."

As has already been noted, "Of Cannibals" provides one of the earliest and most powerful rejections of ethnocentrism. In the previous section we saw how Montaigne brings to light the common root of our cultural presuppositions, and thus challenges the parochial manner in which we tend to uphold what is our own. While it is easy to see what Montaigne is against in this essay, it is less clear what he is for. The question is how we should look at custom, once we have recognized its contingency. On a relativistic reading, Montaigne believes that the ways of each community are appropriate within that community. Alternatively, we might think that we should put no trust in any given set of custom, because they are all arbitrary. Finally, we might suppose that we should subject custom to rational scrutiny and follow whichever ones, if any, turn out to be reasonable.

Montaigne’s ultimate position integrates various aspects of these three. Like the relativist, he has a great respect for local custom and generally urges conformity to its dictates in practical matters. On the other hand, he also demands that we subject customs to rational scrutiny, as he goes on to do in the bulk of "Of Cannibals." Moreover, as we shall see, his final position leads his reader away from the authority of custom through the cultivation of individual judgment. His final, and extremely complex, position is visible only through an examination of
the teachings of his various essays. The central claim of “Of Cannibals,” however, is simply that we cannot take our own customs as adequate guides for thought and action. In addition to this negative point, however, he also suggests how we might evaluate particular sets of customs.

Montaigne is evidently no relativist, because he criticizes both French and Brazilian customs throughout the essay. Initially he says that “there is nothing barbarous and savage” about the Brazilians, but he later modifies this claim. He concludes that “we may well call these people [the Brazilians] barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves.” This is because “there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling…” Montaigne subjects both European cruelty and Brazilian cruelty, therefore, to the standards of reason. He certainly does not regard cannibalism as reasonable within cannibalistic societies. The comparative reasonableness of Brazilian society is a mark of the unreasonable character of sixteenth century France. He is very far from suggesting that anything goes provided that some culture accepts it. The critical force of “Of Cannibals” depends upon the rejection of relativism.

“Of Cannibals,” however, does more than challenge parochial self-satisfaction. It provides numerous specific judgments on both Brazilian and European customs. Montaigne’s own position is left somewhat elusive, however, as he does not provide a systematic account of

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289 Montaigne, I.31, 189.
290 Ibid.
291 There is some evidence that Montaigne has simply made up at least some of what he tells us about the cannibals. See, for example, Schaefer, The Political Philosophy of Montaigne, 180. This need not change our fundamental interpretation of Montaigne’s central claims in the chapter. That being said, it might influence the credence that we are willing to give those claims. Schaefer, for example, suggests that Montaigne is using the Brazilians to illustrate that even a fairly minimalist set of customs (e.g. the two Brazilian principles) are sufficient to keep a society together (195). If the society described is not real, then it could hardly provide evidence for this claim. Montaigne does seem to suggest, however, that his own community provides ample evidence for this claim, given that some order has remained in spite of the persistence of religious conflict.
what would make a particular set of customs rational. Nonetheless, we can distill some general features of such an account from his praise of the cannibals. When we turn to his discussion of the cannibals themselves, we find not a relativistic position, but instead the claim that Brazilian way of life is naturally superior to the European. Moreover, their superiority is demonstrable even from within the European point of view. Montaigne notes that the cannibals recognize two forms of excellence: martial valor and love for one’s wife. Montaigne draws our attention to the former’s prominence in Western accounts of the good life through discussions of King Leonidas of Sparta and other classical warriors. The latter is commended by the Christian tradition. This might seem to suggest that there are some universal goods that provide the standard for assessing the world’s disparate cultures. Leonidas and the cannibals, on this account, are praiseworthy according to a basic set of evaluative standards that are shared cross-culturally. These standards, one would assume, are readily apparent to everyone.

Ultimately, however, the comparison between Leonidas and the Brazilian warriors seems more rhetorical than substantive. It is intended to chasten his European readers and make them aware of their parochial prejudices. In spite of his praise for Leonidas, Montaigne challenges the worth of martial valor.\textsuperscript{292} He regards the passion for honor through the display of courage as extremely dangerous. To see this, we need only consider his derisive presentation of the causes of the Trojan War, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Throughout the work he decries the strife and bloodshed to which the passion for glory gives rise. It is impossible to believe that he really regards a society dedicated almost entirely to warfare and glory as the highest human possibility.

\textsuperscript{292} In “Of Honorary Awards”, for example, that “military valor” is a virtue that “spreads easily” (335). On Montaigne’s evaluation of martial value, both in itself and as a stage in the development of the idea of virtue, see Schaefer, \textit{The Political Philosophy of Montaigne}, 216-217.
The ideals of the Brazilians described in “Of Cannibals” are not Montaigne’s own. That being said, we should not conclude that his praise of them is purely rhetorical. He indicates that the Brazilians do enjoy a very real peace of mind that is unavailable to most Europeans. This is because their aims are well within their reach. They do not wear themselves out striving after what they cannot obtain. Their basic material needs can easily be satisfied by the ample resources available to them. It will turn out that their psychological needs can also be more readily met. Thus they seem to achieve, at least to a significant degree, what Montaigne takes to be the aim of all philosophy, mental and physical tranquility.

Montaigne’s account of Brazilian life has two parts: the internal relations of the community, and its wars with others. With regard to the first part, he presents it as an idyllic existence, encouraged both by the simplicity of the people’s needs and the abundance around them. The simplicity of Brazilian culture is such that Plato and Lycurgus would have been surprised to see that “our society could be maintained with so little artifice and human solder.”

This is, in part, because they devote no attention to most areas of knowledge, for example “knowledge of letters” and “science of numbers.” Their moral and political ideas are similarly minimalist:

This is a nation, I should say to Plato, in which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship…the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, belittling, pardon—unheard of.”

One might expect that, in the absence of both theoretical and political expertise, the community would be impoverished and disorderly. This is not quite the case. While it is, in a certain sense,

293 Montaigne, I.31, 186.
294 Montaigne, I.31, 186.
295 Montaigne, I.31, 186.
very poor, the available material resources are sufficiently abundant that nobody need go hungry or even notice any deficiency. Montaigne provides a detailed account of their food, drink, housing, and practices. Everything is very simple, but also very much adequate to the needs of this community.

The men, when not engaged in war, are primarily occupied with hunting. The women spend the day preparing a distinctive drink, described as “sweet and a little flat”, which Montaigne claims to have tasted and enjoyed. Old men spend the morning patrolling the common living areas and reminding their neighbors of the communities two demands: that they show valor in war and that they love their wives at home. Aside from the different gender roles, everyone lives virtually the same kind of life. There is little to generate conflict, which is presumably the reason why envy, lying, and so forth never even had to be given a name.

Any claim that the Brazilians enjoy peace of mind may seem dubious, given that they are constantly engaged in warfare and thus put themselves at risk of extremely gruesome death. Montaigne’s claim, however, seems to be that even their violent conflicts produce less psychological turmoil than their European equivalents. Perhaps the Brazilians’ only need that is difficult to satisfy is their desire for honor. Their warfare and accumulation of wives both aim at this target. One would think that these wars are zero sum games in which only the winner gains the desired measure of honor. The dashed hopes of the losers would, presumably, disrupt the tranquility that Montaigne attributes to the Brazilians. This issue seems not to arise for two related reasons. The Brazilians do not believe in retreat. As Montaigne observes, “it is

\[\text{Montaigne, I.31, 187.}\]
\[\text{Montaigne, I.31, 187.}\]
\[\text{This desire seems to motivate their tremendous lust for vengeance. As Manent notes, the contrast between the vengeful and warlike cannibals, who Montaigne presents here as a kind of model, and the Christian practice of forgiving one’s enemies is striking. See Montaigne: La Vie Sans Loi, 216.}\]
astonishing what firmness they show in their combats, which never end but in slaughter and bloodshed; for as to routs and terror, they know nothing of either.” Consequently, it seems that these cannibals never have to return home dejected. They either die in glorious combat or are captured. If they meet the former fate courageously, then they have no reason for shame. Even in the latter case, they can still demonstrate their valor.

The vanquished are eventually consumed by the victors. Up until that time, however, the captors and the captives engage in an elaborate test of fortitude which, in a sense, continues the struggle for honor that began with the combat itself. The captors treat the captives very well, so that they will judge death to be especially terrible by comparison. The captors gain glory if they captives show fear, while the captives receive glory if they remain steadfast. Consequently, the quest for glory can continue up until the point of death. The upshot of all of this is that Brazilian society satisfies universal human needs in a direct way. Montaigne rejects monism because he recognizes that there are many different ways in which these needs can be met.

There are two central claims in the essay. The first is that we have an overwhelming tendency to overvalue our own customs. The second is that Europeans have radically undervalued those of the Brazilians, to the extent that the latter, who enjoy much more tranquility of mind than their Christian counterparts, are regarded as barbarians. The latter claim relates to the former in two ways. The European attitude towards the so called barbarians results from the psychological biases Montaigne explores. Furthermore, even the Brazilians, in spite of

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299 Montaigne, I.31, 188.

300 A good set of customs, this would suggest, tends to produce an orderly set of desires that are consistent with one another. Such customs tend to produce mental tranquility. Levine points out that the Brazilian society seems to lack two important sources of conflict that plague the European context: conflict between private individuals and conflict between public authorities and private individuals. Everything is simple and harmonious. See Levine, Sensual Philosophy, 109.

301 Montaigne, I.31, 191.
the superiority of many of their ways, still live with customs that are in many respects defective. While they may be less cruel than their European counterparts, they are certainly too cruel for Montaigne to endorse their actions. Indeed, it seems that their inferiority with regard to cruelty was largely due to a lack of technique rather than lack of desire. After contact with Europeans, they eagerly adopted advanced Portuguese torture methods. Nonetheless, as things stand they do live better than many of Montaigne’s countrymen. Montaigne’s critical standpoint can do justice to the merits of a culture without recommending it categorically.

3.9: Experience as a Standard for Thought and Action

Montaigne’s own standards of judgment remain elusive. He wishes to distinguish himself from those who assume knowledge of universal ethical or religious truths. As we have seen, however, he also rejects relativism. His own criteria are rooted in experience, the nature of which he explores in his final essay. While experience is in some way tied to judgment, he presents it in contradistinction to reason. He begins by observing that, “there is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge.” If we cannot use reason to satisfy this desire, he suggests, “we use experience...which is a weaker and less dignified means.” While he does not make it entirely clear at this stage, Montaigne’s discussion of experience in this essay suggests that the kind of reason that he rejects here is largely a priori in its methods and universalistic in the scope of its claims. The dogmatic views about God and the soul discussed in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond” are Montaigne’s most obvious examples of the abuse of reason. Whereas the classical philosophers, at least as conventionally understood, derived their teachings on the best way of life from such claims, Montaigne searches for a standard that is more limited in scope. He aims to assess himself, his friends, and his countrymen, locating what

302 Montaigne, I.31, 188.
303 Montaigne, III.13, 992.
is best for each one, rather than subordinating that assessment to a more general statement about the universe. As “Of Experience” reveals, taking experience as our guide involves reflection on our individual characteristics and desires, as well as the particular features of the situations we confront. The reasoned examination of experience provides objective, albeit highly situational, standards of judgment. It is not simply a matter of personal preference. If we do not attend to experience carefully, we may be mistaken about what is good for us. Montaigne’s experiential reason, therefore, is not universalistic or dogmatic, but neither is it relativistic or nihilistic. The delicate balance involved here is tied to the need for thorough and honest self-examination.

Because individuals are particular, experiential knowledge is particular. Montaigne has access to facts about his own life that are not possessed by anyone else. This does not, however, mean that we cannot judge the situations of others. Montaigne remarks that he often understands his friends better than they understand themselves, presumably because of his careful attention to their particularities, and also states that he could have been a great advisor to a king if he were simply allowed to observe and advise.

The case for experience overlaps with the case against reason. Because our grandiose attempts to find widely applicable general truths about the world are destined to fail, we require a more modest source of guidance. The critique of reason found in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” is extended in “Of Experience.” The central theme of the latter essay is the heterogeneity of the world in general and human affairs in particular. In treating this theme, Montaigne examines a baffling array of issues and phenomena: epistemology, law, medicine, food, defecation, sex, death, and more. His central claim, however, is that any attempt to draw grand generalizations in a heterogeneous world will inevitably lead to injustice and unhappiness, because it involves an attempt to stifle the world’s permanent diversity.
Much of the preceding analysis has been concerned with the negative or critical aspect of Montaigne’s position. He shows that the monistic claims generated by religion, philosophy, and custom cannot be taken as our guides, given the diversity of human experiences. That effort would be useless, and perhaps depressing, if he had no positive teaching to offer. In the remainder of this chapter, I will turn to his account of experience, which is his positive standard and the alternative to reason, custom, and religion. Because a mode of judgment that is founded on experience mirrors the diversity of the self and the world more generally, it leaves one free to respond spontaneously to the contingent situations in which one finds oneself.

As R.A. Sayce has noted, Montaigne uses the term “experience” in at least three distinct ways: the “act of experiencing, long experience, [and] experiment.” Indeed, these various senses are closely related to one another. He is attuned to his basic sensory and emotional life, as documented at great length in “Of Experience.” Over time, such efforts provide him with a stockpile of experience in the second sense, which he uses to figure out the life that is most appropriate given his distinctive needs. Finally, as Erich Auerbach observes, he seeks to observe himself “under as many different experimental conditions as possible, for in this way one may hope to determine the limits of possible changes and thus finally arrive at a comprehensive picture.”

Experience is justified as a standard partially by the failures of the alternatives (religion, reason, custom), but it is also uniquely appropriate given the nature of human beings and the

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304 While experience is opposed to these alternatives as an ultimate standard, it in no way rules out, for example, going along with particular religious or customary practices.
305 Sayce, 179.
306 Auerbach, 291. Auerbach’s way of putting this point makes Montaigne sound like a forerunner of the modern natural sciences. David Lewis Schaefer (1990) develops an argument on which Montaigne is in fact the progenitor of the scientific revolution. Charles Taylor (1989), on the other hand, emphasizes the ways in which Montaigne’s treatment of the self is different than those of more scientifically inclined thinkers such as Descartes and Locke.
world. Montaigne explains the relationship between his method and his subject at the outset of his essay “Of Repentance.” He contrasts himself with those who “form Man” by noting that he merely aims to “sketch a picture of one who is very badly formed.” He claims that “the brushstrokes of my portrait do not go awry even though they do change and vary.” He explains that his portrait thus matches the world:

The world is but a perennial see-saw. Everything in it—the land, the mountains of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—all waver with a common motion and on their own. Constancy itself is nothing but a more languid rocking to and fro. I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming: not the passage from one to another… but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must adapt this account of myself to the passing hour. I shall perhaps change soon, not accidentally but intentionally. This is a register of varied and changing occurrences, of ideas which are unresolved and, when needs be, contradictory, either because I myself become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subjects. So I may happen to contradict myself but, as Demades said, I never contradict the truth. If my soul could only find a footing I would not be assaying myself but resolving myself. But my soul is ever in its apprenticeship and being tested. I am expounding a lowly, lackluster existence. You can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life just as well as to one of richer stuff. Every man bears the whole form of the human condition (Screech trans.).

Auerbach observes that the logic of Montaigne’s defense of his procedure can be understood as a syllogism: “I describe myself; I am a creature which constantly changes; ergo the description too must conform to this and constantly change.”307 The major premise, Auerbach goes on to argue, relies on several different implicit contrasts: forming men versus telling of a man, the men formed versus the man Montaigne describes (himself).308 The minor premise is explicated by noting the changes that prevail everywhere in the world, and which must also therefore affect Montaigne himself.309 The evidence supporting the major and minor premises is found

307 Auerbach, 287.
308 Auerbach, 288.
309 Auerbach, 289.
throughout the essays. Montaigne provides copious documentation of the variety of human customs and human experiences, several of which have already been discussed.

The syllogism itself establishes only that Montaigne’s method is appropriate for the study of its subject. An accurate presentation of Montaigne need not have any broader significance. Perhaps he is simply an idiosyncratic individual whose experiences are different than those of other people. He goes on to claim, however, that “every man bears the form of the whole human condition.” This statement is rather puzzling, given what precedes it. At the very least, it is not obvious how Montaigne knows that his own experience is representative of a more general “human condition.”

Furthermore, if one does grant that every person’s experience is representative in this way, one might wonder why representing diversity is so important to Montaigne’s method. Montaigne obviously places great importance, as this passage indicates, on presenting *himself* as a unique object of study. If he is just one instance of universal humanity, it would seem that he could simply outline the universal features that everyone shares, and then let his readers figure out how they manifest those features. The problem is that Montaigne’s approach is justifiable only if human nature is, in some sense, universal, but human experiences are also diverse at some very fundamental level.

Montaigne does not define precisely the common thread running through his varied uses of the word “experience,” although given his comments in “Of Experience” it must form the epistemological foundation for all of his investigations. Here we might consider Alan Levine’s observation that Montaigne believes that we can obtain a kind of “phenomenological knowledge.”310 This is, indeed, what Montaigne seems to have in mind when he refers to

310 Levine, 5.
experience as an alternative to reason. It involves what is directly accessible to us, the ordinary workings of our bodies and minds, rather than the generalizations of theologians and philosophers. This is in keeping with the subject matter of “Of Experience.” There, Montaigne declares that “I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics.”

His investigation is focused largely on his emotions and his bodily functions, for example anger and pain. Here we can see why knowledge of such things may be attainable in the absence of universal knowledge. Even if Montaigne does not know whether or not Aristotle’s account of anger is correct, he at least knows what it is like for him to experience anger. He puts the point as follows:

I would rather be an authority on myself than on Cicero. In the experience I have of myself I find enough to make me wise, if I were a good scholar. He who calls back to mind the excess of his past anger, and how far this fever carried him away, sees the ugliness of this passion better than in Aristotle, and conceives a more justified hatred for it. He who remembers the evils he has undergone, and those that have threatened him, and the slight causes that have changed him from one state to another, prepares himself in that way for future changes and for recognizing his condition (1001).

The person who recalls his own anger understands its full force, by recollecting what it was like to be in its grip. The richness of the reflection, then, is far greater than it would be in reading an abstract philosophical work. Moreover, he comes to understand the place of anger within his own life. He can then recognize what has made him angry and also the costs that were incurred. This indicates that experiential knowledge is not simply knowledge of what an experience felt like. It is also a knowledge of causes and effects, albeit within a clearly circumscribed domain. Although Montaigne believes that we are constantly undergoing change, there is apparently not

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311 Ibid.
so much change that we cannot use reflection on our past errors in order to improve our future conduct.

Montaigne immediately follows these lines, however, with a restatement of the claim discussed earlier from “Of Repentance.” There, he claimed that “every man bears the form of the whole human condition,” and here argues as follows:

The life of Caesar has no more to show us than our own; an emperor’s or an ordinary man’s, it is still a life subject to all human accidents. Let us only listen: we tell ourselves all we most need.”^312

The claim that our own life is sufficient for knowledge is not, if one accepts the arguments that Montaigne has made thus far, the difficult part to accept. If the operations of, say, anger are somewhat different in each person, then it would be foolish to infer that Caesar’s anger has some privileged role in telling us about our own. To the contrary, studying Caesar might well mislead us.

Accepting this line of reasoning, however, would seem to lead us not to Montaigne’s conclusion about the universality of the “human condition” and “human accidents,” but rather to its opposite. It would seem to suggest that anger is fundamentally particular, in such a way that by studying myself I learn about *my own* anger rather than that of Caesar. Montaigne elsewhere seems to make this suggestion himself. In one famous passage, Montaigne attacks Bodin for doubting a story reported by Plutarch concerning ancient Sparta. Plutarch reports that a Spartan boy stole a fox and hid it under his cloak. When he came across another person, he was so eager to conceal his crime that he allowed the fox to rip his stomach apart rather than let it be seen. Bodin doubts that a human being would be able to endure this, but Montaigne believes that it is in keeping with Spartan fortitude. He remarks, in his “Defense of Seneca and Plutarch,” that

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^312 Montaigne, III.13, 1001.
“there was nothing, according to their custom, in which their reputation was more concerned, or for which they had more blame and shame to suffer, than being caught stealing.” Montaigne goes on to say that, because he is “steeped in the greatness of those people” the story does not seem to him “even rare and strange.”

What he seems to be suggesting here is that, in order to judge whether or not the events described by Plutarch are possible, we must know something about what the Spartans were like. If we assume that they would respond to such a situation as we would, then we will fail to judge accurately. This line of argument, however, depends on the idea that our own experience is not a decisive standard for judging other “human accidents.” Just because I could not handle being ripped apart by a fox, it does not mean that a Spartan child could not.

What needs to be explained has now become somewhat clearer. We need some way of understanding how our individual experience gives us knowledge of “all human accidents,” but in a way that does not assume that all others are fundamentally like us in their motives, actions, etc. We obviously cannot suppose that introspection gives us special insight into the details of Spartan culture. Nonetheless, we might learn introspectively that the Spartan way of life is possible, if our introspective efforts show that human lives are fundamentally variable. Perhaps, for example, our resistance comes primarily from a confusion between our own habits, inculcated through custom, and human nature itself. As Montaigne remarks, “we must not judge what is possible and what is not, according to what is credible and incredible to our sense” and

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313 Montaigne, II.32, 664.
314 Montaigne, II.32, 664. Ann Hartle (2003) calls attention to Montaigne’s claim that peasants in his own day endured, because of the religious wars, physical suffering that approaches that described by Plutarch (21). This might make Plutarch’s claim more plausible to Montaigne and others who lived through the Wars of Religion. This does not, however, remove the difficulty that I am exploring here. If one’s own experience does not include such feats of fortitude then one might doubt Montaigne’s story, which will reinforce one’s doubt towards Plutarch’s story, and so on.
some tend to “balk at believing about others what they themselves could not do—or would not.” As we come to see that our own customs are not simply natural, we recognize that other ways of living might be radically different. While “it seems to each man that the ruling pattern of nature is in him,” this is a mistake.315 We have, for Montaigne, a given set of individual tendencies and capacities, or a “ruling pattern,” but we should not assume that it is the natural human pattern that governs all.

If experiential knowledge was simply knowledge that things change, it would have little practical use in our lives. It might help us to avoid various dogmatic errors, but it would not give us any positive insights on how we should act. There is, however, something more than this. In studying ourselves, we recognize certain general motives. Montaigne describes many of these in the *Essays* generally, and in “Of Experience” in particular. The passage discussed earlier notes that we learn more about anger from studying ourselves than from studying Aristotle. This presupposes that anger is not just an individual quirk, but instead a general human passion. Its workings will differ across different people, but not so much that we cannot recognize that the same passion is at work.

This similarity in spite of difference is also evident in Montaigne’s essay, mentioned above, discussing Plutarch. In that essay, he explains his own stance towards the stories he hears as follows:

> For my part, I consider some men very far above me, especially among the ancients; and although I clearly recognize my inability to follow them with my steps, I do not fail to follow them with my eyes and judge the powers that raise them so high, of which I perceive in some degree the seeds in me, as I do also of the extreme baseness of some minds, which does not astonish me and which I do not disbelieve either.316

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315 Montaigne, II.32, 665.
316 Montaigne, II.32, 665.
This suggests that the basic human concerns are fundamentally similar.\footnote{317} The use of plant metaphors such as seeds as sprouts has been widespread in both China and Europe. What is distinctive about Montaigne’s use, however, is that it is decidedly non-teleological. We have the seeds of various possibilities within us, and there is no authoritative or natural way in which they should develop.

If we return to the story of the Spartan boy who stole the fox, the way in which this might work becomes clearer. Montaigne remarks, regarding the Spartans, that “there was nothing, according to their custom, in which their reputation was more concerned, or for which they had more blame and shame to suffer, than being caught stealing.”\footnote{318} While some of Montaigne’s contemporaries might find the whole story ridiculous, they should be able to recognize many features that render it intelligible. The boy in question was willing to be mauled in order to maintain his reputation, and this was because of the particular customs of Sparta. The Essays, and “Of Custom and “Of Cannibals” in particular, certainly help readers to see, through reflection on their own lives, that custom is decisive, and that “habit is a second nature, and no less powerful.”\footnote{319} Thus, the readers should be willing to admit that custom might, given its enormous influence over human action, lead others to act quite differently than ourselves.\footnote{320}

\footnote{317} The metaphor that links our basic capacities for human excellence with seeds is a recurrent one that has been often invoked in Western moral and political thought, as Maryanne Cline Horowitz has argued. See Maryanne Cline Horowitz, Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). There is also a similarity between this metaphor and what, in the Chinese tradition, Mencius refers to as the “sprouts” (duan) of humanity.

\footnote{318} Montaigne, II.32, 664.

\footnote{319} Montaigne, III.10, 939.

\footnote{320} Sue Farquhar reads the fox story and Montaigne’s own tale of peasant fortitude as part of Montaigne’s attempt to demonstrate the limits of a ruler’s authority. Her claim is that, on Montaigne’s view, the power to resist is always there no matter how much power the ruler appears to have. See Sue W. Farquhar, “On Civility: The Model of Sparta in Montaigne’s “Defense de Seneca et de Plutarque,” French Literature Series 33 (2006): 33-50, 42-43.
Moreover, the psychology suggested by the *Essays* places great weight on the force of reputation, to which it ascribes much of virtue. As David Lewis Schaefer has argued, there is good reason to think that Montaigne regards the concern for reputation as the great motive for classical virtue.\(^{321}\) As we shall see in Chapter V, Montaigne finds it at the root of the French Wars of Religion as well. He evidently believes that the reader who pays careful attention to his or her own experience will quickly find that he is not free of a concern for reputation. Insofar as the essays expose that concern, which often operates unrecognized, it also tends to undermine it. Nonetheless, the reader should be able to see that the twin forces of custom and reputation could easily motivate quite extreme conduct.

As we have seen, experience teaches us, on Montaigne’s view, both the variability of human ways of living and a set of core concerns that motivate human action across times and places. These kinds of knowledge, however, remain largely negative, in the sense that what we know is that a wide range of possibilities are open to human beings. Montaigne, however, claims that his knowledge would allow him to serve as an advisor to a king, and he in fact worked in that capacity, so he must believe that we can know something more than this. Our awareness of diversity and of our own intellectual limitations must be conjoined with substantive experience of the world. Montaigne remarks on his own attitude towards the story of the Spartan boy by observing that he is “so steeped in the greatness of those people” that it not only does “not seem incredible to me, as it does to Bodin, but I do not find it even rare and strange.”\(^{322}\) The Spartans have developed the various human capacities in a particular way, and Montaigne is familiar with it through his study of the ancient world. The awareness that people live quite


\(^{322}\) Montaigne, II.32, 664.
differently while sharing basic human capacities should lead us to investigate the ways in which those capacities were developed by a particular community or individual.

Learning from experience, therefore, points us towards the study of other ways of living and thinking. We cannot judge rightly if we are overconfident in our own habits of thought, but we must also gain genuine familiarity with the particular features of individuals and communities. Montaigne certainly attempted to gain this kind of familiarity through his own investigations. As the Essays demonstrate, Montaigne was intimately familiar with the literature, ancient and modern, available in his own place and time. Moreover, he sought to investigate other communities and ways of living in his own travels. Montaigne’s skepticism encourages empirical studies.\(^{323}\)

\(^{323}\) David Lewis Schaefer has suggested that Montaigne is not only interested in gathering empirical information, he is also a proto-natural scientist. Schaefer supports this claim with reference to Montaigne’s comments on the importance of health and the need to gather medical knowledge to protect it. Schaefer demonstrates convincingly that Montaigne is concerned with gathering information about physical wellbeing, that such information must be assembled in an orderly way, and that such inquiries will require a community of inquirers. See The Political Philosophy of Montaigne, pp. 117-125. Hugo Friedrich (1991), on the other hand, argues that Montaigne’s “view of the world is heraclitic,” and thus involves too much uncertainty and flux to ground science as it would come to be understood (139). In support of this claim, he points to a passage in which Montaigne notes that Copernicus’ view is just one of many such views, and thus that it will eventually be supplanted by something new (140). In other words, Montaigne encourages us to see Copernicus’ view, his predecessors’, and his successors’ positions as all, in some sense, equal. Schaefer, however, suggests that Montaigne believes that this insight is compatible with the idea that the competing perspectives can be judged according to the criterion of utility (125). The dispute hinges, in large part, on the question of whether or not some set of laws or generalizations, scientific or otherwise, are useful across a broad range of contexts. Schaefer seems to think that Montaigne believes that there are such laws, while Friedrich’s Montaigne denies that. Levine argues that Montaigne, “unlike Bacon, Descartes, and the other modern natural scientists…does not try to reduce everything—including human phenomena—to one simple substance.” Levine, Sensual Philosophy, 128.

Schaefer’s view seems to attribute a pragmatic approach to science to Montaigne, in the sense that theories are evaluated on the basis of their practical usefulness. Usefulness here would be interpreted as that which encourages pleasure. It is not entirely clear, however, that Montaigne views pleasure as a homogenous entity that can be quantitatively measured in order to provide such assessments.
Such investigations are not, for Montaigne, pursued for the sake of knowledge considered in the abstract. They are, instead, necessary to determine the particular ways in which individuals and communities can flourish. While our needs share certain general features, most importantly peace and freedom, both mental and physical, they will be manifested in different ways in different lives and different cultures. He accepts, therefore, that the best course of action in a particular situation is in this respect relative to a given context, individual or cultural.

At the same time, however, he is an anti-relativist in two distinct senses. First, as we have already seen, he believes that human understanding as such can grasp the full range of possible human ways of living, given the relevant inquiries. Second, he indicates that the fact of diversity among human phenomena, rightly understood, itself provides a form of guidance, albeit a limited one, for life. This is because that diversity cannot be fully captured within any philosophical, cultural, or religious system. While rules or general accounts of human practices may, in some circumstances, be useful, what is far more important is free judgment. Consequently, we have reason to engage in self-exploration and to cultivate the intellectual humility that will make this possible. This is how we come to know ourselves and how we recognize the ways in which to best satisfy our particular needs. We also have reason, on his view, to prefer freedom to constraint, because it permits us to pursue our varied aims without impediment. The political consequences of this preference for freedom will be developed further in Chapter VI.

324 One of the themes of “Of Experience” is that judgement cannot be replaced by more and more explicit statements. He ridicules, for example, those who seek to interpret a text by means of another text’s interpretation, and that text by another text, ad infinitum. This does not, however, mean that he thinks that language is of no use. The point is simply that understanding the text will ultimately depend on a form of judgment that is not itself dependent on some further interpretive text. This should not be taken to mean, contrary to the suggestion of some deconstructionist readings of Montaigne, that he regards meaning as fundamentally indeterminate.
Montaigne’s experiential thinking promises to improve the lives of his readers on many different dimensions. It can help us to recognize the particular needs bequeathed to us by the interactions of our local customs, our individual proclivities, and the habits that have been created by both. It allows us to guide our lives in a more modest manner, once we have given up our metaphysical pretensions. Indeed, if Montaigne is to be believed, this new way of thinking helps us with everything from dealing with our anger issues to improving our digestion. For many, however, concerns such as these pale in comparison to more existential ones, most importantly the fear of death.

Montaigne’s experiential reasoning prepares one for a life of freedom. It is, at its core, linked to the recognition of the heterogeneous character of the world and of our lives, and it helps us to respond effectively to these diverse conditions. As Montaigne will argue, the paralyzing fear of death is among the foremost obstacles to freedom thus conceived. In “To philosophize is to learn to die” he makes the following declaration:

> premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom. He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint. There is nothing evil in life for the man who has thoroughly grasped the fact that to be deprived of life is not an evil. 

For this reason, we can take Montaigne’s confrontation with the human fear of death as the decisive test of his experiential philosophical method, considered as a means for preserving human freedom.

### 3.10: Achieving Freedom: The Fear of Death

Montaigne is preoccupied with death throughout the essays. This does not, of course, make him unique within the philosophical tradition. The title of his first thematic exploration of death, “That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die,” is drawn from Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*,

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325 Montaigne, I.20, 72.
which in turn draws on Plato’s *Phaedo*. Moreover, the links between the content of that essay and the thought of ancient predecessors such as Lucretius and Seneca is often commented upon.\(^{326}\) As we shall see, however, Montaigne does not simply repeat Stoic or Epicurean doctrines concerning death. Instead, his position on death is an encapsulation of the rest of his thought.

If we consider Montaigne’s various claims concerning death, it becomes apparent that he is advancing a novel position. He is arguing that death cannot be grasped through abstract reason alone. It must, instead, be comprehended through a personal confrontation with one’s own mortality. Nothing less can alleviate the fears that inevitably plague mortal life. There are at least two closely related reasons for this. First, the inevitability of death is a consequence of the inevitable decay of our particular bodies. It is, for this reason, highly particular. Only reflection on our own experience, therefore, can provide us with the assurances necessary to live at peace with our fate. Second, classical philosophy leads us away from the particularity of the body towards the universality of reason. Montaigne’s major statements on death, in this way, not only modify the classical views on the matter, but actually seek to demonstrate the decisive superiority of his mode of philosophizing to the classical one.

Arriving at an adequate interpretation of Montaigne’s views on death requires an examination of varied material composed at different stages of his career. As Hugo Friedrich has noted, if we want to understand his position we must examine not only the essays that are primarily devoted to the theme, but also “about twenty further Essays and his countless other approaches to this subject in passing.”\(^{327}\) Furthermore, in addition to the *Essays*, we also have a

\(^{326}\) See, for example, Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 265.  
long letter written to his father describing in great detail the death of his closest friend, Étienne de La Boétie.

According to the evolutionary reading of Montaigne’s thought pioneered by Pierre Villey, his earliest comprehensive statement on the matter in “That to philosophize is to learn how to die” affirms a Stoic position, while his later essays are transformed by a skeptical crisis that he supposedly underwent. In Book I, “That to philosophize…” suggests that philosophical reflection on the general features of death is the primary means of eliminating its terrors. Book II contains a second major statement on death, “Of Practice,” which is based primarily on an account of his own brush with death, while Book III contains a reconsideration that urges us to accept the natural attitude towards death manifested by peasants, who give little thought to the matter and are none the worse off.

As this brief summary indicates, there are certainly significant differences both in subject matter and attitude across the three books that constitute the Essays. This provides a kind of prima facie case for Villey’s evolutionary view. As David Lewis Schaeffer has demonstrated, however, even the earliest treatment, “To philosophize…,” contains ideas that are more fully developed in the later essays. Moreover, even Montaigne’s later emphasis on simplicity and the salutary effects of simply not thinking about death are prefigured earlier in the text.

To fully address the evolutionary thesis and the criticisms that have been directed against it would require a lengthy examination of Montaigne’s statements on death which, as Friedrich emphasizes, are scattered widely across the text. We can, however, sidestep these debates to a

329 David Lewis Schaeffer, The Political Philosophy of Montaigne, 289-312.
330 David Lewis Schaefer, The Political Philosophy of Montaigne, 290. Hugo Friedrich also points out that Montaigne emphasizes that death is simply a natural and inevitable change. See Friedrich, 268.
certain extent. Regardless of whether Montaigne ever truly believed the quasi-Stoic position developed in “To philosophize…,” or whether, as Schaefer suggests, he subtly undermined that position, there is no doubt that the later essays are an explicit rejection of that view. Whether or not Montaigne is criticizing his own earlier Seneca-like rationalism, or just Seneca’s rationalism, the basic philosophical issues are the same. I will, therefore, proceed by attempting to clarify Montaigne’s reasons for rejecting the Stoic position, and perhaps that of classical philosophy more generally, primarily through a comparison of “To philosophize is to know how to die” and two other crucial essays on death, “Of Practice” and “Of Physiognomy.”

*That To Philosophize is to Know How to Die*

It is unsurprising that “To philosophize…” has been understood as an endorsement of various classical, particularly Stoic and Epicurean, views on death. As already noted, the title has a Ciceronian and, ultimately, Platonic origin. Moreover, the text is full of comments on death drawn from various classical sources. What is most important for our purposes, however, is that the essay reflects a thoroughgoing effort to use reason to defeat the fear of death. Rather than focusing on the experiential features of death, he encourages us to reflect often on its general features: notably its inevitability, the impossibility of truly encountering it in lived experience, and so forth.

Montaigne begins by offering two interpretations of the claim found in the title. On the first interpretation, “study and contemplation draw our soul out of us to some extent and keep it busy outside the body; which is a sort of apprenticeship and semblance of death.” On the second interpretation, “all wisdom and reasoning in the world boils down finally to this point: to teach us not to be afraid to die.”\(^\text{331}\) These seem less like contradictory interpretations than two

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\(^{331}\) Montaigne, I.20, 67.
different kinds of claims about the relationship between philosophy and death. The first explains how philosophy prepares us to death, the second explains the motive from which we might pursue that project. That being said, he ultimately affirms some version of the second, while rejecting the use of the first. His argument, which must be understood through the consideration of all three major essays on death, casts doubt on whether the abstractions of reason, and the philosophical efforts to liberate soul from body, can ever really deal with the embodied experience of our own mortality.

He goes on to argue that everyone believes that pleasure is the human end, and that consequently “the dissensions of the philosophical sects in this matter are merely verbal.” Montaigne suggests that virtue, as taught by these philosophers, is desirable to the extent that it produces pleasure. Philosophy thus conceived has a natural interest in death, because “among the principal benefits of virtue is disdain for death, a means that furnishes our life with a soft tranquility and gives us a pure and pleasant enjoyment of it, without which all other pleasures are extinguished.” Montaigne goes on to describe powerfully the ways in which people are made miserable by the thought of death. This fear reaches the point that people seek to avoid directly speaking of death at all. While Montaigne realizes that he may yet have decades to live, he also notes that many of his friends are already dead and that freak accidents can take place at any moment (70-71). In this way, he indicates that one can never truly consider oneself far from death.

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332 Montaigne, I.20, 67.
333 Montaigne, I.20, 68.
334 Montaigne, I.20, 69.
It is particularly noteworthy that Montaigne, in spite of his professed Catholicism, never suggests or discusses the numerous available Christian responses to the fear of death. He does not appeal to the afterlife or divine judgment. Montaigne himself, according to his contemporary Estienne Pasquier, heard a mass and received the last rites from a priest shortly before he died.\footnote{This is reported in one of Pasquier’s letters. See Friedrich, 299.} It is all the more striking, therefore, that he does not urge his readers to seek such consolations in any of these three major statements on death. This omission can hardly be accidental. His letter to his father describing the death of Étienne de La Boétie does include a description of the relevant religious rituals. The most reasonable explanation of the omissions elsewhere, therefore, is that he simply did not regard the consolations of religion as particularly effective means for extirpating the fear of death.

Montaigne, in “To philosophize…,” does briefly considers another possibility that he will, in “Of Physiognomy,” take much more seriously and even endorse. He imagines an interlocutor suggesting that the most important thing is just not to worry so much about death.\footnote{Montaigne, I.20, 71.} “Of Physiognomy” will suggest that this is the basic attitude of peasants, who supposedly enjoy a healthier and more natural relationship to death. Here, however, he responds that it is not reasonable to hope that we will get through life without having to worry about death:

> When it comes, either to them or their wives, children, or friends, surprising them unprepared and defenseless, what torments, what cries, what frenzy, what despair overwhelms them! Did you ever see anything so dejected, so changed, so upset?\footnote{Montaigne, I.20, 71.}

In order to avoid these miseries, which he suggests are the result of being surprised by the prospect of death, we must “provide for this earlier.”\footnote{Montaigne, I.20, 71.} As he puts it, “we must be always
booted and ready to go, so far as it is in our power." Montaigne, the crucial ingredient in human freedom. An absence of preparation means that we can be thrown into a state of abject misery at any moment by an event that will surely come sooner or later. He praises an Egyptian custom of bringing in a skeleton during feasts, in order to remind the revelers of their upcoming demise. This is part of his effort to develop “take an entirely different way” of approaching death:

Let us rid it of its strangeness, come to know it, get used to it. Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death…At the stumbling of a horse, the fall of a tile, the slightest pin prick, let us promptly chew on this: Well, what if it were death itself?

Having stated this intention, Montaigne proceeds to gather together many different descriptions of death and pieces of advice concerning death found in classical literature. He has already claimed that we have every reason to suppose that death is near at hand. He recites examples of various contemporaries, including his own brother, the victim of a freak tennis accident, who died prematurely. To heighten our awareness of death’s inevitability and proximity, he provides numerous quotations on the subject from various classical authors, among them Horace, Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid. At this point, Montaigne seems to be in broad agreement with those who initially made the claim invoked in the essay’s title, Socrates and Cicero, at least in the sense that all agree on the necessity of dealing with death through deliberate reflection.

Montaigne’s Near Death Experience

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339 Montaigne, I.20, 71.
340 David Lewis Schaefer notes that Montaigne’s initial praise of this practice and his understanding of the original Egyptian rationale are not entirely congruent. Schaefer argues that Montaigne eventually indicates that the Egyptians brought out the skeleton as a spur to sensual pleasure, rather than serious thought about the pervasive threat of death. See Schaefer, The Political Philosophy of Montaigne, 291.
341 Montaigne, I.20, 72.
342 Montaigne, I.20, 71.
343 Montaigne, I.20, 71-74.
Montaigne’s other two major statements on death, “Of Practice” and “Of Physiognomy,” contain two crucial departures from the initial statement of his position. First, they move from a rationalistic to an experience-based method of addressing the problem. Second, they move from the idea that death is best addressed through constant reflection to the claim that death is a rather simple matter that requires little premeditation. The first of these shifts may have been catalyzed by the personal experience of grave bodily injury and unconsciousness described by Montaigne in “Of Practice.”

Montaigne begins “Of Practice” by defending the value of personal experience in guiding conduct. He asserts that “reasoning and education” alone are insufficient, because they will fail “when it comes time for action.” It is not entirely clear whether or not the failure involved is one of motivation or knowledge. Be that as it may, Montaigne observes that this presents a special problem for our understanding of death. He points out that many philosophers have sought to experience in advance various ills, such as poverty, that might befall them, for the sake of preparation. This is obviously impossible in the case of death. Nonetheless, Montaigne argues, there are experiences that we can undergo which are quite close to death:

There is a certain way of familiarizing ourselves with death and trying it out to some extent. We can have an experience of it that is, if not entire and perfect, at least not useless, and that makes us more fortified and assured.

Montaigne mentions two ways in which we might do this. First, he notes that many reasonably take drifting into sleep as being in some way analogous to death. He suggests that the experience

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344 Schaefer suggests that the story itself may be pure fiction. This may be the case, although I do not see any decisive reason for thinking so. He does mention that he is uncertain of whether it occurred during the second or third civil war that erupted, but this could easily be a joke about the prevalence of conflict.
345 Montaigne, II.6, 324.
346 Montaigne, II.6, 324.
347 Montaigne, II.6, 325.
of drifting happily in and out of sleep may be nature’s way “to accustom us to it [death] and take away our fear of it.”

He does not dwell on the case of sleep, however, and quickly moves on to his own near death experience. It occurred one day during one of the religious wars when he was riding a small horse near his estate. An employee of his, riding a much larger horse, collided with him at a high speed while trying to impress some observers. As a result of the collision, Montaigne was thrown from his horse and suffered massive injuries. Nobody was able to revive him, so his companions assumed that he was dead and carried him back to his home. It turned out that they were in error, and Montaigne gradually regained awareness after having thrown up a large quantity of blood. He describes his experience as follows:

It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, but in truth not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling people have who let themselves slide into sleep.

Montaigne found himself only tenuously connected to his surroundings and even to his physical injuries. He claims that this confirms a view that he already held, according to which those who are dying are not conscious of their words, their physical movements, and so forth. This supports his conclusion that death need not be feared, because the experience of dying is far less painful than it might appear.

Pierre Manent has observed that Montaigne’s experience here confirmed his belief in “what we would call psycho-physiological parallelism” or the view that “the life of the soul

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348 Montaigne, II.6, 325.
349 Montaigne, II.6, 327.
350 Montaigne, II.6, 328.
increases and decreases along with the life of the body. This might appear to be a terrifying conclusion, insofar as it suggests that the soul is annihilated along with the body. With regard to the process of dying, however, it comes as a relief to Montaigne. This is because the self turns out to be less present at such times, and therefore is less able to suffer. In the final essay, “Of Experience,” Montaigne makes the following remarks:

The last death will be all the less complete and painful; by then it will kill only a half or a quarter of a man. Here it is a tooth that has just fallen out, without pain, without effort; that was the natural term of its duration. Both that part of my being and several others are already dead, others half dead, even some of the most active, which held the highest rank in my vigorous prime. Thus do I melt and slip away from myself. How stupid it would be of my mind if it were to feel the last leap of this decline, which is already so far advanced, as acutely as if it were the whole fall. I hope this will not happen.

This passage suggests that Montaigne’s general thesis about the link between the body and the soul is evident not only at extreme moments such as his accident, but also in the process of aging itself.

It is important to note two crucial change in the way in which Montaigne approaches death in “Of Practice” in relation to “To philosophize…”. First, he is now concerned with what it would be like for a particular person, namely himself, to die, rather than with the human phenomenon of death generally. Second, and this is a consequence of the first point, he is concerned with grasping the subjective experience of death rather than its general features. Taken together, these features mark an important departure from the approach suggested by Socrates in the Phaedo.

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352 Montaigne, III.13, 1030. It is striking that, although Montaigne claims that the process described is an aspect of God’s mercy, he says nothing at all about the more conventional comforts that God might offer us in the face of death.
Manent has noted that Plato’s teaching aimed, at least explicitly, to help the soul become free of bodily entanglements, while Montaigne is most concerned with his own embodied experience. The turn towards bodily experience raises some crucial questions about his relationship to his readers and the reasonableness of drawing general conclusions on the basis of his particular experience. Suppose that his experience was precisely as he describes it. Can we infer, purely on the basis of the evidence provided, that we should not fear death? Montaigne’s experience could be particular to him, or to the precise sort of injuries that he suffered. In his last comprehensive statement on death, Book III’s “Of Physiognomy,” he explores two other exemplars who support his own experience of the naturalness of death: ordinary peasants and Socrates.

*Of Physiognomy*

Montaigne’s final comprehensive statement on death is found in the penultimate essay, “Of Physiognomy.” There Montaigne develops the turn towards experience suggested in “Of Practice,” and decisively leaves behind the more abstract philosophical attempts to grapple with death that were explored in “To Philosophize is to Learn how to Die.” He suggests that we can learn how to die from nature, without the outside assistance of any text or thinker. He extends the earlier analysis, however, by noting that, in spite of what some philosophical accounts might lead us to believe, ordinary people are naturally equipped to confront death in a completely adequate manner.

He begins with a concern that was stated at the outset of “Of Practice,” and which takes on a greater and greater significance in the final essays. In that earlier essay, he drew a contrast between what we know through reason and what we know through experience. Here he draws a

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353 Manent (2012), 314.
related distinction between what we know from supposed philosophical authorities and what we know by nature. What we know by nature, it turns out, is what is readily accessible to any ordinary human being through experience. To be sure, what we hear from philosophical authorities is distinct from what we ourselves have come to know through reason. What Montaigne seems to suggest, however, is that even claims that purport to be appeals to our reason are in fact appeals to authority, unless they are open to some kind of verification by our own experience.

Montaigne begins by lamenting that “the version of the sayings of Socrates that his friends have left us we approve only out of respect for the universal approval these sayings enjoy, not by our own knowledge. They are beyond our experience.”

We have, he suggests, a version of Socrates who serves primarily as an object of veneration or personal displays of learning, rather than one who speaks to our most pressing concerns.

Nonetheless, for Montaigne, Socrates is also the vehicle through which we can return to ordinary experience and to a full awareness of our natural capacities, which become manifest once we have cleared away excessive learning. This is because “Socrates makes his soul move with a natural and common motion.” He is able to do this, in part, because he speaks of things with which everyone is familiar:

So says a peasant, so says a woman. His mouth is full of nothing but carters, joiners, cobbler, and masons. His are inductions and similes drawn from the commonest and best-known actions of men; everyone understands him.

Montaigne suggests that the simplicity of Socrates’ discourse has been obscured by the aversion to simplicity that prevails among his learned admirers. Socrates, rightly understood, becomes

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354 Montaigne, III.12, 965.
355 Montaigne, III.12, 965.
Montaigne’s paradigmatic case of a life lived according to nature and experience. Montaigne contrasts reason and experience as ways of knowing, but for him the greatest advocate for the life of reason turns out to be, in fact, our best way of returning to a reliance upon experience. This clarifies another aspect of Montaigne’s appeal to experience. In “Of Experience” the emphasis is often on particularity. Individuals and communities are of interest to the extent that they manifest some particular configuration of desires, habits, and so forth. Here we see that Montaigne believes that appeals to experience can also rely upon a common human experience, available to any ordinary person.

It is for their own sake that Montaigne urges his readers to turn to the experience of ordinary people. As we have already seen, he takes death, and the fear of death, to be among the dominant concerns of human life. We must seek out the examples of ordinary people (and Socrates) because they prove to be better guides in this, the most existentially compelling of all human questions. While scholars and their texts might seem to be our best guides, when we examine their lives we see little reason to think that they have much to teach us. “Of Physiognomy” continues the attack, begun in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” on the authority of philosophy to guide human life. It develops one of the most intriguing suggestions of that earlier essay. There, it was claimed that philosophy does not make us happy or wise, but Montaigne also suggests that the great philosophers have been subject to a fundamental misinterpretation. He notes, in particular, that the doctrines that the philosophers discussed have been widely taken as the core, while the questioning and even skeptical aspects have been ignored. That would seem to raise the question of whether or not coming to understand them rightly would give us any cause to modify Montaigne’s judgment on their potential contribution

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to human happiness. We see here that at least one philosopher, rightly understood, can show us how to deal with our most pressing concerns. What that philosopher teaches us, however, is to turn towards the view of death that is characteristic of peasants and other common people.

The distinctive feature of the manner in which common people approach death, as Montaigne presents it, is that it is unpremeditated and without an excess of fuss. Montaigne was able to observe this first hand, through his own experience of the plague. In 1585, while he served as the Mayor of Bordeaux, the region was struck by the plague and thousands of people died. Montaigne observed that most people did not panic, and instead became so used to seeing death that they readily accepted it when it came for them. He tells his readers that he observed cases such as the following:

Here a man, healthy, was already digging his grave; others lay down in them while still alive. And one of my laborers, with his hands and feet, pulled the earth over him as he was dying. Was that not taking shelter so as to sleep more comfortably?...In short, a whole nation was suddenly, by habit alone, placed on a level that concedes nothing in firmness to any studied and premeditated fortitude.\[357\]

This might seem to confirm Montaigne’s earlier suggestion that one should inoculate oneself against the fear of death by thinking about it often. His claim that his neighbors became immune to the fear of death through “habit alone” would seem to suggest that it was the extraordinary prevalence of death, rather than their natural dispositions, that made things tolerable. It turns out, however, that the conduct of common people during the plague was just an extreme instance of a much more ordinary, and natural, phenomenon.

Montaigne remarks that he never saw one of his “peasant neighbors cogitating over the countenance and assurance with which he would pass this last hour.” This is because “Nature teaches him not to think about death except when he is dying.” This policy is advantageous

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\[357\] Montaigne, III.12, 977.
because “the common people” therefore “need neither remedy nor consolation except when the blow falls, and consider only precisely as much of it as they feel.”

Montaigne draws a connection between these common people and Socrates, whose speech to the jury, depicted in Plato’s *Apology*, he paraphrases in this essay. In doing so, he elides certain distinctions between the peasants, as he presents them, and Socrates, as both Plato and he himself present him. Socrates’ speech does indicate a lack of concern for death, but not at all because he is not giving the matter any thought. He raises questions about whether or not he and his audience can really know about death. Not knowing what death is like and not thinking about death at all are obviously quite different things. Furthermore, we must also consider how Montaigne’s own professed knowledge of death, described in “Of Practice,” can be reconciled with either of these views.

What all of these stances have in common is imperturbability in the face of death, whether from agnosticism, ignorance, or experience. The question is whether the different ways in which they reach this state can be reconciled with one another. To a certain extent they are mutually exclusive. One cannot adopt the Socratic stance if, like the peasant, one has simply devoted no thought to the matter. Similarly, Montaigne’s own condition, including his bout with death, would seem to preclude him from this kind of ignorance. While the peasant’s indifference might be fine for the peasant, a reader who is already plagued by the fear of death presumably cannot adopt it. For that reader, the alternatives of Socrates and Montaigne are the genuine options.

The two views may, however, be ultimately be reconcilable. Montaigne’s own claim has at least two parts. First, we need not fear death because we will know how to handle it when it

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358 Montaigne, III.12, 980-981.
359 See *Apology* 40c-42a.
arises. Second, we need not fear death because it is not painful or terrifying when it actually comes. It is the latter claim that he supports with his account of his near death experience. The first he supports with reference to the peasants and those who died during the plague. Socrates’ presentation in the *Apology*, and Montaigne’s paraphrase, offers two additions. First, we do not know what it is like to actually be dead. Montaigne can grant this, because his argument only concerns the moments immediately preceding death. In fact, it would seem to follow from his more general skepticism about claims to knowledge of a world outside of human experience.

Second, Socrates claims that if one lacks this knowledge then one should not fear death. Montaigne can accept that one should not fear being dead if one does not know what it is like. He seems to presuppose, however, that we must also know what dying is like, from an experiential point of view, before we can grant Socrates’ conclusion that death is not an evil. In this respect, Montaigne’s experiential thinking complements, rather than contradicts, the Socratic position. His own position, however, contains internal tensions. Although he claims to have discovered that death is not terrible through his own experience of unconsciousness, his experience may only be one possibility among many. Elsewhere, he admits that particular deaths can be quite terrible. In “Of Cannibals,” as we have already seen, he condemns the European practice of “tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling…”.

The tortured body, which is very much alive and which suffers tremendously, can be contrasted with Montaigne’s barely conscious body as described in “Of Practice.” His experience of the latter in no way rules out the possibility of the former.

This indicates that Montaigne’s aim is not to show that his preferred mode of experiential reasoning eliminates human suffering immediately. It helps us to understand ourselves as

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360 Montaigne, I.31, 189.
embodied beings subject to continuous fluctuations in our experience. This allows us to see our true needs, such as some measure of bodily security, and to distinguish them from our false ones, such as glory or metaphysical certainty. It does not eliminate the terrors of death, but it does show us that many of those terrors are premised on an erroneous understanding of our condition. For those that are truly terrible, it directs us towards prudent attempts to minimize human cruelty and suffering. By eliminating our false beliefs about what is harmful for us it allows us to focus on those that are genuine.

3.11: Conclusion

While Montaigne does not deny that particular deaths can be quite terrible, the overarching theme of Montaigne’s explicit treatment of death is that we should not fear it, because we will find that we can respond appropriately to its arrival when the time comes. In the meantime, we may as well enjoy ourselves. This claim is intimately connected to his defense of experiential thinking more generally. The virtue of relying upon experience, for Montaigne, is that we can respond freely to new situations as they arise, thus enjoying new opportunities for pleasure and tranquility. He argues that we must treat death in the same way. Avoid metaphysical worries that might prevent one from responding to the actual challenges as they arise, and simply allow things to proceed.

Montaigne’s examination of death reveals the freedom that can result when one has purged oneself of dogmatic hopes and fears. This purgation occurs through a skeptical interrogation of one’s beliefs. The skeptical arguments that Montaigne musters draw upon the phenomena of diversity and disagreement. As Montaigne reveals, custom, philosophy, and religion are unable to provide us with unambiguous guidance. When we see how others, equally
well-situated to discern the truth, depart from our most cherished opinions, we are forced to question the status of those opinions.

To acknowledge the epistemological significance of pluralism is not necessarily to endorse it, from the practical or normative points of view. As the example of Montaigne’s admirer Nietzsche indicates, the endorsement of a form of perspectivism can be conjoined with less than tolerant ethical and political projects. Montaigne has, indeed, sometimes been taken as an advocate for cynical realpolitik or, more commonly, indifference towards politics. The next chapter will argue that, at least under certain circumstances, skepticism of the type endorsed by Montaigne and Zhuangzi is connected to forms of toleration. Subsequent chapters will indicate that this vision has substantive political consequences, and does not collapse into quietism.
Chapter IV: From Skepticism to Toleration

4.1: Introduction

Both Zhuangzi and Montaigne confronted worlds deeply divided by both political and theoretical conflict. Whether Renaissance humanists or scholastic theologians, Confucians or Mohists, all schools in these eras believed that they had found the single best way of living. Moreover, they generally believed that their projects should be inculcated through law or other political means. Zhuangzi and Montaigne propose more tolerant outlooks. They do this, in part, by attacking the philosophical assumptions of their less tolerant contemporaries. They seek to humble their readers, in order to show disputation and force will exacerbate, not ameliorate, social, political, and intellectual divisions. Difference, according to their teachings, is a permanent feature of the world, not an ephemeral circumstance or a sign of moral decay. They promise to educate us on how to live in this world without destroying ourselves intellectually or physically. Interpersonal toleration, while by no means their sole recommendation for achieving this, is a central element of their strategy.

In this chapter I will argue that the skeptical arguments of Montaigne and Zhuangzi have practical, not just epistemological, significance. Linking skepticism to toleration in this way has a long but complicated pedigree. It is widely recognized that many of the eminent early modern skeptics sought, in one way or another, to encourage toleration. Nonetheless, the philosophical connection between skepticism and toleration is contested. It is often suggested

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361 For accounts of the links between skepticism and toleration in the work of these and other major early modern figures, see Alan Levine, ed., Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999).
that skepticism is an inappropriate or incoherent way of trying to motivate toleration. John Rawls, for example, is eager to distance the account of the limits of reason upon which his own political liberalism rests from skepticism.362 There are at least two quite serious lines of objection that any skeptical account of toleration must confront. The first objection is that skepticism, as a thesis about the limits of our knowledge, cannot provide a foundation for any particular normative conclusion. The second objection is that skepticism produces apathy, which renders toleration moot, given that we only need to tolerate things that we find objectionable in some way.

The first objection is stated succinctly by Catriona McKinnon. She addresses one particular variety of “metaphysical ethical skepticism,” moral relativism. Moral relativists deny that there are any universal moral truths, and assert instead that moral claims can be judged true or false only with reference to some particular community. McKinnon argues that it is impossible to derive any substantive moral conclusions from this position. That is because relativism is “a meta-ethical doctrine, that is, it is a view about what morality is. However, any principle of toleration can only be justified by a normative argument; that is, by an argument about what ought to be done.”363 Those who would attempt derive tolerant conclusions from this form of relativism, according to McKinnon, are simply confusing is and ought. This point is not specific to relativistic forms of moral skepticism. Insofar as all forms of skepticism are claims

362 John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 63. I will not dwell on Rawls’ argument here simply because he is primarily interested in showing that his account of the “burdens of judgment” does not lead to skepticism and also that skepticism is not appropriate as the basis for an overlapping consensus of reasonable views. Because neither of these claims, even if they turn out to be true, rule out the possibility that skepticism can motivate tolerant attitudes, I will not discuss Rawls’ position any further in this chapter.
about what is the case, epistemologically speaking, all are equally unsuited as bases for
tolerance.\textsuperscript{364}

McKinnon’s point is a reasonable one, so far as it goes. It is true that accepting
skepticism does not commit one, logically speaking, to behaving tolerantly.\textsuperscript{365} As a practical
matter, however, the goal may simply be to encourage toleration, not to show that one would be
irrational if one were intolerant. It could simply be a fact about human beings that, as a
psychological matter, we tend to become more tolerant as we become more skeptical.\textsuperscript{366} As we
shall see, there is at least one important reason to endorse this view. Intolerance and cruelty are
often motivated by particular kinds of monistic knowledge claims. Purging ourselves of such
beliefs through sceptical means may lead to toleration, given these facts, even if skepticism does
not entail toleration in a strict sense. This type of case for toleration strikes some as inadequate.
Joseph Raz has noted that this does suggest some limits to a skeptical case for toleration. As he
puts it, “it is true that global scepticism…rules out intolerant attitudes and policies which are

\textsuperscript{364} Related problems emerge in recent discussions of the practical consequences of pluralism. Pluralism
claims that there are various incommensurable goods or ways of life. Some of the most important
defenders of pluralism, notably Isaiah Berlin, have seen it as a bulwark for freedom and toleration. More
recently, however, John Gray has argued that toleration actually presupposes much more unity than the
pluralist finds feasible or desirable. Gray insists that toleration is actually a relic of early modern
monism. It could provide a basis for peaceful coexistence, on his view, only as long as a particular way
of life was taken for granted. Modern conditions of pluralism are such that there is no longer a shared
outlook of this type. Instead, we can only hope for some contingent agreement among our diverse
communities. This agreement is only a modus vivendi, or a temporary settlement found agreeable by the
relevant groups, rather than a universal moral injunction. John Gray, “Pluralism and Toleration in

\textsuperscript{365} McKinnon is, admittedly, only claiming that skepticism cannot motivate toleration by itself. Even so,
this would seem to lead to the question of why skepticism has been linked to toleration so frequently.

\textsuperscript{366} Alex Zakaras has suggested that pluralism and liberalism are linked in just this way. See Alex
rooted in principles and values” but this “merely leaves people free to pursue actions and policies which do not depend on any belief in the validity of any principles or values.”

While Raz is correct, the question this raises is whether or not the sources of intolerance are often linked to “principles and values” or not. David Heyd has noted that “the three main spheres in which the principle of toleration has been operative are religion, sex, and expression.” Religion is probably the most historically significant case, and it is obviously tied to both “principles and values.” The same is true of both sex and expression. It seems clear that such cases are, even if not the only instances of intolerance, at least some of the most important ones. Consequently, it is possible to grant Raz’s point while still taking skepticism to be an important element of the broader case for toleration. Much of the rest of the chapter will be devoted to exploring the conditions that prevailed in ancient China and early modern Europe, in order to explain why skepticism was linked to toleration in important ways.

Others have argued that there are internal tensions within the concept of toleration itself. Bernard Williams has suggested that the possibility of toleration is itself a powerful philosophical question. This is because toleration involves two seemingly opposed elements. First, that which is tolerated must be held objectionable in some way. Second, in spite of that, it must be the object of principled non-interference. Skepticism might seem to undermine the first component of toleration, by encouraging us to suspend judgment on, rather than condemn, unfamiliar ways of living. Any plausible account of toleration must, therefore, either reject

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370 As Williams (1996) puts it, “toleration ‘requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them;’ but skepticism and indifference mean that people no longer
the necessity of maintaining these two stances simultaneously or explain how doing so is possible.\textsuperscript{371}

This chapter attempts to contribute to the understanding of the nature and justification of toleration through an examination of the contexts in which Montaigne and Zhuangzi lived and developed their positions. As the preceding discussion indicates, the relationship between skepticism and toleration depends largely on the particular conditions present in a given time and place. Even if one grants that under a given set of circumstances, for instance those of early modern Europe during the Wars of Religion, skepticism tended to encourage toleration, that could have been the result of mere historical happenstance. This is where the comparative approach taken here is valuable. If, as I shall argue, the link between skepticism and toleration recurs in very different times and places, such as ancient China and sixteenth century France, the connection is much more likely to be of theoretical significance.

In this chapter, I will defend three primary conclusions. First, I argue that the link between skepticism and toleration can be powerful in particular contexts, even if the former does not logically entail the latter. While there might be skeptics who are intolerant, skeptical arguments may serve to encourage tolerance when it is targeted against beliefs, for example religious or ethical claims, that produce intolerance in the relevant context. Second, I argue that both Montaigne and Zhuangzi manifest the tension between acceptance and condemnation that is characteristic of the concept of toleration. Both distinguish between a practical context in which

\textsuperscript{371} Debates over the tension between the two aspects of toleration, acceptance and rejection, sometimes give rise to the thought that it must not be an individual attitude, but instead a political stance. See, for example, Bernard Williams (1996). David Heyd, on the other hand, suggests that toleration is an intermediate attitude, falling between one’s private convictions and the public neutrality of the state. See Heyd, “Is Toleration a Political Virtue?” in Williams and Waldron (2008).
one might act according to a particular understanding of the world and a broader intellectual context in which one takes that understanding as one among many. Montaigne and Zhuangzi each attempt to move their readers to see the validity of the second, higher perspective, without claiming that it can fully supplant the earlier one. I conclude by discussing the ways in which each writer understands the human capacity for compassion, which in both cases is taken to be a core aspect of the case for toleration.

4.2: The Importance of Context

When skepticism and pluralism are interpreted in a very general and non-contextual manner, they do fail to support, or perhaps even undermine, a robust defense of toleration. Skepticism and pluralism must be understood in particular ways if they are to support toleration. The difficulties involved in these debates result, in part, from the highly abstract level at which they occur. Skepticism and toleration are sometimes treated conceptually, with little regard for the broader political, rhetorical, and historical context from which they emerged. The only relationship between the concepts that could be grasped at this level would be a purely logical one, and it is clear that no such relationship holds here. Skepticism does not necessitate toleration. Neither, however, is the link purely one of historical happenstance. Skepticism and pluralism are tied to toleration because intolerance has so often been linked to theoretical monisms. Skepticism serves, under such conditions, to challenge the theoretical basis for intolerance, while pluralism provides an alternative view of life with which to fill the void created by skepticism. In the subsequent sections I will examine each in turn.

At the most general level, the problem with grounding toleration in skepticism is that toleration affirms a particular view of how one should relate to others while skepticism only negates (some set of) claims to knowledge. The problem with this view is that it ignores the
contextual aspect of skeptical arguments. Neither ancient or modern skepticism emerged as just an abstract claim about our knowledge. The ancient skeptics had an ethical purpose, arguing that skepticism rightly understood would nourish the best possible human life. For the modern skeptics, such as Montaigne and Bayle, skepticism also served a practical purpose. Moreover, its purpose was intimately linked to the intellectual and political context from which it emerged. It was addressed not only to human beings as such, but also to human beings living on a continent riven by religious conflict. Skepticism might not dictate toleration in all circumstances, but it does challenge many of the most influential grounds for intolerance. As I shall demonstrate, theoretical monism led to intolerance in both early modern Europe and Warring States era China.

In sixteenth century France, intolerance was largely a product of a particular monistic worldview, namely a particular interpretation of the Christian religion. The violent deeds of the sectarians were, in a crucial sense, theory laden. Each side believed that the presence of the other constituted a vile pollution within the body politic, and thus was confronted with the choice of either removing the pollution or facing divine retribution. Challenging these assumptions served to challenge the rationale for intolerance itself.

Natalie Zemon Davis has referred to the recurrent religious riots of the Wars of Religion as “rites of violence.” In doing so, she calls to mind the way in which the actions of the participants were, more or less self-consciously, mimicking the theological claims of the competing sects. It may seem that rites cannot be the target of skepticism, given that they are in some sense performative or practical rather than theoretical. Given the intimate link between Christian ritual and Christian doctrine in the sixteenth century, however, this distinction does not hold up. When a Parisian baker in 1561 urged an enraged Protestant crowd not to harm the wafers being stored for the Eucharist, they demanded (before killing him) to know whether a
“God of paste” could protect him from “the pains of death.” Similarly, Catholics in Orleans taunted their Protestant victims by asking “Where is your God? Where are your prayers and Psalms? Let him save you if he can.” Each jeer calls attention both to the ritual world of prayer and the Eucharist, but also the doctrine that rendered such rites intelligible. Zemon Davis adduces many such cases:

"Look", says a crowd of image-breakers to the people of Albiac in 1561, showing them the relics they have seized from the Carmelite monastery, "look, they are only animal bones”…Catholic crowds answer this kind of claim to truth in Angers by taking a French Bible, well-bound and gilded, seized in the home of a rich merchant, and parading it through the streets on the end of a halberd. "There's the truth hung. There's the truth of the Huguenots, the truth of all the devils". Then, throwing it into the river, "There's the truth of all the devils drowned.”

As the crowd’s language suggests, truth is at stake here, and thus a claim to knowledge.

Mack Holt recounts a similar incident:

…violence occurred in the Catholic stronghold of Dijon in May 1570 when a Protestant baptized his dog in a public fountain and forced the poor beast to drag a statue of St Anthony through the streets, ‘in contempt of the holy sacrament of baptism and the veneration of the saints’ as the Dijon magistrates remarked.

Such incidents make sense only in the context of a particular network of theological claims. The violence is not random, but is instead theological both in its form, which aimed at mocking some particular ritual that had been judged abhorrent, and its purpose, the cleansing of the country. As a result, a skeptical argument that reduces confidence in the dogma could also be expected to eliminate the cause of the violence. Montaigne’s skeptical arguments for toleration can best be understood within such a context, rather than through abstract speculation about whether skepticism necessarily establishes toleration always and everywhere. As Montaigne argues in

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373 Ibid.

the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” the great disagreement among philosophers of the highest rank on matters pertaining to God and the soul suggests that we lack knowledge of that sort. Nor does Montaigne leave much room for confidence in direct revelation. He claims that the conduct observed during the Wars of Religion hardly suggests that any of the participants have been touched by God’s grace.

Those whose religious cruelty Montaigne decried took their own knowledge extremely seriously. Montaigne hopes to show that they err in doing so. Persecuting others in the name of one’s own claim to knowledge of God’s will is absurd, because that is precisely the sort of knowledge that we are least likely to have. It is true that Montaigne urges conformity to the religion of one’s community, largely because no other could be demonstrated superior. Nonetheless, he does not simply leave everything as it is. He urges a personal and intellectual conversion to a tolerant and skeptical pluralism that need not conflict with the demands of civil order.

One who takes Montaigne’s view of spiritual matters may persist in religious observance. He or she will do so, however, in a different spirit than that of the fanatics, both Catholic and Protestant, of the sixteenth century. If our knowledge of the divine is extremely limited, one will be unlikely to sacrifice tangible goods, such as public order and personal safety, for the sake of enforcing orthodoxy upon one’s rivals. By making religion a matter of local custom and particularity, Montaigne also limits its power to motivate the sort of ideological cruelty that characterized his own age.

_Ideological Violence in Ancient China_

As I have argued, religious violence in sixteenth century France had a substantial theoretical component. That is the reason why skepticism was relevant to the case for toleration.
Ancient China was not without its own forms of ideological violence. Zhuangzi’s skepticism, for this reason, motivates its own form of tolerance. Nonetheless, it is important not to overstate the similarities between the two cases. The religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, and the sectarian cruelty that accompanied them, have no precise parallel in ancient China. While the Warring States period was, as the name suggests, chaotic and violent, the political conflicts were largely over who would rule rather than the doctrine that ought to structure government. The latter disputes were confined primarily to the intellectual realm. Nonetheless, there is a certain parallel between Montaigne’s account of ideologically motivated harm to others and that of Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi indicates that both laws and social norms, especially those of a rigid sort, can cause significant harm. He does this both by undermining the theoretical basis for those norms, while also attempting to describe more sympathetically those at the margins of respectable society, for example women, those with physical disabilities, former criminals, and so forth.

We encounter these marginal characters throughout the Zhuangzi. They are marginalized by the law, because of their unattractive appearance, or their supposed social uselessness. All are thus situated by the dominant view of the good life in early Chinese society. They are harmed both physically and psychically. In the worst cases, they have their bodies mutilated in order to mark them as outsiders. In challenging the view of the good life dominant in his own day, Zhuangzi also challenges these forms of intolerance.

The ancient Chinese legal order often imposed extreme punishments on those who defied its dictates. Drastic physical mutilation was the consequence for perceived criminal activity. The Classic of Documents lists the “Five Punishments” (wuxing), which were facial tattooing, cutting off the nose, cutting off a foot, castration, and execution. Moreover, these punishments
could be doled out for a rather broad range of offenses. As Michael Nylan points out, “many of the most serious crimes listed in the Five Proclamations chapters—including sibling rivalry and disrespect to family heads or to dead ancestors—are not crimes at all under the modern legal system.” As we shall see in the next chapter, Zhuangzi’s dismissive attitude towards such conventions is quite evident, particularly in his stance towards death and the dead.

These punishments exerted their force through brutal physical hardship, but also through the social marginalization that they entailed. This is brought out forcefully in a passage written by Sima Qian, the great Han Dynasty historian:

Above all, a man must bring no shame to his forbears. Next he must not shame his person, nor be shameful in his countenance, nor in his words. Below such a one is he who suffers the shame of being bound, and next he who bears the shame of marked clothing. Next is the man bound and fettered who knows the shame of rod and thorn, and the man who bears the shame of the shaved head and the binding manacle. Below again is the shame of mutilated flesh and severed limbs. Lowest of all is the extreme penalty, the ‘punishment of rottenness [castration].’

Sima Qian had been accused of conspiring against his ruler, for which he was punished by being given the choice between death and castration. He chose the latter so that he could, in the spirit of filial piety, carry out the ambitious research projects initiated by his father Sima Tan. In spite of his noble rationale for accepting this punishment, he nonetheless regarded it as the greatest social degradation. As Karen Turner comments on this passage, “the amputation of any part of the body put a halt to the moral and social development of the person and, as Sima Qian so eloquently wrote, rendered the victim no longer a fully participating member of the social, ritual, and political community.” These mutilating punishments, therefore, served as the

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375 Nylan, 148.
376 Cited in Karen Turner, “The Criminal Body and the Body Politic: Punishments in Early Imperial China,” Cultural Dynamics 11 (1999), 237-254, 247. It is important to note that Sima Qian wrote this hundreds of years after the death of Zhuangzi. Nonetheless, the purpose of these punishments appears to have remained constant.
377 Ibid.
extreme point of a moral and legal order that aimed to inculcate a particular way of life. Those who deviated from the way were marked visibly for all to see.

Moreover, there Warring States China, like early modern Europe, endured political and intellectual changes that made theoretical expositions of right conduct more pervasive. To see why this was the case, we must consider the evolution of ancient Chinese law. The earliest period from which we have extant sources is that of the Shang dynasty. The Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) was based in the Yellow River Valley and is known to us in part through the oracle bones, tortoise shell and bone inscriptions used for divinatory purposes. Judging by these inscriptions, it is believed that the primary form of social order was the zu, a clan-like kinship group, each of which had its own town.\textsuperscript{378} The zu also, apparently, had their own regulations that governed their members. At this point, therefore, conflicts among standards would rarely arise, insofar as one would likely live among one’s kinship group and have deep familiarity with its standards.\textsuperscript{379}

The Zhou dynasty, after a series of military victories, replaced the Shang dynasty in 1046 BCE. Because the Zhou rulers had previously controlled a comparatively small population, considered in relation to that of the Shang, it was a challenge to administer the newly conquered territories. As Yongping Liu notes, they were thus forced “to find the appropriate political, philosophical, and social apparatus to bring the newly acquired territories under control and to manage this disparate population.”\textsuperscript{380} Their response was to institute a feudal (fengjian 封建)

\textsuperscript{379} For another account of the role of clans in preserving early Chinese political order, see K.C. Chang, \textit{Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 9-32.
\textsuperscript{380} Liu (1998), 34.
system, according to which vassals were given fiefs in exchange for their service to the rulers.\textsuperscript{381} Nonetheless, the zu and their customary rules continued to exist, and thus there were multiple distinct standards of conduct that had to coexist within the Zhou territories.\textsuperscript{382}

The relations between the king and his vassals, during this period, were structured by \textit{li} (ritual 礼), which allowed each person to recognize the proper behavior during official occasions. \textit{Li} explained, for example, the way in which local rulers should behave when they travelled to the central court and the circumstances under which a noble man and a woman could marry.\textsuperscript{383} Because these affairs were primarily governed high level interactions, “it was very unlikely that these rites were applied to anyone who was not a member of the nobility.”\textsuperscript{384}

The Western Zhou dynasty fell apart and, under pressure from invasions by tribes originating north of the Zhou territories, the capital was moved eastward, leading to a new dynasty called the Eastern Zhou. These rulers eventually became unable to exercise more than nominal control over what emerged as, for all practical purposes, independent states. These states could not rely on the feudal ties that had held together the Western Zhou, which led to new social challenges. Tongdong Bai explains the social challenges that emerged during this period through a comparison with early modern Europe:

In the feudal system of China and Europe, each level of the pyramid-like ruling structure comprised only a small community of a few hundred or, at most, a few thousand people, bonded by certain rituals, codes of conduct, and explicit or implicit contracts. That is, the community on each level was a de facto small state, a community of acquaintances largely sharing the same values. After the transition to modernity these levels collapsed, and what emerged was large, populous, well-connected states composed of strangers.\textsuperscript{385}

\textsuperscript{381} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{382} Liu (1998), 42.
\textsuperscript{383} Liu (1998), 70.
\textsuperscript{384} Liu, 73.
\textsuperscript{385} Tongdong Bai (2012), 21.
Bai interprets Confucianism’s teachings on benevolence (ren) as a response to this new reality. The early Confucians, he observes, believed that benevolence could be cultivated in the family and expanded outward as a new “social glue.” Mozi, the founder of the Mohist school, famously argued that all human beings must, for largely pragmatic reasons, demonstrate “universal love” (sometimes translated as “inclusive care”) for all. For Mozi, this kind of disposition comes about from the recognition that we benefit when everyone’s lot is improved. Confucius and Mencius had to make explicit the theoretical basis for the kind of social unity that they hoped to generate, whereas their predecessors could appeal to hallowed custom. Consequently, skepticism may have had a more obvious theoretical target than it would have in the past.

 Zhuangzi’s objection is to any set of standards, whether enshrined in law or simply defended by the competing schools of thought, that restricts freedom. Legal punishments, and in particular the physical mutilation that was often practiced in ancient China, provide the most viscerally gripping example of such standards. Zhuangzi attempts to show that the standards that lie behind these punishments are ultimately arbitrary, in spite of the force that they gain from having been internalized by many in his community. His stories seek to undermine these standards by presenting the victims of such punishments as paragons of wisdom. These stories cast doubt on even the wisdom of Confucius, who is presented as an overly conventional and rigid teacher.

 Confucius’ attitude towards punishment, and that of the Confucian tradition more generally, is complex. He declares, for example, that “the great man cherishes the rigors of the law, but the small man cherishes leniency.” Nonetheless, the overarching theme of Confucian

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386 Bai (2012), 35.
387 Schwartz (1985), 146-147.
reflection on government is that the virtue of the ruler and the force of ritual should minimize the need for punishment.\textsuperscript{388} Furthermore, while the \textit{Classic of Documents} testifies to the pedigree of extreme physical punishment in Chinese law, the central chapter on punishments appears more concerned with ensuring that punishments will not be applied unfairly or excessively than with ensuring their severity.\textsuperscript{389} Nonetheless, even this point draws attention to the moralizing character of the view of government that Zhuangzi decries. It does little good, from his point of view, to allow people to avoid punishment through the inculcation of some monistic view of life.

Zhuangzi appears to regard the punishments of his day as arbitrary harms that say nothing about the virtue of the supposed criminal. He calls the five punishments “the trivia of public instruction.” By trivia here he means something that is purely conventional and fails to track genuine merit. In the same section, he calls the Confucian rituals and laws the “trivia of good government” and the lengthy Confucian mourning periods the “trivia of grief.”\textsuperscript{390} The imposition of these arbitrary customs, for Zhuangzi, is the height of intolerance. Insofar as there is a theory of toleration in Zhuangzi, it is presented in a response to parochial and ideological violence inflicted on others. This becomes clear not primarily through his thematic statements, but rather through his presentation of sagely individuals who have been subjected to such punishments. He offers numerous descriptions of those who, in spite of having been singled out for mutilating punishment at one time or another, possess knowledge of the \textit{dao}.

One of the central purposes of this scheme of punishments was to socially marginalize the offenders. Zhuangzi offers a striking reversal, in which he praises criminals and hunchbacks

\textsuperscript{388} \textit{The Analects of Confucius}, 4.11, 33.
\textsuperscript{389} \textit{The Chinese Classics, Volume III: The Shoo-King} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp. 588-612. For a useful discussion of the emphasis that this chapter places on justice, as opposed to severity, see Michael Nylan, \textit{The Five Classics} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 148-149.
\textsuperscript{390} \textit{Zhuangzi}, XIII, 101.
while deriding philosophers and government ministers. As he presents things, it is the Confucians who should look to the physically disfigured for guidance. Some of his richest stories involve Confucius or his disciples coming to recognize that their own virtue was in no way superior to that of those whom they had most strongly held in contempt. In this way, Zhuangzi indicates the arbitrary character of the penalties and the way of life to which they are linked. He tells of a man named Shushan No-Toes, whose foot had been amputated in punishment, who visits Confucius with the intent to become his student. Confucius rejects him, on the grounds that Shushan is a law breaker and can no longer be helped. No-Toes proceeds to Lao Dan (Laozi or Lao Tzu), who urges him to make Confucius “see that life and death are the same story, that acceptable and unacceptable are on a single string?” This would serve to “free him from his handcuffs and fetters.” Lao Dan’s claim is that the distinction that Confucius wants to draw between those who have suffered mutilating punishments and those who have not has little basis in any plausible account of the human good. As we shall see shortly, this links Zhuangzi’s critique of ideological violence to his skepticism. We take certain kinds of distinctions so seriously that they create the grounds for fanatical cruelty, in this case physical dismemberment and social ostracism. By showing us, through skeptical argumentation, that these distinctions cannot be understood as uniquely capturing the nature of things, Zhuangzi encourages us to depart from such fanaticism.

Zhuangzi here calls to mind not only the infliction of actual physical harms through penal law, but more broadly the systems of evaluation on which they are grounded. While Confucius does occasionally speak of punishments, the emphasis in his own thought, as well as that of Mencius, is overwhelmingly on moral education. They would both regard the actual punishments, in large part, as consequences of a failure to inculcate the proper moral outlook
through government and the family. Mencius, especially, warns rulers that their reliance on penalties indicates a troubling breakdown in the moral order of society. Only later, in the Confucianism of Xunzi, who came in the generation after Mencius, are punishments given a substantial role in Confucian moral and political thought. Xunzi will claim that the “classical standards of order are rituals associated with punishments,” but he retains his predecessors belief that one must be cautious with punishment.\footnote{Xunzi, 25.18, 177.} In spite of their reluctance to rely on punishment, Zhuangzi appears to be suggesting that the basic moral categories of Confucian thought are somehow implicated in these grave harms.

There is a rhetorical aspect to Zhuangzi’s treatment of punishment. Zhuangzi does not claim that all criminals are virtuous, nor does he praise transgression for its own sake. His point is not that the fusion of law and ethics fails because the result is ethical, but instead because it is legalistic. Law must have a high degree of generality. Human nature, however, involves immense diversity. Zhuangzi’s skepticism and pluralism are articulated against a set of assumptions about human nature and the moral life that render a particular kind of legal morality feasible. By attacking these foundations, the legal regime is reinterpreted as a system of ideological violence.

4.3: Toleration and the Levels of Judgment

We have seen that Zhuangzi and Montaigne use skepticism to undermine various forms of harmful interference in individual lives. This may be sufficient to justify calling them tolerant in a colloquial sense, but perhaps not in a more precise sense. Tolerating a particular way of living is, in this stricter sense, distinct from approving of it or being indifferent to it. As T.M. Scanlon puts it, “tolerance…involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted
acceptance and unrestrained opposition.”\textsuperscript{392} Bernard Williams argues, in a similar vein, that “the sphere of toleration has to be one in which the agent has some very strong view on a certain matter; thinks that people with conflicting views are wrong; and thinks at the same time, that in some sense, those others should be allowed to have and express those views.”\textsuperscript{393} The relationship between various religious groups who are willing to coexist while also regarding one another as deeply mistaken could be a paradigmatic case here. In order to tolerate a particular way of living, one must both disapprove of it but refrain from interfering with it, and one must do both on a principled basis.

One way of understanding the particular tensions involved in the idea of toleration appeals to two different perspectives. When looked at from one sort of perspective, the object of toleration is objectionable, albeit perhaps only on a personal level. When looked at from another, it must be accepted. This line of thinking can be developed in various ways, depending on how one understands each of the two perspectives. Zhuangzi and Montaigne each suggest that, in this way, we can approach the world from within two quite different perspectives.

Both writers suggest a distinction between a kind of cosmic perspective that equalizes all other perspectives and a more local perspective that one finds best at a given moment. For Montaigne, experience is the tool by which we recognize which aims are, while not mandated by any transcendent standard, appropriate for us. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, emphasizes the spontaneous acceptance of a particular perspective or way of living. What the


\textsuperscript{393} Williams (1996), 37. Williams goes on to suggest that this formulation is not strong enough, and adds that we must take others to have a right to their view (38). If the idea of toleration is interpreted so strictly as to require the idea of rights, then neither Montaigne nor Zhuangzi are theorists of toleration. Nonetheless, I am trying to demonstrate that their views could be regarded as tolerant in a looser sense roughly in line with the formulation just quoted.
two approaches have in common, in spite of these differences, is that both suggest that we must move between two quite different ways of looking at the world. We have a cosmic perspective that encompasses and takes as equal all particular perspectives. We also, however, have a particular perspective that shapes our practical lives at a given moment. The ways in which these practical perspectives, such as those presupposed by political action, are related to the cosmic perspective will be discussed in the subsequent chapters. What is important to realize here is that this dual-perspective approach is what brings these theories near to contemporary theories of toleration.

The cosmic perspective is, on this view, the one that is supposed to motivate toleration. Putting our beliefs within a broader context is supposed to help us to see that they are no more or less reasonable than those of many others. This does not eliminate the more experiential or practical level of thinking, but it does put it within a broader context. Thomas Nagel offers a useful way of thinking about the relevant distinction:

The idea is that when we look at certain of our convictions from outside, however justified they may be from within, the appeal to their truth must be seen merely as an appeal to our beliefs, and should be treated as such unless those beliefs can be shown to be justifiable from a more impersonal standpoint. If not, they have to remain, for the purpose of a certain kind of moral argument, features of a personal perspective-to be respected as such but no more than that.  

Nagel goes on to argue that this procedure does not require us to deny that our personal convictions are true. He “means only that from the perspective of political argument we may have to regard certain of our beliefs, whether moral or religious or even historical or scientific, simply as someone’s beliefs, rather than as truths—unless they can be given the kind of impersonal justification appropriate to that perspective, in which case they may be appealed to as

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truths without qualification.” Nagel’s approach attempts to provide a foundation for the distinction between the two stances towards beliefs that characterizes toleration.

Rainer Forst suggests Nagel’s account presupposes an implausible separation between public and private convictions. He argues that the integrity of one’s private convictions will likely be undermined, if one grants Nagel’s account of the demands of the impartial perspective:

…this radical form of self-detachment and self-relativisation involves too extreme a separation of the ethical from the political-moral perspective, so that one can no longer explain how someone who has adopted such a detached perspective on her own convictions (assuming that this is even possible) can still regard them as ethically true and good if they have failed the test of public justification.\footnote{Ibid.}

Toleration, Forst suggests, requires not just that we cast doubt on possibility of interpersonal agreement on our private convictions, but also that we maintain the view that they are privately appropriate for us. This would, on his view, require that we regard the epistemic standards that we apply when taking the impersonal view as inappropriate for the evaluation of private convictions. Nagel, according to Forst, gives us little reason to think there is any such distinction.

Forst certainly makes a compelling case that there is some tension between many kinds of convictions and the kind of detached, impersonal, and quasi-skeptical stance that Nagel describes. Moreover, the same arguments that he raises against Nagel also apply to Montaigne and Zhuangzi. Noting the tension, however, is not much of an argument against any of these views. Forst’s assumption is that a doctrine of toleration should leave the private convictions of the tolerant individual intact, while providing reasons not to act on those convictions in the public sphere. While this may be desirable, at least in some cases, there is no reason to think that it is always possible.

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Forst (2014), 484.}
Forst’s own suggestion is that we must acknowledge the significance of different “contexts of justification.” He argues that “the threshold of reciprocity and generality separating them implies that different questions must be answered in accordance with different criteria in the two contexts.” On his view, the way in which we judge the adequacy of the “ethical” convictions that guide our personal conduct and the standards used to assess a potential “general rule” are different in kind. Because they are different in kind, rather than different simply with regard to the degree of strictness of the epistemic standards applied, there is no reason why one’s personal convictions would be undermined by accepting Forst’s view of the justification of political norms.

The merit of this approach relative to that of Nagel, Forst suggests, is that it leaves private convictions intact. This works, however, only if those convictions confine themselves, in some sense, to private matters. There are two essential point that Confucians, Christians, and the advocates of any other worldview must accept, if they are to buy into Forst’s account of toleration. The first is that the particular claims of their traditions cannot be adequately justified to others in the public realm. The second point is that those who hold those convictions ought, on the basis of the first point, to refrain from foisting them on others by political means. These two claims may be reasonable, but it is clear that they are not universally accepted. Consequently, Forst’s view of toleration requires groups to modify their existing convictions just as surely as does Nagel’s.

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397 Forst (2014), 485.
398 Forst has suggested that this distinction originates in the writings of Pierre Bayle. Bayle suggests that there are some normative principles that all human beings can share, and which are thus able to serve as a basis for justifying particular policies across diverse communities, and others (such as religion) that, while not necessarily ungrounded, are not capable of playing this justificatory role. See Rainer Forst, “Pierre Bayle’s Reflexive Theory of Toleration,” in Nomos XLVIII: Toleration and its Limits, eds. Melissa Williams and Jeremy Waldron (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 78-113.
As the dispute between Nagel and Forst indicates, toleration generally involves taking two different stances or perspectives towards a particular idea or mode of conduct. In some respect, the object of toleration is taken to be objectionable, while in another, it is taken to be worthy of, at the very least, non-interference. Nagel links the first perspective to one’s personal convictions and the second to the impersonal view. Both Montaigne’s skepticism and that of Zhuangzi operate at something like Nagel’s impersonal level. They encourage us to see ourselves and our beliefs as just one small part of the universe. Zhuangzi and Montaigne suggest that taking the broader view does in fact change our way of thinking at the more immediate, personal level. This is, in fact, the entire point. They show that, considered in light of the cosmic view, many of our personal convictions seem ridiculous. Montaigne suggests, for example, that Alexander the Great’s personal ambitions can be understood as a consequence of his desire to become as powerful as the gods. Taking the cosmic perspective is supposed to show that such aspirations are absurdly hubristic, and thus to eliminate the cause of his violent cruelty.

At the same time, however, the cosmic perspective does not replace the more specific perspectives within which we inevitably operate. In part, this is simply a matter of necessity. We must act and the cosmic perspective does not provide us with any particular reason for doing so in one particular way rather than another. The problem with the dogmatic monisms that both Montaigne and Zhuangzi reject is that they fail to recognize this. They believe that their

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399 As I shall argue, they accept that taking the impersonal or cosmic perspective does often cast doubt on our personal beliefs. In this respect, they would not disagree with Forst’s response to Nagel. If the cosmic perspective were to eliminate all of our convictions, including our critical attitudes towards some views, then there would be no need for toleration at all. The crucial point is that there is a distinct practical or experiential standpoint which can involve a more limited, non-cosmic form of condemnation of other views.
convictions have some sort of cosmic grounding, and this conviction tends to produce fanaticism. On a more substantive level, however, the cosmic perspective does not replace the ordinary practical one because they operate according to different principles. The kind of experiential knowledge is relevant within the latter perspective has an entirely different basis and degree of generality than that which operates within the former. The knowledge involved is appropriate to a specific circumstance or set of circumstances, rather than to every case. It is for this reason that, contrary to Forst’s concern, the skepticism of the cosmic perspective does not destroy the basis for disagreement that must persist in order for tolerance to remain a relevant category. Zhuangzi can accept that the disputing schools are part of the varied workings of the world, even while finding their dogmatism objectionable on another level.

Even if one accepts that the skepticism motivated by the cosmic perspective undermines certain intolerant projects, insofar as those projects are premised on various kinds of unreasonable monism, we must still consider whether or not there is anything that is intrinsically tolerant about the practical, experience-driven, particularity-sensitive perspective. We might fear that people will simply replace their cosmically grounded intolerance with more locally grounded intolerance. In other words, they might derive their intolerance from convictions that do not rest on very general claims about human nature or the cosmos.

I do not think that Montaigne or Zhuangzi provide any way of ruling out this possibility entirely. There are two distinct reasons, however, for doubting that it is likely to present a difficulty. The first is simply an observation about the general causes of intolerance. Zhuangzi and Montaigne seem to believe that the most significant causes of conflict, cruelty, and intolerance are tied to extremely ambitious claims to knowledge. If this is correct, refuting such claims might contribute a great deal to the spread of toleration. That is a worthy outcome even if
there are other, less common, forms of intolerance that have not been decisively ruled out. The second reason for optimism is their observation that human beings seem to have an inborn concern for one another.

4.4: Toleration, Compassion, and Cruelty

Skepticism produces toleration, in these texts, not only by eliminating the causes of intolerance, but also by removing certain obstacles to the operation of our natural concern for others. Both Montaigne and Zhuangzi suggest that a skeptical stance allows us to better understand the true costs of dogmatism. Intolerance and the greatest acts of cruelty generally require some sort of theoretical support. We are more likely to do harm to others if we believe that we know with certainty what is best for them and for the community more broadly. Weakening such convictions, on the other hand, tends to encourage caution regarding the harms that we are willing to impose upon them in hopes of uncertain future gains.

Such caution does not lead to a specific policy of toleration, in the sense of a clearly demarcated boundary between what is tolerable and what is intolerable, much less a specific political regime that can be regarded as maximally tolerant. As we shall see in the next two chapters, both Montaigne and Zhuangzi regard such hopes for ideal government as more likely to do harm than good. What it instills, instead, is a general willingness to coexist with different ways of living and thinking. Such conditions can, for both thinkers, be exhilarating, but just as importantly they are unavoidable. The delusion that one can successfully avoid them is a pernicious error that leads to cycles of violence and vengeance. Both Montaigne and Zhuangzi, therefore, manifest the concern for cruelty emphasized in Judith Shklar’s work on Montaigne.400

We might begin to see how this general line of thinking operates by examining one of the final passages of the Zhuangzi’s Inner Chapters:

The emperor of the South Sea was called Shu, the emperor of the North Sea was called Hu, and the emperor of the central region was called Hundun. Shu and Hu from time to time came together for a meeting in the territory of Hundun, and Hundun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu discussed how they could repay his kindness. “All men,” they said, “have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat, and breath. But Hundun alone doesn’t have any. Let’s try boring him some! Every day they bored another hole, and on the seventh day Hundun died!

Hundun’s death here is not a result of the ill will of Shu and Hu. They seem to be his friends, and they are eager to return the hospitality that he has shown them. Nonetheless, they do him the greatest harm. This comes about because they assume that the best way of helping him consists in forcing him to conform to their own particular view of what one needs in order to live well, namely seven orifices. What is being condemned, therefore, is imposing rigid standards upon human beings who would be better served by remaining open to fluctuating human experience. The central point has to do with the basis of human flourishing, but it also seems to indicate a concern for those whose flourishing is impeded by the rigid moral systems. If the passage is to have any force for the reader, he or she must come away with the sense that something has been lost when Hundun’s life is destroyed in this way. Zhuangzi does not devote much attention to our concern for others, but this story does indicate that he regards it as real.

*Montaigne on Cruelty*

Montaigne, like Zhuangzi, seems to believe that human beings have a fundamental concern for others that will manifest itself once erroneous metaphysical doctrines are cleared away. This aspect of his thought comes across most powerfully in his attack on human cruelty.

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401 As this argument indicates, I disagree with P.J Ivanhoe’s claim that Zhuangzi does not believe that people are naturally compassionate. Ivanhoe articulates this point as part of a criticism of David Wong’s reading of Zhuangzi. See P.J. Ivanhoe, “Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?” p. 206.
Montaigne examines cruelty, and our capacity for being affected by it, in his essay “Of Cruelty.” That essay can be divided into two parts. The first examines human virtue, as understood both in the ancient world and in his own day. The second discusses Montaigne’s own inability to accept cruelty and the way in which it pervades human life. At first glance, the contrast being drawn is between the rigorous virtue of people like Cato the Younger and Montaigne’s willingness to live according to his own natural inclinations. Cato killed himself in dramatic fashion, “dying and tearing out his entrails,” when it became clear that Caesar would defeat him, while Montaigne follows a more relaxed course of action.\textsuperscript{402} This way of understanding the contrast being drawn would suggest that Montaigne is contrasting his own vice with Cato’s virtue.

As David Lewis Schaefer has noted, however, Montaigne subtly but thoroughly calls into question the value of Cato’s stance. He indicates that Cato sacrificed himself primarily because of an obsession with overcoming ordinary human limitations. Montaigne affirms that Cato “felt pleasure and bliss in so noble an action, and…enjoyed himself more in it than in any other action of his life.”\textsuperscript{403} Montaigne even suggests, although he distances himself from the judgment on the grounds of Cato’s concern for the “public advantage,” that one might believe that Cato was happy to have Caesar threaten “the ancient liberty of his country” so that he could perform such a beautiful action.\textsuperscript{404} Cato’s effort, on Montaigne’s view, was premised on the idea that the human good consists in performing beautiful actions in which we overcome the weaknesses of our everyday humanity. As Schaefer has put it, Cato identifies the good with the beautiful, while Montaigne identifies it with that which is useful for the preservation of human life. Moreover, this line of reasoning suggests, a concern for the beauty of virtuous actions may cause us to

\textsuperscript{402} Montaigne, II.11, 374.  
\textsuperscript{403} Montaigne, II.11, 374.  
\textsuperscript{404} Montaigne, II.11, 374.
neglect the human costs of those actions. This is because their beauty comes precisely from liberation from the needs of the body. Judith Shklar, one of Montaigne’s foremost recent admirers, has argued that he believed that “it is only if we step outside the divinely ruled moral universe that we can really put our minds to the common ills we inflict upon one another every day.”\textsuperscript{405} Montaigne’s move here is of course a rejection of the claims of the religious partisans of his own day, but it may also be an indictment of people like Cato. He too sought to transcend concern for those “common ills,” insofar as pursuing noble and beautiful actions require depreciating the importance of such things.

The conflict between Cato and Montaigne, thus understood, might appear to be a classic example of irreconcilable value conflict. Cato prefers beautiful actions, while Montaigne prefers useful actions. Perhaps we simply have to decide on our standard and then choose which model to follow. Cato’s model leads to firmness in the face of great hardship and suffering, while Montaigne’s leads to sympathetic concern for those who must endure the pervasive cruelty around us. Cato’s is intolerant, insofar as it demands that we subject ourselves and others to rigorous standards of excellence, and accept the costs in terms of human suffering, while Montaigne’s would rather just let others be, in order to avoid those costs.

Montaigne’s skepticism, however, calls into question the presuppositions of Catonian virtue. He will argue, most extensively in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” that an understanding of the limits of human capacities will lead us to accept that we are finite creatures with little to gain from such striving. Those arguments cannot be explored in any detail at the moment, although they will be treated more extensively later on. What “Of Cruelty” shows us,

however, is what a more epistemologically modest view of the human condition might mean for social and political life.

Montaigne presents himself as the exemplar of this mode of understanding. While he does observe the presence of vices in him, he gives no indication that he is truly disturbed by them. The essay serves to indicate, instead, the good consequences that might result if we were to cease worrying so much about rooting out those vices. The most powerful result, he suggests, would be a far greater attentiveness to the everyday acts of cruelty that we see all around us. To use the terms suggested by Judith Shklar, his derogation of the significance of the classical vices leads to a relative increase in the significance of the “ordinary vices.”

Montaigne’s explicit discussion of cruelty begins with his observation that he has a tendency to “sympathize very tenderly with the afflictions of others.” He remarks that he pities most those who are dying, although he does not pity the dead to any great degree. He says that he is much more shocked by his peers who torture the living than by “savages” who eat the dead. His concern, contrary to those of the partisans of the Wars of Religion, is primarily for ordinary human life, not the hereafter.

He calls attention to the fact that Julius Caesar gained a reputation for clemency because he killed some of his enemies before crucifying their bodies. This, Montaigne notes, indicates the “ugly and horrible examples of cruelty that the Roman tyrants put into practice,” since it is within such a context that the praise of Caesar makes sense. He argues that ancient cruelty

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406 Montaigne, II.11, 380.
407 Montaigne, II.11, 380.
408 This seems to me to be one of the aspects of Montaigne’s thought that makes sense only in conjunction with his skepticism. If the religious partisans could genuinely know what was best for the souls of their countrymen, then the physical harms discussed might well seem to be a small price to pay.
involves “nothing more extreme than what we experience of this every day.”

He professes shock at what he sees:

I could hardly be convinced, until I saw it, that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it; hack and cut off other men’s limbs; sharpen their wits to invent unaccustomed torments and new forms of death, without enmity, without profit, and for the sole purpose of enjoying the pleasing spectacle of the pitiful gestures and movements, the lamentable groans and cries, of a man dying in anguish.

Here we see that cruelty need not be tied to any particular extrinsic purpose. There seems to be a human capacity, at least in some people, for taking pleasure in the misery of others.

Nonetheless, Montaigne’s suggestion in the essay as a whole is that cruelty is greatly exacerbated by a human tendency to overestimate our dignity and our place in nature. The cruelty of the ancient tyrants, presumably, is linked in some way to their desire to establish their preeminence over others. The cruelty of the religious fanatics of his own day is premised on their knowledge of how to care for the souls of their neighbors. Because cruelty is so often premised on contestable and, on Montaigne’s view, unfounded claims to knowledge, it can be argued against. Shklar suggests that, for Montaigne, the question of why we should hate cruelty “is an entirely psychological question,” because “he looked first of all into himself and found that the sight of cruelty instantly filled him with revulsion.”

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409 Montaigne, II.11, 383.

410 Montaigne, II.11, 383.

411 Shklar suggests that the difference between Bentham’s view of human nature and that of Montaigne and Montesquieu is that the former was “entirely untouched by misanthropy and he really thought that benevolent activity was a primary pleasure: pity is a painful emotion, and relieving the suffering of others is a relief for oneself as well” (36). As we see here, while Montaigne believes that one can purge human beings of some of their rationales for cruelty, he does not believe that it is purely extrinsic to human nature.

412 Shklar, 9.
While he certainly finds cruelty repulsive, this is not presented as merely a fact about his own tastes. It seems to be a more general consequence of the ways in which human beings are able to sympathize with one another, once they have purged themselves of false ambitions, such as the desire to transcend the ordinary human condition. It is in order to humble these cruelty-inducing pretensions that Montaigne makes such a powerful effort to encourage his readers to see themselves as part of the same class as the animals. He himself notes that he avoids harming animals even when he captures them, and he prefers to let them roam free again.413

In a passage shortly before the essay’s conclusion, Montaigne goes so far as to suggest a community of all living things:

…there is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it. There is some relationship between them and us, and some mutual obligation.

He does not explain what exactly this might mean in practice. Nonetheless, it is striking that here he is making an affirmative claim about our duties of humanity. Earlier in the same essay, he had treated his own compassion for those who suffer as something more like a personal idiosyncrasy than a general feature of human life, much less a substantive moral obligation. That line of thinking went hand in hand with his claim, here seemingly undermined, that the kind of natural “innocence” that he possesses falls short with respect to both the virtue that results from serious effort and the more thoroughgoing virtue that no longer finds any internal resistance after long cultivation.

We must look elsewhere to find the arguments that ground his suggestion here, which seems to point us to a community bound together by a shared awareness of suffering and the

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413 Montaigne, II.11, 383.
human capacity for cruelty. Those arguments, as we shall see, largely proceed by showing that our pretensions to be something more than mere animals are utterly without foundation.

In this respect, Montaigne and Zhuangzi’s positive projects share a common strategy. Both attribute many of the ills in the world to our self-confidence in our own wisdom. When we believe that we have comprehensive knowledge, they suggest, we will behave in ways that do harm to the natural diversity of human beings. Conversely, recognizing the limits of our knowledge encourages us to accept that diversity. In this way, their epistemological positions are intimately linked to tolerant attitudes towards differing ways of living and thinking.

This kind of tolerance is an individual outlook, rather than a political principle. The skepticism from which it arises is not, however, without political consequences. While neither Montaigne nor Zhuangzi seek to provide a set of universal political prescriptions, their positions lead us to think about government in a new, more modest way. This is for reasons that are closely related to those that have been discussed in this chapter. Many grandiose political projects, like many intolerant individual actions, are motivated by monistic claims to knowledge of the human good. Insofar as those claims can be shown to be questionable, the corresponding projects will be called into question. As we shall see, Montaigne and Zhuangzi offer a tolerant view of government in a limited sense: namely, that certain intolerant projects are shown to be unreasonable and dangerous.
Chapter V: Wandering in the Ruler’s Cage: Zhuangzi’s View of Government

莊生齊物同歸一，我道同中有不同。
遂性逍遙雖一致，鸞凰終挍勝蛇蟲。

Zhuangzi created "Equalizing Things [Discourse]" and brought things back to unity, [Yet] amidst my way's agreement there is also disagreement. Even if proceeding according to nature and going “freely and easily” are still the same, The Phoenix is greater than the snakes and worms in the end.

- Bai Juyi (772-846)\(^{414}\)

5.1: Introduction: Quietist or Teacher?

There is a puzzle at the heart of Zhuangzi’s thought, which we find at the intersection of his epistemology and his practical stance. It is captured elegantly in Bai Juyi’s poem. On the one hand, Zhuangzi suggests that all perspectives are equally parts of the whole, and thus should be accepted as manifestations of the dao. On the other, Zhuangzi seems to recommend one particular way of thinking and living. Just as it is better to be a phoenix than a snake, isn’t it better to be a broad-minded sage than one of the narrow-minded partisans described in the text? Can Zhuangzi really make the first claim while also endorsing the second? If not, does this commit him to quietism and indifference? This is not merely a theoretical puzzle. It is closely linked to the question of whether or not Zhuangzi has a political theory at all.

In the second and fourth chapters, I argued that Zhuangzi’s thought leads to a tolerant stance towards different ways of living and thinking. His skeptical attack is aimed at destroying

\(^{414}\) Translation mine. The Chinese text is available here: http://sou-yun.com/Query.aspx?type=poem1&id=12936. Arthur Waley translates the poem as follows: “Chuang-Tzu levels all things, and reduces them to the same Monad. But I say that even in their sameness, difference may be found. Although in following the promptings of their nature, they display the same tendency, Yet it seems to me that in some ways, A phoenix is superior to a reptile.” See Arthur Waley, A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems (New York: Knopf, 1919), 241. While I am following the general spirit of Waley’s translation here, I want to draw attention to the fact that Bai Juyi is explicitly referring to the titles of the first two chapters of the Zhuangzi, which have been discussed at some length in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
the foundation, the theoretical monisms, upon which intolerance is generally built. This establishes that a tolerant individual ethos is at the heart of Zhuangist thought. We must also consider, however, the broader political implications of his stance. Even if the individual follower of Zhuangzi is tolerant, easygoing, and freedom loving, he or she might remain a marginal figure within a community that remains fundamentally unfree and intolerant. This raises two fundamental questions about Zhuangzi’s attitude towards government. First, we must determine his stance towards political involvement generally. Second, we must ask whether it is possible for any institutional or policy arrangement to adequately support the freewheeling life that he urges upon his readers.

Most commentators have suggested that Zhuangzi’s vision is fundamentally apolitical or even anti-political. A.C. Graham has described the Zhuangzi as “in effect an anthology of writings with philosophies justifying withdrawal to private life.”[^15] Not only does Zhuangzi allegedly prefer the private to the public, he refrains from offering a view of a flourishing communal life at all. As Tongdong Bai has put it, the text “does not bother to offer any political solution to the problem of its times because it considers them to be unsolvable.”[^16]

Consequently, the portions of the text that seem to comment directly on the workings of politics or the conduct that one might hope for from officials and rulers are discussed much less frequently than other passages.

Reading Zhuangzi as a means for distancing oneself from public affairs is a tradition with deep roots among Chinese intellectuals. Zhuangzi’s thought, for example, influenced a famous group of friends known as the “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove,” who responded to the political turmoil of the Wei and Jin dynasties (265-317 CE) by spending their time together

[^16]: Bai, 111.
drinking wine, engaging in conversation, writing poetry, and so forth, rather than attempting to overcome the political disorder that prevailed.\footnote{Yuet Keung Lo, “The Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove,” in Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy, ed. Xiaogan Liu (Dordecht: Springer, 2015), 425-448.} While some twentieth century Chinese writers admired this mode of withdrawal, others worried that Zhuangzi’s thought posed a threat to the kind of active citizenship that modernizing a traditional society like China would require. Lu Xun (1881-1936), perhaps the foremost Chinese writer of the twentieth century, admired the literary features of Zhuangzi’s writings but ultimately regarded their influence on Chinese culture as baleful. Like Zhuangzi, Lu Xun launched powerful attacks on Confucian culture. Unlike Zhuangzi, however, he deplored any attempt to rise above the fray of political conflict. What was necessary, he argued, was a willingness to engage in public spirited political projects that would break the shackles of tradition. Lu Xun attacked the young writer Shi Zhecun (1905-2003), who argued that young people should devote themselves to studying the Zhuangzi, for his “fascination with dead skeletons of the past.”\footnote{Quoted in Jianmei Liu, Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 71.} This interest, Lu Xun argued, represented an effort to be the “third type of person” in the conflict between leftists and conservatives.\footnote{Liu, 72. While Lu Xun had himself been wary of politics in his early writings, by the 1930s he had clearly aligned himself with the left. One of the central claims of his essay “On the Third Type of Person” (Lun disanzhong ren 論第三種人), written in 1932, is that writers must recognize the reality of class conflict and their place in it. See Lu Xun, “Lun Disanzhong Ren,” in Lu Xun Quanji, Volume IV (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1981), 438-444. For an English translation, see Lu Xun, Selected Works: Volume III, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 187-191.}

The anti-political reading of the Zhuangzi does have some grounding in the text itself. Many passages of the text, as we shall see, emphasize the need to rise above conflicts and, at least at times, withdraw from public affairs. We must admit, at the very least, that Zhuangzi is less concerned with political reform than many of his contemporaries and most modern theorists. As we shall see, however, his effort to disparage political involvement is a consequence of a
compelling theoretical stance towards politics, and can even be understood as part of an effort to encourage a more fruitful mode of government.

5.2: Wandering as a Personal and Political Stance

While it is true that Zhuangzi often casts doubt on ill-conceived political projects, this does not mean that he rejects the task of governing entirely. In this chapter, I argue that Zhuangzi’s political stance is best understood through the consideration of his account of wandering, the concept in his work that most closely approximates the idea of freedom in Western political theory, together with his account of the workings of government. This approach is useful because his reservations about government are largely tied to the limits that it places on the ability to wander freely, both spiritually and physically, while his more positive remarks on government concern its capacity to facilitate or complement such wandering.

Working out the practical consequences of this general stance, however, is a complicated task. This is because, in keeping with his effort to do justice to the diversity of phenomena in the world, Zhuangzi offers multifaceted presentations of both wandering and political action. There are at least three distinct forms of wandering, all of which are linked to the idea of freedom by their emphasis on independence from constraint. Moreover, all of them are essential if one is to take full advantage of the available opportunities for fruitful action in both the personal and social realms.

We can, Zhuangzi suggests, conceive of wandering physically, in the absence of material constraints, psychically, in the absence of overwhelming emotions and desires, and perspectival, when we are able to undergo transformation in our basic systems of evaluation. These forms of wandering can be helped or hindered by participation in government, and the dictates of government, in varied ways. Consequently, Zhuangzi considers the problem of government
from three distinct perspectives: that of a private individual, that of a minister, and that of a ruler. While he is often taken to suggest that one should prioritize the life of a private person, or even a recluse, rather than that of a minister or ruler, Zhuangzi’s teaching is in fact far more sophisticated than that. Whether one should take on one role rather than another depends on the particular features of one’s situation, rather than general rules. Zhuangzi is concerned with identifying the general conditions of the good life, rather than prescribing a particular course of action.

In the next few sections (5.2-5.5), I shall begin by considering Zhuangzi’s idea of “wandering” (you 游). I shall call argue that it is fundamentally tied to avoiding constraints, which fall into the three categories just mentioned. I will then examine the reasons why Zhuangzi believes that political involvement carries with it grave risks that prevent us from wandering freely (5.6-5.7). In the final sections, I consider the ways in which a minister (5.7) or a ruler (5.8) might govern in a way that does not threaten wandering, but instead facilitates it. I conclude by arguing that Zhuangzi’s account of politics and wandering suggests a distinctive alternative, albeit perhaps a complementary one, to Western understandings of freedom.

5.3: The Idea of Wandering

While the concept of freedom has no precise translation within the theoretical terminology of Warring States era China\textsuperscript{420}, twentieth and twenty first century commentators have often noted that Zhuangzi appears to exalt freedom above all else.\textsuperscript{421} The widely shared

\textsuperscript{420} As Bryan Van Norden has argued, the absence of a term within a particular context need not indicate the absence of a concept. He terms the error in question the “lexical fallacy.” He observes that most people have the concept of the plastic tips on shoelaces, even though they do not know the term that describes them (aglets).

\textsuperscript{421} For recent interpretations of Zhuangzi’s view of freedom, see Hochsmann (2004), Wenzel (2003), Jiang (2011), and Xu (2011).
sense that Zhuangzi defends some form of freedom arises from a holistic understanding of his view of life, rather than an effort to translate some particular term. Nonetheless, that view of life is particularly associated with the activity that Zhuangzi calls wandering (you 游). This is because the idea of wandering in Zhuangzi, like the idea of freedom in the West, is fundamentally a kind of independent and unconstrained activity. We might say that the ideas of wandering and freedom are distinct, although in decisive respects similar, responses to human concerns that are shared across the two contexts. This section will clarify the character of this distinctively Zhuangist mode of activity, while the subsequent one (5.4) will explain the ways in which it is akin to the concept of freedom as it has been understood by many Western theorists.

Wandering is about independence, and Zhuangzi identifies at least three distinct forms that independence can take. As I shall explain momentarily, he discusses physical or bodily independence, psychological independence, and perspectival independence. These forms of independence, all of which contribute to the comprehensive task of Zhuangist wandering, correspond to a significant extent with the false “selves” against which Zhuangzi launched his skeptical attack (as discussed in Chapter 2). The skeptical arguments show that we do not have fixed physical, emotional, or perspectival experiences and needs, and thus we cannot locate a determinate and constant self at any of these levels.422 Similarly, our varied experiences and needs require varied outlets, thus explaining why we need to avoid constraints of each of these types. In the passages discussed in this chapter, Zhuangzi provides us a sense, albeit one that is communicated through metaphor and other literary means rather than direct description, of the positive vision of life that the negative aspect of his thought, the skeptical argumentation, is

422 For example, the view that we must govern ourselves in accord with some aspect of our physical body, with some particular emotional state in mind, or with an unchangeable set of criteria of judgment.
supposed to serve. Indeed, his skepticism serves to clear away theoretical impediments to wandering, while the experience of wandering provides fodder, in the form of varied experiences, for the skeptical argumentation.

**Physical Wandering**

Zhuangzi uses the term “wandering” *(you 遛)* throughout the work. In its most literal use, it refers simply to moving about the world. One episode, for example, describes Ziqi of Nanbo as “wandering [you] around the Hill of Shang.” While the term may be deployed in a perfectly ordinary sense here, elsewhere Zhuangzi develops and makes attractive the idea of wandering freely without physical encumbrances. The first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, “Free and Easy Wandering,” provides powerful presentations of the forms of independence just discussed. Zhuangzi begins by describing the overcoming of physical and perspectival constraints, before providing a discussion of the emotional constraints generated by an excessive concern for fame and public service. The chapter begins with the story of an enormous fish, Kun, that transforms itself into a giant bird named Peng:

In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I don’t know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of the鹏 measures I don’t know how many thousand li across, and when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds over the sky…” (Watson 2013: 1).

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423 Chris Fraser notes that Zhuangzi can be read as offering wandering as a substantive account of the good life, and perhaps even as a virtue. See “Wandering the Way: A Eudaimonistic Approach to the *Zhuangzi,*” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 13 (2014): 541-565.

424 For example, the term “wandering” *(you 遛)* appears in the chapter entitled “In the World of Men” both as a spiritual ideal and also, in the following passage, where it just means physically wandering about: “Ziqi of Nanbo was wandering around the Hill of Shang when he saw a huge tree there, different from all the rest.” *Zhuangzi*, IV, 31.


426 The name “Kun” here is playful, because the term usually refers to fish eggs. Zhuangzi is, therefore, suggesting that distinctions of size are relative and shifting. See Ziporyn (2009), 3 f.1.

427 Li is a Chinese unit for measuring distances. It is approximately 500 meters.
This is among the most powerful images of wandering in the text. This enormous animal transforms (hua) itself freely and travels enormous distances without impediment. It seems, for this reason, to embody the way of life of the Zhuangist sage, who also undergoes free transformation without internal or external constraints.

They physical sense of wandering is also evident in the description of the “perfect man” (zhi ren), who a character named Wang Ni describes as follows:

The Perfect Man is Godlike. Though the great swamps blaze, they cannot burn him; though the great rivers freeze, they cannot chill him; though swift lightning splits the hills and howling gales shake the sea, they cannot frighten him. A man like this rides the clouds and mist, straddles the sun and moon, and wanders [you] beyond the four seas. Even life and death have no effect on him, much less the rules of profit and loss! The text here offers a description of total independence, which allows the Perfect Man to transcend all physical limitations. The passage provides an ideal for spiritual cultivation, but perhaps not a model for political action in the world. Insofar as we fall short of the Perfect Man, we must take matters like life and death seriously. Far from neglecting such topics, however, Zhuangzi provides an account of the ways in which one must approach the rulers and government if one wants to wander freely.

Zhuangzi is presented in the text as cherishing the ability to freely wander through the world, seeking enjoying in varied ways of living. This is why he is unwilling to take up a ministerial post. Doing so, he believes, would threaten his physical safety, and thus he prefers to enjoy a quiet life in which he can do as he pleases. He compares ministers to sacrificial oxen and sacred turtles stored in boxes, neither of which can wander any longer. In another story from the Outer Chapters that calls to mind the example of Peng, Zhuangzi compares his own activity to

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428 Zhuangzi, II, 15.
that of a glorious bird. The bird, flying high above, sees an owl eating a disgusting rat.

Zhuangzi tells his friend Huizi, who was worried that Zhuangzi would take his own position as a minister in the state of Liang, that he resembles this owl.  

Perspectival Wandering

Physical constraints, such as imprisonment, are not by any means the only obstacles that hinder our ability to wander freely. Intellectual constraints, generated by both our basic categories of thought and our emotional commitments, are just as decisive. These perspectival constraints are not imposed primarily by human nature or the human condition, although Zhuangzi seems open to the idea that there are such constraints.  

They are derived in large part from the intellectual influence of our communities. In one dialogue from the chapter “The Great and Venerable Teacher,” a man named Yi Erzi visited a wise hermit named Xu You. The latter asks what the former has learned from the sage king Yao. Yi Erzi responds that Yao has urged him to “practice benevolence and righteousness and to speak clearly about right and wrong!” Xu You responds with derision:

Then why come to see me?” said Xu You. “Yao has already tattooed you with benevolence and righteousness and cut off your nose with right and wrong. Now how do you expect to go wandering [you] in any far-away, carefree, and as-you-like-it paths?  

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429 Zhuangzi, XVII, 137.
430 The existence of fundamental human categories of thought seems to be suggested by the passage comparing human beings to other animals discussed in Chapter 2.
431 Zhuangzi, VI, 52.
432 Zhuangzi, VI, 52.
This passage makes clear the conflict between Zhuangzi’s good life, the life of wandering, and the Confucian account. The legendary Emperor Yao was regarded as a person of exemplary character as well as a great benefactor of humanity.  

Great indeed was Yao as a ruler! How lofty! It is heaven that is great and it was Yao who modelled himself upon it! He was so boundless that the common people were not able to put a name to his virtues. Lofty was he in his successes and brilliant was he in his accomplishments (Analects VIII.19).

According to Confucius’ view, therefore, Yao manifests the standard set by heaven. Mencius claims that when he urges rulers to manifest benevolence and righteousness in their actions, he “has never dared put before the King anything short of the way of Yao and Shun” (IIB2). Whereas for Confucius and Mencius the virtues of Yao represent the highest standards of excellence, for Zhuangzi cultivating them is more like being tattooed or having one’s nose cut off. These were among the primary means of punishing criminals and setting them apart from mainstream society, so Zhuangzi is inverting the dominant views of his own community.

Zhuangzi clearly rejects the Mencian suggestion that these virtues must be defended if people are to avoid a precipitous moral decline that could reach the point of cannibalism. He is also making an even stronger point. He is not just claiming that benevolence and righteousness are not necessary, individually or socially. They are, on his view, positively harmful. The essential question is how exactly they are harmful. Part of the issue, as we shall see, is that they drive us into dangerous situations. Mencius’ claim in the passage just quoted, according to which he uses the example of Yao to lecture rulers on righteousness and benevolence, is exactly what Zhuangzi rejects, in a speech voiced by a reimagined “Confucius,” as likely to endanger

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433 Mencius IIIA4, for example, describes the ways in which Yao sought to deal with the problems posed by a great flood.
one’s life. Part of the story, therefore, is the dangers brought about by the pursuit of these supposed virtues.

It is important to remember that Zhuangzi is not just criticizing the particular perspective that extols the value of benevolence and righteousness. He is indicating the limits of all perspectives. This becomes apparent in some of the images contained in the initial chapter, “Free and Easy Wandering”:

The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn. They are the short-lived. South of Chu there is a caterpillar that counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. Long, long ago there was a great rose of Sharon that counted eight thousand years as one autumn. They are the long-lived. Yet Pengzu\textsuperscript{434} alone is famous today for having lived a long time, and everybody tries to ape him. Isn’t it pitiful!\textsuperscript{435}

The relevant constraints here are those imposed by the limits of our experience and the conceptual repertoire to which it gives rise. These constraints might take two different forms. It is clear enough that Zhuangzi is calling our attention to the fact that what kind of being one is shapes what one takes to be a long life. When we refer to a long life, we really mean a long life for creatures like us. That is, presumably, why Pengzu’s example is relevant, but not the tremendously old rose of Sharon described here, when we consider whether or not a given human being is old. The point is that a given concept (e.g. oldness) is applied differently depending on one’s perspective. This is at least one sense in which we are dependent on, or constrained by, our perspectives. The text may also indicate that the concepts to which we have access will depend on our perspectives. Consider, for example, Zhuangzi’s observation that the “summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn.” This clearly suggests that the entire

\textsuperscript{434} As Watson notes, and the context indicates, this was the name of a famous man who supposedly lived to a very old age.

\textsuperscript{435} \textit{Zhuangzi}, I, 2.
cycle of seasons would be, for such a creature, an extremely long time. This would illustrate the point about the perspective-dependence of judgments about whether or not something counts as a short or long time. It also, however, seems to suggest that the summer cicada has no use for the concepts of “spring” and “autumn.” They are simply irrelevant to it, and thus absent from its perspective. We may not be able to wander, on a perspectival level, because we are limited in our application of a given concept or because we lack the ability to generate new concepts.

To wander among perspectives and ways of seeing the world rules out the possibility of rigidly accepting a self-interested standard by which to oppose the public-spirited standards of the Confucians. The primary danger of benevolence and righteousness here is not their specific content, for example their other-regarding character. Instead, it is their inflexibility. By adopting them, we miss out on other ways of seeing the world.

*Psychological Wandering*

To this point, therefore, we have two modes of constraint, physical and perspectival, and thus are led to envision a mode of “wandering” that overcomes these constraints. Zhuangzi’s view of wandering also, however, contains a third element. He is concerned with overcoming the constraints presented by our psychological, and particularly emotional, lives. One passage describes the “sagely man” who “has his wanderings.” He wanders in the sense that he is independent of ordinary human purposes. This is, in part, because he is without the “feelings of a man.”

This ideal, as developed elsewhere in the text, requires us to liberate ourselves from our greatest fears, for example the fear of death. As we shall see, however, this does not preclude concern for the human world.

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436 Zhuangzi, V, 40.
In “Free and Easy Wandering” Zhuangzi analyzes one of the most powerful human psychological afflictions: the obsession with fame and lofty offices that, on his view, is encouraged by the Confucians and Mohists and which often leads to grave spiritual and physical risks. As we shall see later on, he believes that this desire places great constraints on our freedom. Governing and wandering are compatible, but only given the right sort of spiritual cultivation.

Zhuangzi’s strategy for demonstrating the psychological dangers of the political life is to emphasize the smallness of the stakes involved. Zhuangzi describes the abject dependence of the person who has “wisdom enough to fill one office” or “talent enough to be called into service in one state.” Such a person, the passage suggests, is likely quite proud to succeed even within this limited context. This person has a kind of freedom, in the sense that they can obtain their desired ends, but they cannot liberate themselves from those ends. Zhuangzi may be indirectly referring to his friend and interlocutor Huizi, who is presented as being dominated by these desires throughout the text. He was able to satisfy these desires, and he enjoyed an illustrious career as a government minister. Huizi’s preoccupation with power was so great that he even worried that Zhuangzi was plotting to take his office. In light of a greater independence, such as freedom from human praise and condemnation, this desire for worldly success would be laughable. This was the independence that, according to Zhuangzi, belonged to Song Rongzi. Even this man had his own limitations, in light of the higher freedom of Liezi, who could rise with the wind and “go soaring around with cool and breezy skill.”

437 Zhuangzi, I, 3.
438 Zhuangzi, XVII, 137.
439 Zhuangzi, I, 3.
Liezi was still dependent on the wind. Instead, he should have “wandered through the boundless.” This final form of wandering is presented as a form of activity that is totally independent and unconditional, and it is this form to which Zhuangzi attempts to lead his readers.

Wandering, here, involves a fundamental openness to change and novelty, and thus it must primarily be described negatively. We can say that the wanderer will not be driven by, for example, political ambition, but we cannot say exactly what he or she shall do. Perhaps for this reason the passage describing the official concludes with the declaration that the perfect man has no self, the perfect man lacks merit, and the sage has no fame. Here, self, merit, and fame are ideas upon which less free human beings must depend. They are of primary concern of the Confucians, Mohists, and the School of Names. It is clear, therefore, that part of Zhuangzi’s view of freedom is the ability to liberate oneself from the projects suggested by the rival philosophical schools. Those schools constrain wandering in all three of the ways that have been discussed. They create perspectival constraints by inculcating a narrow set of doctrines. They create emotional constraints by suggesting that governing is the ultimate good or death the ultimate evil. Moreover, they lead one into physical danger by encouraging reckless political involvement.

5.4: Does Wandering Preclude Goals?

While Zhuangzi’s “wandering” entails liberation from many common human projects, at least when they are pursued in a rigid and dogmatic spirit, and it is certainly not a specifically political activity, it is nonetheless compatible with governing. In the sections that follow, I will

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440 Zhuangzi, I, 3.
441 Shen (2009), 254.
examine Zhuangzi’s account of how one might wander within what he takes to be one of the most dangerous contexts, both physically and psychologically, namely public service. I will also argue that this account leads him to endorse a certain kind of government, one that attempts to leave the governed unconstrained and free to wander. The presentation of wandering just offered, however, may seem to suggest that this will prove impossible. If wandering is all about avoiding constraints, we might think that one wanders most freely precisely when one is least encumbered by any definite purposes. Given that governing, like most other activities, requires that one adopt goals and act in order to advance them, this view would have the consequence that it is totally incompatible with Zhuangist wandering. What Zhuangzi is concerned about, however, is not acting deliberately or pursuing goals, but rather taking those actions and goals as fixed for all time. As Chris Fraser points out, one crucial passage on Zhuangzi’s view of spiritual purification suggests that one will retain one’s intention (zhì 志). While we must be able to move among various goals, as opportunities present themselves and the creative power of the dao becomes manifest, we will still work towards particular goals at particular points in time.

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442 Chris Fraser, “Psychological Emptiness in the Zhuangzi,” Asian Philosophy 18.2 (July 2008): 123-147, 129.
443 J. David Velleman has suggested that we might think of Zhuangzi’s point by contrasting it with Harry Frankfurt’s view of human agency. In his writings on agency, Frankfurt distinguishes between humans, who have the capacity for second-order reflection on what they should want and (hypothetical) wantons, who would simply have to take their desires as given without any kind of second order desires about what they should desire. As Velleman notes, Zhuangzi’s ideal person can sometimes seem like a wanton rather than Frankfurt’s human agent. J. David Velleman, “The Way of the Wanton” in Practical Identity and Narrative Agency, ed. Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie (New York: Routledge, 2008), 169-192, 185. While this interpretation certainly resonates with some passages of the Zhuangzi, I do not see any reason why we cannot imagine a Zhuangist wandering freely among second-order desires just as easily as first-order ones.
Elsewhere in the text, Zhuangzi offers advice on how one can “wander” even while pursuing particular aims. These passages reveal that wandering can also be understood as a way of getting the most out of a particular situation. Perhaps the most famous such passage is the discussion of Cook Ding. Ding is visited by Lord Wenhui, to whom he explains his ability to carve ox carcasses. He observes that a bad carver just hacks away, but after much practice he himself has attained the ability to effortlessly slide his knife through the spaces (jian 間) in the joints (jie 节). The action of the butcher’s blade here, as it moves without impediment through these spaces, is described as wandering. Here the butcher’s wandering seems to be distinguished from mere hacking because of its recognition of the actual structure of the underlying material and its effectiveness in accomplishing the butcher’s aims.

The butcher’s wandering is not reclusive or even non-purposive. It has a definite purpose, carving an ox, which makes sense within a broader framework of social practices (farming, feasts, etc.). This framework, to be sure, involves constraints of various kinds. The butcher’s physical wellbeing may depend on doing the job well, doing the job well may require taking the task very seriously, and so forth. The idea is that one can act with a certain kind of freedom even when operating in what otherwise might seem to be constrained circumstances. At the moment of carving, the task takes place effortlessly and these external considerations have no bearing, however important they might be in the cook’s ordinary life. Thus, Cook Ding wanders in the sense of avoiding psychological obstacles, for example emotional disturbances, and physical obstacles, for example the bones in the carcass, to the achievement of his project. The rest of the text would seem to suggest, although it is not discussed explicitly in this passage, that if Cook Ding is truly wandering he will not take the aims of the cook to be final or all

444 Zhuangzi, III, 19-20.
consuming. We might reasonably imagine an advisor or ruler “wandering” in the spirit of Cook Ding. He or she would, presumably, act without internal conflicts, while also advancing definite goals.

5.5: The Attractions of Wandering

If one is committed to wandering, remaining aloof from fixed commitments and enjoying whatever opportunities come one’s way, then Zhuangzi’s skepticism is useful. The decisive question, however, is whether or not such an activity is desirable. Zhuangzi must make this distinctive way of living attractive to others. He faces an important challenge in doing so. He cannot make the case for his position by demonstrating the desirability of some particular end, because his central claim is that we do not have a single end. This leaves the content of his preferred way of living open-ended.

This is, presumably, why he prefers to defend it obliquely, by capturing his readers’ imaginations with wild stories and enigmatic dialogues. At times, however, he pursues another strategy. He demonstrates the desirability of the life devoted to spiritual wandering by revealing the undesirable features of the alternative. He presents human lives that are devoted to obsessive commitments which lead only to misery. The promise of both skepticism and his account of wandering is to liberate us from these pernicious obsessions.

Zhuangzi suggests that most people are plagued by fears that they cannot extirpate, most notably the fear of their ambitions, such as hopes for political success, being thwarted. Huizi’s fear of failing to maintain his status as a powerful minister has already been discussed. Even more importantly, many people are plagued by the terror of death. These fears depend on dogmatic accounts of the human good. The flexible and pluralistic attitude endorsed by Zhuangzi serves to eliminate these fears.
The elaborate mourning rituals recommended by the Confucians may have contributed to the fear of death, by encouraging people to dwell on the passing of others rather than turning to other activities. Confucius remarks, for instance, that he cannot bear to see a person who “remains unmoved by sorrow when overseeing mourning rites.” The Analects observes how profoundly moved Confucius could become on such occasions. We learn, for instance, that he “never ate his fill” when he ate with someone in mourning and also that he “would never sing on a day when he had wept.” Edward Slingerland notes that “while others might observe the superficial niceties of the mourning rituals and then get on with their day, Confucius felt the rituals (even if they were being enacted by someone else), and remained profoundly affected by the emotions they evoked.” As we shall see, Zhuangzi and his cast of characters do not refrain from singing even upon the deaths of their closest family and friends.

Confucius urges his followers not to become preoccupied with spirits and the afterlife. Analects 7.21 states that “the master did not discuss prodigies, feats of strength, disorderly conduct, or the supernatural.” Moreover, when his student Zilu asks about death, Confucius admonishes him by declaring “you do not yet understand life—how could you possibly understand death.” Nonetheless, it is easy to imagine how elaborate funeral observances and mourning periods lasting for months or years might lead one to regard death as a great yet inevitable evil. Part of the attraction of adopting the flexible attitude towards one's own perspective that Zhuangzi recommends is that it allows us to distance ourselves from the fear of death. Zhuangzi concludes the story of Lady Li by asking “how do I know that the dead do not

\[445\] Slingerland, 28.
\[446\] Slingerland, 67.
\[447\] Analects 11.12. Slingerland, 115. Confucius was so reticent about spirits that the Mohists accused him of undermining the basis for moral conduct, on the supposition that people will adhere to morality only if it is backed up by supernatural enforcement.
wonder why they ever longed for life?”448 This remark is linked to an earlier line of thought, in which he asked:

> How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?449

Being able to entertain such questions seriously is one reward for subjecting our most cherished beliefs to radical doubt. In doing so, we call into question our deepest fears. Our existing perspectives have a dark underbelly. They allow us to enjoy what they indicate is good, but they also designate many things as evil or fearsome. The opposing evaluations depend on one another. As Zhuangzi puts it, both aspects of a given system of distinctions, the “this” and the “that,” give birth to each other.450 We must distance ourselves from both in order to distance ourselves from either.

The seductive character of this liberation from one’s greatest fears is evident in a passage from the chapter “The Great and Venerable Teacher.” Zhuangzi describes three friends, Master Sanghu, Mengzi Fan, and Qinzhang. They spoke to each other as follows:

> Who can join with others without joining with others? Who can do with others without doing with others? Who can climb up to heaven and wander in the mists, roam the infinite, and forget life forever and forever?” The three men looked at one another and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and so they became friends.451

These masters embody Zhuangzi’s balance between detachment and involvement. They partake of friendship, while also remaining in some sense spiritually distant from it. They are totally likeminded and totally content with each other. On the other hand, in their concern for the infinite they lose concern for death, which must inevitably bring an end to their friendship.

448 Zhuangzi, II, 16.
449 Zhuangzi, II, 16.
450 Zhuangzi, II, 10.
451 Zhuangzi, VI, 49.
Eventually Master Sanghu dies, prompting Confucius to send his disciple Zigong to help with the funeral ceremony. Zigong found “one of the dead man’s friends weaving frames for silkworms, while the other strummed a lute.” Both joined in song and declared that Sanghu had returned to his “true form.” When their surprised visitor returns to Confucius, his teacher tells him that the three masters “wander beyond the realm” while he is forced to “wander within it.” Confucius asks his, presumably bewildered, student “to men such as these, how could there be any question of putting life first or death last?” He observes that they “borrow the forms of different creatures and house them in the same body.”

5.6: From Wandering to Freedom

Zhuangist Wandering, insofar as it is fundamentally a form of unconstrained activity, has a natural affinity with several different concepts of freedom. The psychological wandering that is possible when one avoids dogmatic commitment to a particular aim, such as achieving one’s political ambitions, resembles in some respects the freedom sought by the Stoics and Epicureans. This is because those schools were fundamentally interested in pursuing a form of spiritual freedom that is possible only once one has purged oneself harmful emotions and desires. The sense of wandering that involves the ability to move through space without constraint, of course, also corresponds to the sense in which we discuss freedom as contrasted with imprisonment. To a certain extent, the perspectival sense of wandering, when one can

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452 Zhuangzi, VI, 49.
453 Zhuangzi, VI, 50.

adopt different perspectives as required by different situations, also has its counterpart in ideas concerning freedom of thought.

The political implications of these understandings of wandering, however, are less clear. He does not seem to offer us a distinctively political sense of wandering that could serve as a counterpart to political freedom. He says nothing, for example, about freedom understood in terms of the independence of a political community and the absence of external domination. Nor does he give us an account of the ways in which particular forms of government or policies might help or hinder wandering. Moreover, even to the extent to which Zhuangzi’s wandering does resemble freedom, it is not readily classified according to distinctions familiar in Western political theory, such as that between positive and negative freedom.

Both negative and positive freedom, for Berlin, involve the absence of particular kinds of constraints. I possess positive liberty, according to Berlin, when “my life and decisions…depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind” and I am thus able to act in accordance with my “‘higher’ nature.” Negative freedom is “the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.” Positive liberty is concerned with internal constraints, such as the passions or false beliefs, while negative liberty requires only that others do not interfere with the way in which I actually want to act. Berlin is concerned with both primarily as political ideals. Nonetheless, both are facilitated (or inhibited) by non-political conditions as well.

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456 Hannah Arendt, among others, has suggested that the original meaning of freedom was fundamentally communal and political. See her essay “What is Freedom?” in Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: Penguin, 2006).


459 Berlin, 194.
In some respects, Zhuangzi’s view of freedom seems most closely related to the positive understanding of liberty. Wandering is a mode of activity that requires a particular kind of self, one that has been freed from many ordinary concerns and united with the dao, and thus posits something like the “higher nature” discussed by Berlin. That being said, this form of positive freedom does not lend itself to the political projects that Berlin fears. Berlin worries that a concern for positive liberty often gives rise to political projects that seek to realize “true selves” while ignoring the suffering of human beings as they actually are. On Zhuangzi’s view, as we shall see momentarily, such projects are generally futile.

All of this appears to give some support to the apolitical or anti-political readings of Zhuangzi that have proven so influential. I will argue, however, that this impression is misleading. It is true that Zhuangzi’s account of wandering does not generate a political theory of the type with which we are most familiar. Like the Confucians and the Mohists, and unlike Western political theorists since antiquity, he gives little or no attention to the variety of possible political institutions. All of the schools of the Warring States period seem to presuppose that government will be monarchical. While the Mohists and Confucians offer fairly definite policy recommendations, however, Zhuangzi does not even go this far. He says virtually nothing about the way in which a ruler might best deal with the economy, family life, and so forth.

None of this, however, indicates that Zhuangzi has nothing to say about politics. He declines to offer an account of the best regime or even the best set of governing practices because he believes that fruitful action, political and otherwise, is inherently responsive to the particular conditions of under which the action in question takes place. Consequently,

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460 Bryan Van Norden notes that Zhuangzi’s Confucian opponents are also particularists about morality, in the sense that they reject the adequacy of general principles for guiding action. The difference may, therefore, be one of degree rather than kind.
generalizations about how one ought to proceed are of little use. All that can be done is to prepare ourselves to be open to new possibilities for acting well. It is for this reason that Zhuangzi’s primary concern is the cultivation of a particular way of living, which allows one to wander freely in the senses already discussed. He is concerned primarily with the cultivation of the personal characteristics necessary to facilitate this. It is for this reason that his political theory is presented as an application of his broader views on knowledge and action. Moreover, because of the particularistic character of these views, he proceeds by examining a variety of risks and possibilities that one might encounter while one plays various political roles, rather than giving a final set of instructions.

Zhuangzi’s most extended meditations on government occur in the fourth chapter, “In the World of Men.” There he provides a series of dialogues, the star of which is a reinterpreted “Confucius” who gives voice to Zhuangist teachings. This Confucius explains how, contrary to expectations, humane projects of political reform such as those endorsed by the Confucius of the Analects will lead to the destruction of those who pursue them. At the same time, however, he explains how an individual might seek to harmonize with the ruler in order to find new opportunities for good government. This aspect of his thought, considered together with his comments on the rule of the sage kings, suggests a distinctive model for facilitating freedom, or more accurately wandering, by means of government.

5.7: The Private Life in Zhuangist Thought

While Zhuangzi’s praise of the private life is not the totality of his political thought, it is surely one of its most prominent aspects. One of the distinctive features of the Zhuangzi is that it is full of admiring stories of those at the margins of society: hermits, recluses, and so forth. Once we have understood Zhuangzi's account of wandering, his admiration for these sorts of
people is readily comprehensible. Interactions with government, and social commitments more generally, entrap one in a web of obligations. These obligations constrain wandering in all of its forms: physical, psychological, and perspectival. We have already seen the way in which Zhuangzi criticizes a minister who can think only of his success within some particular community. This person is surely not capable of the kind of psychological or perspectival wandering that Zhuangzi exalts.

In many passages Zhuangzi’s message is even simpler. He claims that the private life is desirable because one’s physical freedom, and even one’s life, is endangered by participation in government. In the chapter “Autumn Floods,” he offers a powerful rationale for rejecting seemingly attractive political projects:

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the Pu River, the king of Chu sent two officials to go and announce to him: “I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm.” Zhuangzi held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, “I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Chu that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?” “It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud,” said the two officials. Zhuangzi said, “Go away! I’ll drag my tail in the mud!”

This passage elegantly weaves together several of Zhuangzi’s concerns about government. It is striking, for example, to consider the honors sought by the official discussed in “Free and Easy Wandering” in light of the “honors” enjoyed by the sacred tortoise. Zhuangzi’s free enjoyment of the simple pleasures, for example his fishing, presents a stark contrast to the life of an official constrained by his insatiable desire for honors. Most striking, however, is the underlying claim that being involved in government means death. While we can understand the claim as

\[\text{Zhuangzi, XVII, 137.}\]
concerning, at least in part, a spiritual death, it is also quite literal. This becomes apparent when, in a related metaphor, he compares a ruler’s advisor to a sacrificial ox:

Someone sent gifts to Zhuangzi with an invitation to office. Zhuangzi replied to the messenger in these words: “Have you ever seen a sacrificial ox? They deck him out in embroidery and trimmings, gorge him on grass and beanstalks. But when at last they lead him off into the great ancestral temple, then, although he might wish he could become a lonely calf once more, is it possible?”

The claim of these passages is made more general, and also more radical, in Zhuangzi’s condemnation of usefulness in the concluding passages of “In the World of Men.” There he claims that not just government, but all useful activities, lead one to be exploited by others. This creates an obstacle to physical freedom, and even to one’s life. The story involves a carpenter and his apprentice wandering around and coming across a huge tree. The apprentice asks why the carpenter is paying no attention to such a promising source of wood, but the carpenter laments that the tree is totally worthless:

Make boats out of it and they’d sink; make coffins and they’d rot in no time; make vessels and they’d break at once. Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It’s not a timber tree—there’s nothing it can be used for. That’s how it got to be that old.

Later that evening, the tree appeared in the carpenter’s dreams and offered a defense of its uselessness:

Are you comparing me with those useful trees? The cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citron, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs—as soon as their fruit is ripe, they are torn apart and subjected to abuse. Their big limbs are broken off, their little limbs are yanked around. Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don’t get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey. They bring it on themselves—the pulling and tearing of the common mob. And it’s the same way with all other things.

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463 Zhuangzi, IV, 30.
464 Zhuangzi, IV, 30-31.
The implicit argument is simple. Usefulness is always usefulness for some particular person. Moreover, being useful to others means being useful for their purposes, not your own. Finally, their purposes and your own may be fundamentally at odds.\footnote{There is some tension between the line of thinking that emphasizes uselessness for the sake of survival and that which emphasizes the plurality of legitimate perspectives. The former seems to be just one possible stance towards the world and thus to be an awkward fit with the latter. Nonetheless, they are not incompatible. Zhuangzi never says that survival through uselessness is an absolutely privileged goal. He simply suggests that it is often a reasonable and legitimate one. Moreover, the realization of any particular good obviously depends on preserving one’s life. For another useful discussion of these matters, see Thomas Radice, “Clarity and Survival in the Zhuangzi,” Asian Philosophy 11.1 (March 2000): 33-40.} If you love fruit, it’s great to tear it off the tree, but the tree does not get much out of it. The trees that this carpenter uses for lumber are even worse off. In an earlier passage in the same chapter, which will be considered at length in the next section, Zigao, the Duke of She, is sick with anxiety about an upcoming diplomatic mission that he is being forced to undertake. While he is certainly being useful, it is clear that his ruler’s benefit is his loss. We shall see in the chapter that follows that Montaigne retained strong memories of his father in just such a state, worn down by the troubles involved in securing the common good.

The question that emerges from all of this is whether or not Zhuangzi believes that such risks are the full story about public service, or merely a part. In the sections that follow, I will argue for the latter position through an analysis of the passages discussing ministerial service and ruling. There we see that Zhuangzi’s political position is considerably more nuanced than the passages just discussed might seem to suggest. Those passages are best understood not as a complete rejection of government, but rather as a strategic effort to cool the political passions of his readers, who are likely under the influence of the optimistic reformism that Zhuangzi associates with the Confucians and the Mohists.
5.8: *The Risks and Rewards of Public Service: The Role of the Minister*

While Zhuangzi’s wariness about political involvement is well established, he by no means suggests that it is always inappropriate. As I have already noted, he is especially concerned that politics tends to nourish forms of ambition that hinder free thought and action, and also that it places one at the mercy of fickle and often violent rulers. That being said, he also offers models for effective political action. Considering these models does not give us a blueprint or set of rules according to which political action must proceed. Instead, it demonstrates that Zhuangzi regarded his underlying stance as compatible with political involvement, and invites the reader to consider the ways in which government might serve to facilitate, rather than hinder, freedom or wandering. The dangers are great but the benefits, we have reason to think, are also great. The famous sage rulers of the past, for example, are presented as great benefactors. While we should not use their examples to mount reckless projects of reform or to fantasize about everlasting fame, their contributions are nonetheless genuine. A ruler who is spiritually free will, unlike most actual rulers, allow all within his or her community to wander freely, both spiritually and physically. The minister faces a more difficult situation, since reform will only be possible insofar as the ruler consents. Nonetheless, the ultimate object is the same, and Zhuangzi suggests that the prospects are not entirely bleak if one first gives attention to the necessary self-cultivation.

Zhuangzi suggests that the most effective political actor will, perhaps surprisingly, turn out to be the open-minded skeptic. The minister or advisor, given his precarious situation due to the unpredictable whims of rulers, is especially in need of the kind of spiritual cultivation Zhuangzi offers. His most thorough defense of this claim can be found in the discussions on politics that he puts in the mouth of Confucius and his disciples in “In the World of Men.” This
chapter, more than any other, offers us an attempt to reconcile Zhuangist wandering with public affairs. The teacher in these passages is Confucius, but the Confucius presented in the Zhuangzi is not the Confucius that we know from the Analects or any other classical text. This Confucius is profoundly skeptical about the reformist project that his great disciple Yan Hui presents to him. He mocks them and treats Yan Hui like an ambitious fool who has failed to think through the consequences of his own actions. This presentation departs, to say the least, from the Analects’ treatment of Yan Hui, according to which he is an ethical paragon.

This radical reversal, according to which it is Confucius who is most opposed to the “Confucian” arguments of his prized student Yan Hui, is comical. These passages also, however, provide one of Zhuangzi’s most thorough critiques of the dangers of applying the Confucian ethical project to the affairs of government. His arguments concern the psychological conditions that motivate most political action. The crucial claim is that efforts at reform are often motivated by, or at least mixed with, the desire for fame, and thus they lead to zero sum conflict. The recognition that disputes will not be brought to an end by purely reasoned argument allows the skeptic to extricate himself or herself from these conflicts and to limit interventions to the most opportune moments. The set of dialogues that begins here clarifies Zhuangzi’s understanding of political life. Each one brings to light features of government that one must take into account if one is to act effectively and stay out of harm’s way.

The Project: Reform the Duke

This particular episode begins with Yan Hui approaching Confucius to seek his approval for a mission to the state of Wei.\(^{466}\) This is because the ruler there is young and careless, which

\(^{466}\) The Analects refers to efforts to reform the ruler of this state as well, although there is no way of telling whether the ruler in question is the same. Confucius also notes that his own state of Lu has a
has led to the current point at which “his dead are reckoned by swampfuls like so much grass.”

In seeking to advise this ruler, Yan Hui believes that he is following Confucius’ commands. Moreover, he is presented in the Confucian texts as one of his most intelligent and virtuous followers. In the Analects, his fellow disciple Zigong declared that after hearing a particular idea Yan Hui could infer ten more (5.9). Confucius himself stated that Yan Hui could go three months without thinking of anything except benevolence (6.7). The divergence between the two Yan Huis, and Confucius’ distinct responses to them generates the humor of the passage.

While Yan Hui’s eager reformism is recognizably Confucian in some respects, it is certainly not in line with the model suggested by the Analects. Confucius never urges that one should simply throw oneself recklessly into political projects, denouncing evil rulers and hoping for immediate progress. While he does urge reform, he is also well aware of the risks involved in trying to educate rulers whose characters have rendered them rather ineducable. In this respect, he could perhaps accept some of the Zhuangist criticisms offered here. That being said, Zhuangzi does bring to light differences between his own political stance and even Confucius’ moderate reformism. This becomes apparent when he discusses the methods through which (his) Yan Hui intends to proceed. Confucius’ initial assessment is that the effort will put Yan Hui’s life in peril. He declares that the dao does not desire to be “mixed” (za 齊). He leaves unexplained at this point the precise sense in which Yan Hui’s project involves mixture. In light of what follows, however, it seems that there are at least two distinct internal conflicts that will plague Yan Hui’s efforts. First, his humane desire for reform is mixed with a dangerous dose of personal ambition, and this ambition will lead him into deadly conflict with others. Second,

special relationship to the state of Wei. These links may help to explain why Zhuangzi presents this particular scenario.

467 Zhuangzi, IV, 22.
468 Zhuangzi, IV, 22.
there is a tension between Yan Hui’s need to survive, which will lead him to accommodate himself to the ruler’s bad character, and his moral aims, which require resolute criticism.

Zhuangzi uses the dialogue between Confucius and Yan Hui in order to clarify these tensions and to explain how his own skepticism and “wandering” way of life provide, perhaps surprisingly, a more sensible model for practical action. Zhuangzi points to the precedent of the “perfect men” (zhi ren 至人) of ancient times, who made sure to complete their own cultivation before trying to reform others.\(^{469}\) The idea that one should examine oneself before attempting to reform others is certainly Confucian, but this “Confucius” gives the idea a notably Zhuangist interpretation. The self-cultivation involved is not aimed at perfecting benevolence or righteousness, but rather at emptying oneself of harmful preconceptions, perhaps including those virtues, which might serve to generate conflict in the political realm.

*The Desire for Fame*

In “Equalizing Things Discourse” Zhuangzi suggested that theoretical disagreement, for example the debates of the Confucians and the Mohists, is generally intractable. Here he makes a similar argument with regard to political disagreement. Zhuangzi’s Confucius goes on to argue that efforts aimed at moral reform in fact lead to greater and greater conflicts. He attributes such projects as efforts to seek name or reputation (*ming* 名), remarking that “virtue [*de* 德] is destroyed by fame [*ming* 名] and wisdom comes out of wrangling [*zheng* 爭].”\(^{470}\) At the first stage, then, Confucius is concerned about the motives that guide reform. What seems like high-minded moralism, he suggests, often turns out to be a mere pretense that conceals personal ambition. Yan Hui, as Confucius presents him, does not in fact recognize the motives that truly

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\(^{469}\) *Zhuangzi*, IV, 22.

\(^{470}\) *Zhuangzi*, IV, 22.
motivate his reformist project. If he were to do so, it would become apparent why others are bound to oppose him. Reputation and power are zero sum games, and they lie behind the seemingly positive sum pursuit of what turn out to be spurious notions of a common good.\footnote{Scott Cook goes so far as to argue that “we…get the sense from reading the “inner chapters” that knowledge for Zhuangzi had come to lie more directly at the root of all contention and disaster than had been the case with his predecessor [Laozi].” Cook argues that knowledge is presented as a weapon, in the sense that it is \textit{intrinsically a weapon of destruction}, an implement whose sole purpose is the slaughter of the positions of others in pursuit of one’s own reputation and material gain.” See Scott Cook, “Zhuang Zi and his Carving of the Confucian Ox,” \textit{Philosophy East and West} 47 (1997): 521-553, 532. While this captures something important about Zhuangzi’s approach to knowledge, particularly in the chapter under discussion here, much depends on whether or not one regards the Zhuangist idea of clarity (\textit{ming}) as a form of knowledge. Zhuangzi does suggest a link between “great knowledge” (\textit{dazhi}) and clarity, as these ideas are presented in the text. For this reason, Cook goes too far in suggesting that the traits he mentions are part of Zhuangzi’s view of knowledge as such. What is true of Confucian wisdom, which may only be a form of “small knowledge,” is not necessarily true of “great knowledge” or clarity.}{471}

Yan Hui’s project, however, is not faulty \textit{only} because of his concealed motives. Confucius discusses another case, in which one is trustworthy (xin 信) and virtuous, as well as unwilling to engage in conflict. Even with all of these advantages, if one does not understand the spirit (qi 氣) and minds (xin 心) of men, then there will be no success.\footnote{Zhuangzi, IV, 23.}{472} While the earlier case involved a reformer who is more concerned with fame than genuine virtue, this one seems to be closer to the Confucian ideal. The argument here is not that the reformer is too power hungry. Nonetheless, as shall become clear, the desire to avoid conflict is by no means sufficient. Even this virtuous gentleman will appear, from the ruler’s point of view, to be a pedantic critic. Confucius says that his speeches in favor of reform will amount to compelling the ruler to listen “to sermons on benevolence and righteousness, measures and standards” which is ultimately just “using other men’s bad points to parade your own excellence.”\footnote{Zhuangzi, IV, 23.}{473} Whether one intends it or not, this is bound to create a direct confrontation with the ruler, given that “kings and dukes always
lord it over others and fight to win the argument.”⁴⁷⁴ Having gone in with the best intentions, the reformer will be reduced to the following condition:

You will find your eyes growing dazed, your color changing, your mouth working to invent excuses, your attitude becoming more and more humble, until in your mind you end by supporting him. This is to pile fire on fire, to add water to water, and is called ‘increasing the excessive.’⁴⁷⁵

All of this leads Confucius to the conclusion that “since your fervent advice is almost certain not to be believed, you are bound to die if you come into the presence of a tyrant. He goes on to illustrate this point by citing, much like the more familiar Confucius was wont to do, several historical precedents. These examples, however, indicate the futility, rather than the necessity, of remonstrating with rulers. He cites the examples of Guan Longfeng and Prince Bi Gan, who were executed by Jie, the tyrannical final ruler of the Xia Dynasty, and Zhou, the tyrannical final ruler of the Shang Dynasty, respectively. These men were, on his presentation, morally exemplary: they were “scrupulous in their conduct, bent down to comfort and aid the common people, and used their positions as ministers to oppose their superiors.” Their crucial weakness, apparently, was that they were “too fond of good fame.”⁴⁷⁶

Whereas these passages had seemingly moved from an investigation of insincere virtue that acts to conceal the desire for fame to the limits of even sincere virtue, Zhuangzi’s Confucius now seems to suggest that the desire for fame is at work even in the second class of cases. Zhuangzi’s suggestion seems to be that the Confucian virtues are inextricably linked with a concern for reputation. In other words, while these officials may genuinely have been good, they also desired to be known for being good. This led, in both cases, to their downfall, because they did not take into account the reasons, which Zhuangzi’s Confucius lays out throughout this

⁴⁷⁴ Zhuangzi, IV, 23.
⁴⁷⁵ Zhuangzi, IV, 23.
⁴⁷⁶ Zhuangzi, IV, 23.
speech, their projects were doomed to fail. Zhuangzi, or his Confucius, may also be suggesting that the prospect of fame may lead some to neglect what, from his point of view, is the more important matter: the actual efficacy of the reform effort itself.

*Yan Hui’s Plan: Inner Virtue and Outward Compliance*

Having demolished his disciple’s initial statement of his project, Confucius asks him to explain what sort of plans he has to avoid these difficulties. This prompts an exploration of a second tension in political reform, that between its moral aims and the practical need for the reformer to accommodate himself to a ruler. Whereas Yan Hui began with a description of his moral aims, he now gradually moves towards a description of the methods through which he will succeed without endangering himself. As the conversation goes on, these methods seem to demand greater and greater caution, thus endangering the reformist project as a whole.

Yan Hui now declares that he will be “upright” (duan 端) and empty (xu 虛), uniform (yi 一) and diligent (mian 勉). Here Yan Hui is again deploying a vocabulary derived from Confucian ethics, as is evident in his concern for diligence. The Analects, for example, recounts Confucius’ admonition that one must be diligent (mian) in attending to one’s responsibilities towards the dead (9.16). This vocabulary has, however, been combined with Zhuangzi’s ideal of emptiness. This may suggest that he has recognized that his existing psychological condition requires purgation, in order to avoid the difficulties that have arisen thus far in the conversation. Similarly, in his effort to be “uniform” he may be responding to the earlier criticism that his approach was too “mixed.”

Be that as it may, Confucius remains unconvinced.

How could that ever work? Filled to overflowing with aggressive resolve but presenting an ever-changing appearance to the world so as to accommodate common opinion, manipulating the impressions of others to win a place in their hearts, I’d say even a gradually advancing virtuosity will be unable to take shape, but less the Great Virtuosity.
If you cling without transforming, externally accommodating but internally without any self-criticism—how could that ever work?\textsuperscript{477}

From Yan Hui’s brief description of his plan, Confucius has drawn a number of conclusions regarding the way in which he intends to behave. As he summarizes it, Yan Hui will attempt to avoid overt conflicts with others, most importantly the ruler, while maintaining a fixed spiritual position. Most crucially, he is unwilling to transform (\textit{bu hua 不化}). This leads to outward agreement (\textit{wai he 外合}) but a lack of inward criticism (\textit{nei bu zi 内不訾}). Yan Hui, Confucius’ response suggests, has ascertained that he cannot simply charge in and excoriate the powerful for their bad behavior. What he seems to take as the alternative, however, is more or less a devotion to the same goals with a greater degree of outward flexibility. This, Confucius believes, is unlikely to produce genuine reform. As we shall see momentarily, one’s spiritual state must remain open to transformation as well.

Yan Hui responds to all of this with an even more complex procedure, aimed at both saving his own life and bringing about improvements in the ruler. With regard to moral improvement, he intends to remain upright internally (\textit{nei zhi 内直}) but “outwardly compliant” (\textit{wai qu 外曲}).\textsuperscript{478} Moreover, he declares that he will use the “examples of antiquity” to conceal his admonitions.\textsuperscript{479} In doing so, he aims to become both “a companion of Heaven” and a “companion of men.”\textsuperscript{480} What he seems to have in mind here is preserving a balance between

\textsuperscript{477} James Legge reads most of this passage as a description of the ruler, rather than Yan Hui. I have followed Watson and Ziporyn rather than Legge on this point. The translation here is that of Ziporyn.

\textsuperscript{478} 
\textit{Zhuangzi}, IV, 24.

\textsuperscript{479} 
\textit{Zhuangzi}, IV, 24.

\textsuperscript{480} 
\textit{Zhuangzi}, IV, 24. Here Zhuangzi seems skeptical about the strategy described by acting as a “companion of Heaven” and “companion of men,” but he later uses these terms to praise the “authentic men” (\textit{zhen ren 真人}) of ancient times in the sixth chapter of the text. The suggestion may be that, by this stage of the conversation, Yan Hui is defending Zhuangist ideas but failing to grasp their import.
his lofty moral purpose and the demands of his risky political task. To be a “companion of Heaven,” for Yan Hui, means that he and the “Son of Heaven” [the ruler] are “equally the sons of Heaven.”⁴⁸¹ Consequently, he is beyond the need for human praise. This would seem to mitigate the risks associated with the desire for fame, which have already been discussed. Similarly, being a “companion of Men” here involves obeying the established protocols. As Yan Hui puts it, “everybody does it, so why shouldn’t I? If I do what other people do, they can hardly criticize me.”⁴⁸²

Furthermore, his strategy of appealing to ancient examples should allow him to be a “companion of ancient times,” meaning that even when his words are “lessons and reproaches, they belong to ancient times” rather than to him, and thus “he cannot be blamed.”⁴⁸³ This was a widely accepted rhetorical strategy. Remonstrating officials often adopted it because examples from the past carried with them great prestige and also in order to distance themselves from their criticisms for reasons of safety.⁴⁸⁴

It is clear that, by this point, Yan Hui’s approach has become quite conservative, in response to a reasonable fear for his own life. As a result, the probability of genuine moral reform is extremely low. Zhuangzi’s Confucius recognizes this and notes that Yan Hui “will probably get off without incurring any blame” but cannot hope to “actually convert him [the ruler].”⁴⁸⁵ If one risk of the Confucian strategy for reform is that one will be too obstinate and get killed, the other is that one’s criticisms will become so veiled that nothing will change.

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⁴⁸¹ Zhuangzi, IV, 24.
⁴⁸² Zhuangzi, IV, 24.
⁴⁸³ Zhuangzi, IV, 24.
⁴⁸⁴ For a discussion of the ways in which indirect communication was utilized in ancient China, see Francois Jullien, Detour and Access, especially Chapter 4.
⁴⁸⁵ Zhuangzi, IV, 25.
Rather than persisting in his defense of his own methods, Yan Hui gives up and asks Confucius to explain how he should proceed.

The Fasting of the Mind

In response to Yan Hui’s newfound willingness to listen to instruction, Confucius orders him to fast (zhai 齋). Yan Hui, who was famous for being content in poverty, declares that he has eaten only modestly for months. Confucius explains, however, that what he has in mind is “the fasting of the mind” (xin zhai 心齋). This method involves purging oneself of sensory experience and preconceived ideas. As he puts it, one must listen with one’s mind (xin 心) rather than one’s ears, and one’s spirit (qi 氣) rather than one’s mind. He explains that “listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things.” When he says that the mind stops with recognition (fu 符), he indicates that there is a kind of predetermined match established between our expectations and reality. The term fu was used to refer to “two-halved bamboo or wooden segment[s], one half given to each of two individuals as credential for legitimating proper transmission of military or official orders.” The emphasis, then, is on the way in which the fit between these two tokens parallels the way in which our mind finds what fits its expectations. Fasting the mind is intended to eliminate these expectations, thereby opening us to a broader range of experiences and possibilities for response. If successful, the “spirit is empty and waits [dai 待] on all things.”

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486 Zhuangzi, IV, 25.
487 Zhuangzi, IV, 25. On Yan Hui’s poverty, consider Analects 6.11: “The Master said, ‘How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowl of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!’” Trans. Lau.
488 Zhuangzi, IV, 25.
489 Kroll, 120.
490 Zhuangzi, IV, 25. Xu Keqian notes the link between the procedure discussed here and Nanguo Ziqi’s practice of forgetting in Qiwulun. He also points out that the elimination of the self described in both
Shortly thereafter, Confucius explains what this might look like in practice. He declares that Yan Hui “may go and play [or “wander,” you 游] in his bird cage” but he must “never be moved by fame.” He instructs Yan Hui as follows: “if he listens, then sing; if not, keep still.”

The suggestion appears to be that only one who has cleared his or her mind from all preconceived aims can hope to avoid acting at inopportune moments. That, at least, is the negative or defensive aspect of this kind of spiritual emptiness: one will not be led into harm’s way by unruly desires. Little, however, is said here about the more positive or constructive aspect of emptiness. What sort of reform is it supposed to bring about and what sort of opportunities does one “wait” for? This question is left unanswered, but it is dealt with in the next dialogue presented in the text.

Confucius’ Second Dialogue: Duke Zi Gao of She

The language of “the fasting of the mind” and spiritual “emptiness” suggest a purely negative orientation towards the world, devoid of substantive projects and purposes. If this is what Zhuangzi has in mind, then it would be difficult to draw any particular political inspiration from his thought. The basic structure of this chapter, however, calls that reading into question. Zhuangzi’s Confucius does mock Yan Hui’s reformist zeal, but he does so in order to teach him practices that are more likely to bring about success. Fasting and the attainment of emptiness are some of those practices, and thus they must presumably be compatible with the overarching aim of political reform. In the second dialogue of the chapter, Zhuangzi suggests that action in the passages concerns only one type of self. As he puts it, “The first is the original and innate self, which is as free, open, and spontaneous as the Dao itself; the other is the socially constructed self, which is fixed, closed, and constrained by his or her worldly existence. What should be forgotten and lost is the latter, not the former.” See Xu Keqian, “A Different Type of Individualism in Zhuangzi,” Dao 10 (2011): 445-462, 458.

491 Zhuangzi, IV, 25.
human world necessarily involves particular ends, notably familial and political loyalty, and thus that the more negative spiritual ideals are compatible with them.

Confucius’ dialogue with Yan Hui is followed by the chapter’s second conversation, which takes place between Confucius and a nobleman who has been sent by his king on an important political mission. He must go to the state of Qi in order to convince them to do his lord’s bidding. This conversation differs from the one that immediately precedes it in several respects. First, the Duke is much less confident about how he should proceed than Yan Hui appeared to be. Consequently, after he initially sums up his difficult situation, the passage becomes a monologue in which Confucius lectures him. The differences in their attitudes towards their missions may result from their divergent origins. Yan Hui seems to have independently determined, on the basis of what his teachers have told him, that he should try to bring about the reform of a ruler. Duke Zi Gao, on the other hand, has been ordered to do something that he would rather not do.

Second, Duke Zi Gao’s situation has less prospect for physical risk than that of Yan Hui. Indeed, he expects that Qi will likely give him “great honor,” although they “will be in no hurry to do anything more.” Nonetheless, failure would seem to put him at risk with his own king, which he may indicate when he observes that it would force him to reckon with the “judgment of men.” Be that as it may, much of the passage is devoted to maintaining one’s tranquility during difficult tasks, such as this mission, and thus avoiding the internal turmoil that plagues most people.

These features of the conversation are significant because they make clear that Zhuangzi does not regard the tasks of government as something that can be entirely done away with. If, as

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492 Zhuangzi, IV, 26.
493 Zhuangzi, IV, 26.
his Confucius will emphasize, they are often simply the fate that one must deal with, in spite of the perils involved, then Zhuangzi is not merely the disengaged quietist that one might assume if one were to examine only his personal rejections of office as presented in “Autumn Floods.”\footnote{David Wong argues that Zhuangzi can be understood as urging us not to get rid of our feelings (the “extirpation” interpretation), but rather to be resilient in the face of disappointment and loss. As evidence for this claim, he points to the response given to the Duke of She in the passage under discussion. See David Wong, “The Meaning of Detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism,” \textit{Dao} 5 (2006): 207-219, 214. This claim, however, raises as many questions as it answers. Most importantly, we must consider what kinds of commitments Zhuangzi, on Wong’s view, sees as essential and unavoidable, and under what circumstances they become binding. The passage here mentions filial piety and government service. While Zhuangzi does seem to be suggesting that there are circumstances in which we must live in these manners, he certainly does not take them to be universal rules. As we have already seen, however, Zhuangzi does not always take government service to be desirable. Most of the text even suggests that it is extremely dangerous and undesirable. The most straightforward way of reconciling these aspects of the texts is to take the extirpation of dogmatic ways of understanding our commitments to be a prerequisite for holding them in a more flexible manner that will allow for resilience of the type endorsed by Wong.} Finding freedom within the constraints presented by life’s varied tasks is just as important as finding ways to avoid those constraints.

The Duke begins by explaining his situation. He worries that he will be unable to persuade the ruler of Qi to do as his own superior demands. Failure will be met with “the judgment of men,” while even success will lead him to “suffer from the yin and yang.”\footnote{Zhuangzi, IV, 26.} By this me means that the project itself is causing him internal turmoil and misery. He laments that although he has not eaten anything unusual, he is so upset about his orders that he is “gulping ice water.”\footnote{Zhuangzi, IV, 26.}

Confucius responds by claiming that “in the world, there are two great decrees: one is fate and the other is duty.”\footnote{Zhuangzi, IV, 27.} He goes on to explain these terms. It is fate (\textit{ming}
“that a son should love his parents” and it is duty (yi 義) to “serve his ruler.” Perhaps surprisingly, Zhuangzi’s Confucius ends up asserting a claim that is strikingly similar to that of the Analects’ Confucius here. Nonetheless, he urges that one should pursue these ends in a rather different spirit than that suggested by the Confucians. The essential thing, as the previous dialogue suggested, is to preserve a spiritual emptiness. One should “act in accordance with the state of affairs and forget about yourself,” for then “what leisure will you have to love life and hate death?” In other words, if Duke Zi Gao is afraid, it is because he has not yet obtained spiritual emptiness. He is still obsessed with the success of his mission and the preservation of his own life. This creates an obstacle to his mission, and more generally to his ability to respond flexibly to new situations.

What seems to be posited here is a way of pursuing these ends without consciously pursuing them. As Romain Graziani has noted, Zhuangzi is preoccupied with the way in which one can achieve ends that, by their very nature, cannot be brought about directly. One of Graziani’s central examples is forgetting. We cannot easily forget, say, a particular insult simply by willing to do so. Willing it might even make it more difficult. The ends themselves, however, must be accounted for somehow. If Zhuangzi’s life of wandering presupposes independence from constraint, what does it mean to say that we are bound by fate and duty to our parents and rulers?

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498 Zhuangzi, IV, 27.
499 Zhuangzi, IV, 27.
502 Graziani, 443. The example is originally suggested by Jon Elster, who notes that the command “forget it” cannot work quite like other commands.
The passage is somewhat enigmatic, but a partial explanation can be offered. The title of the chapter provides the context of the advice. When one is “in the world of men,” one must consider family and government because they are part of the basic human situation. Perhaps one may achieve at least partial spiritual liberation from the intellectual and practical demands that they are generally taken to generate, but the human world still has its own recognizable structure.

*Acting Within the World of Fate and Duty*

Zhuangzi does not claim that we can avoid the basic relationships of the human world, family and government, but he urges that one maintain a spiritual distance from them. One can be involved with them while also maintaining spiritual emptiness. It is clear enough why this is desirable from an individual perspective, at least if one accepts Zhuangzi’s view of the good life. He goes on to explain how it can lead to effective action in a broader sense.

Spiritual emptiness allows one to avoid the conflicts brought about by language. Zhuangzi’s concerns about language mirror, and are perhaps a more general form of, his concerns about virtue. Human beings in general, and rulers in particular, quickly become hostile in the face of conflict and criticism. This risk is exacerbated when provoked by strenuous and direct opposition. He draws a comparison between this situation and a drinking party where men begin “in an orderly manner” but “end up in disorder, and if they go on too long they start indulging in various irregular amusements.” Zhuangzi, or his Confucius, concludes that “it is the same with all things. What starts out being sincere usually ends up being deceitful. What was simple in the beginning acquires monstrous proportions in the end.”

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503 *Zhuangzi*, IV, 28.
The Third Dialogue: Ju Boyu and Yan He

The first two dialogues of the chapter offer a particular presentation of the human situation. On Zhuangzi’s view, we must maintain spiritual emptiness, in order to protect ourselves both spiritually and physically, while also accepting that we are part of the social world and its ties. To this point, however, we are still without any reason for thinking that Zhuangzi’s preferred procedures will lead to political success, as opposed to simple self-preservation. In the chapter’s third dialogue, which takes place between a minister of the state of Wei and a scholar from Lu, we are introduced to a more practical strategy, that of harmonizing with the ruler. The scholar, Yan He, asks Ju Boyu, the official, for advice on tutoring the son of Duke Ling of Wei, who would later become infamous for trying to kill his own mother. He recognizes that his pupil is “lacking in virtue,” which seems to be a bit of an understatement. The fundamental problem of reform, here as in the previous dialogues, is tied to the tension resulting from the need to criticize the status quo while still preserving oneself. As Yan He puts it, “if I let him go on with his unruliness I will endanger the state. If I try to impose some rule on him, I will endanger myself.”

Ju Boyu responds by telling him that “in your actions it is best to follow along with him, and in your mind it is best to harmonize with him.” He insists, however, that Yan He should avoid following in a way that results in “being pulled in with him [the ruler]” and he should

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504 Watson, 28.
505 Literally, his “virtue is totally corrupted.”
506 Zhuangzi, IV, 28-29.
507 Zhuangzi, IV, 29.
harmonize without being “drawn out too far.” The alternative is to go along with the ruler in a particular manner: “if he wants to be a child, be a child with him.”

The crucial thing, as Ju Boyu suggests through a series of metaphors, is to avoid a direct confrontation. A praying mantis can “wave its arms angrily in front of an approaching carriage,” which is much like the advisor who enjoy “parading” his “store of talents.” The mantis, and by extension the advisor, put his life at risk because of the “high opinion it had of its talents.” The alternative is suggested by the practice of tiger trainers. These trainers avoid directly provoking the tigers by making sure not to give it “any living thing to eat.” Instead, the trainer “gauges the state of the tiger’s appetite and thoroughly understands its fierce disposition.” The essential point is to work with these appetites, because “the men who get killed are the ones who go against them.”

The presentation of the minister’s role here remains largely negative. Zhuangzi is more concerned with what he must avoid than with what he must do. This is a result of his claim that the chief danger is being dogmatically attached to a particular course of action and that one’s aim should be to cultivate an immediate responsiveness. Here we might ask, however, what will attract the ruler to the advisor and thus allow him to take the lead like an animal trainer.

Zhuangzi appears confident that once one has attained spiritual freedom, one will naturally become the object of others’ interest. Implicit in many of his arguments is the idea that we already crave liberation from the constraints imposed upon us both by external forces, such as

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508 Zhuangzi, IV, 29.
509 Zhuangzi, IV, 29.
510 Zhuangzi, IV, 29.
511 Zhuangzi, IV, 29.
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514 Zhuangzi, IV, 29.
laws and punishments, and by internal ones, such as dogmatic theoretical claims derived from supposedly ancient models or contemporary disputation. We know that the possibility of attaining this liberation is genuine because we confront others who have done so. This is why, on Zhuangzi’s view, spiritual liberation is also politically efficacious. Consider, for example, the following description of one such individual:

Duke Ai of Lu said to Confucius, "In Wei there was an ugly man named Ai Taituo. But when men were around him, they thought only of him and couldn't break away, and when women saw him, they ran begging to their fathers and mothers, saying, 'I'd rather be this gentleman's concubine than another man's wife!'--there were more than ten such cases, and it hasn't stopped yet. No one ever heard him take the lead--he always just chimed in with other people. He wasn't in the position of a ruler in which he could save men's lives, and he had no store of provisions to fill men's bellies. On top of that, he was ugly enough to astound the whole world, chimed in but never led, and knew no more than what went on right around him. Yet men and women flocked to him. He certainly must be different from other men, I thought, and I summoned him so I could take a look. Just as they said--he was ugly enough to astound the world. But he hadn't been with me more than a month or so when I began to realize what kind of man he was, and before the year was out, I really trusted him. There was no one in the state to act as chief minister, and I wanted to hand the government to him. He was vague about giving an answer, evasive, as though he hoped to be let off, and I was embarrassed, but in the end I turned the state over to him. Then, before I knew it, he left me and went away. I felt completely crushed, as though I'd suffered a loss and didn't have anyone left to enjoy my state with. What kind of man is he anyway?"  

The tension between spiritual freedom and political activity does not disappear here. The man in question, after all, leaves his position. What is crucial to emphasize, however, is the influence that he has on the ruler. The ruler goes from confidence in his own judgment to a recognition of the spiritual freedom exemplified by this man. Zhuangzi’s Confucius explains to Duke Ai that the man’s attractive power is a result of the fact that his “innate powers must be whole and intact even though his Virtuosity takes no external form.” Whereas the “virtues” described elsewhere

\[515\] Zhuangzi, V, 37-38.
by the Confucius of the *Analects* are those of active political leaders, such as the Duke of Zhou, here the abilities are said not to become manifest in “form” (*xiu 形*).\(^{516}\)

Instead, this person attains a spiritual state in which he or she can respond endlessly, to use the language of *Qiwulun*, to the varied conditions of the world. Zhuangzi’s Confucius notes the succession of things such as “life, death, preservation, loss, failure, success, poverty, riches, worthiness, unworthiness, slander, fame, hunger, thirst, cold, heat—these are the alternations of the world, the workings of fate (*ming zhi xing 命之行*).\(^{517}\) These things are dangerous, and thus they “should not be enough to destroy your harmony; they should not be allowed to enter the storehouse of spirit.”\(^{518}\) Duke Ai then goes on to ask what it means to say that “virtue takes no form.”\(^{519}\) Confucius responds that “water at rest is the most perfect, and therefore it can serve as a standard. It guards what is inside and shows no movement outside. Virtue is the establishment of perfect harmony. Though virtue takes no form, things cannot break away from it.”\(^{520}\) This explains, it would seem, Ai Taituo’s mysterious ability to attract admirers and achieve influence.

Duke Ai’s own reaction confirms that he shares this attraction. He explains that “now that I’ve heard the words of a Perfect Man, I’m afraid there was nothing to my understanding—I was thinking too little of my own welfare and ruining the state. Confucius and I are not subject and ruler—we are friends in virtue, that’s all.”\(^{521}\) We see here, then, that Zhuangzi is confident

\(^{516}\) See *Analects* 8.11: “Even with a man as gifted as the Duke of Zhou, if he was arrogant and miserly, then the rest of his qualities would not be worthy of admiration.” (Lau trans.).

\(^{517}\) *Zhuangzi*, V, 39. Zhuangzi’s view of fate can be understood by considering this aspect of his position in combination with his earlier claim that being subject to a ruler is fate. Here fate is about how we must accept changing circumstances over time, while the other passage concerns the need to accept the particular circumstances that exist at a given moment.

\(^{518}\) *Zhuangzi*, V, 39.

\(^{519}\) *Zhuangzi*, V, 39.

\(^{520}\) *Zhuangzi*, V, 39.

\(^{521}\) *Zhuangzi*, V, 39.
that the life lived according to the *dao*, in which one has attained spiritual emptiness, has a naturally attractive power. Consequently, the minister can influence the ruler by example unless he or she allows foolish predetermined plans and dogmatic ideas to get in the way.

These passages from “In the World of Men” provide a powerful account of how a minister can gain influence while maintaining psychological tranquility and avoiding punishment. The purpose of gaining influence, however, is to influence the actual workings of government, and for this reason we must turn to Zhuangzi’s view of the ideal ruler. Zhuangzi speaks of rulers less frequently than many of his contemporaries. Perhaps this is due to his concerns about nourishing the ambitions of those who were already too enthusiastic about gaining power. Nonetheless, he does present a coherent and powerful account of the best ruler.

### 5.9: The Ruler’s Conduct

Zhuangzi’s model ruler appears to manifest the forms of excellence that are described throughout the text. He wanders freely and allows others to do the same. In this respect, Zhuangzi’s approach to government mirrors his approach to life more generally. In one passage of the *Zhuangzi*, Lao Dan (Laozi), describes the ideal ruler as follows:

> The government of the enlightened king? His achievements blanket the world but appear not to be his own doing. His transforming influence touches the ten thousand things, but the people do not depend on him. With him there is no promotion or praise—he lets everything find its own enjoyment. He takes his stand on what cannot be fathomed and wanders where there is nothing at all.\(^{522}\)

The mark of the good ruler, on this view, is linked to maintaining two seemingly contradictory stances. The ruler must actually have a “transforming influence,” yet it must be exerted in such a way that “the people do not depend on him” and “everything find[s] its own enjoyment.” One possibility is to interpret the ruler here as engaging in a kind of deception. Perhaps he does a

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\(^{522}\) *Zhuangzi*, VII, 57.
great deal, but conceals it in such a way that nobody notices. The view of ruling contained in the *Dao De Jing* has sometimes been understood in this way. Nonetheless, there is good reason to reject this reading of the passage. The *Zhuangzi* is consistent in its rejection of scheming. The general stance is that one must rise above political conflicts, rather than trying to outfox one’s opponents.

Moreover, there is a simpler explanation for why the ruler seems not to rule. His conduct, as described here, simply allows those within the community to proceed according to their own ways of living. Elsewhere in the text it is observed that the “True man of ancient times” is one who “goes along with what is right for things.” The basic policy suggested, therefore, seems to be non-interference. Human beings, the natural world, and the *dao* itself produce diverse phenomena, and should be allowed to do so.

It is important to distinguish between the *spirit* in which Zhuangzi’s ruler rules and the substantive outcomes that result. The suggestion is generally that the spiritual openness of the ruler is linked, as just argued, with a policy of non-interference. This is not, however, always the case. The ruler need not be an inactive figurehead. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which he comments on the “authentic man”:

He goes along with what is right for things, and no one knows his limit. Therefore, when the sage calls out the troops, he may overthrow nations, but he will not lose the hearts of the people. His bounty enriches ten thousand ages, but he has no love for men. Therefore he who delights in bringing success to things is not a sage; he who has affections is not benevolental; he who looks for the right time is not a worthy man; he who cannot encompass both profit and loss is not a gentleman; he who thinks of conduct and fame misleads himself and is not a man of breeding; and he who destroys himself and is without truth is not a user of men.

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523 *Zhuangzi*, VI, 43.
524 The passage goes on to note a number of people who were devoted public servants who met premature deaths: “Hu Buxie, Wu Guang, Bo Yi, Shu Qi, Ji Zi, Xu Yu, Ji Tuo, and Shentu Di—all of them slaved in the service of other men, took joy in bringing other men joy, but could not find joy in any joy of their own.” See *Zhuangzi*, VI, 43. Given that this comes after the description of sagely government, it should
This passage is not entirely about rule, although sagely rule is one of its central subjects. A series of distinctions are drawn here, generally in order to separate a widely celebrated virtue from the behavior often associated with it. Zhuangzi’s claim seems to be that the sage accomplishes that which the virtue, in some sense, aims at, without making virtuous action a conscious goal. Here, again, he seems to be directly criticizing the political theories of his rivals, the Confucians and Mohists. The Confucians urge humanity, but Zhuangzi claims that the sage can enjoy “intimacy” without this theoretical prop. Similarly, he bestows “benefits” (li 利) on the people, just as the Mohists urge, but he does not do so because of love (ai 愛), which they urged on their readers. Zhuangzi indicates, therefore, that the truly important human needs which give rise to these theories will not be ignored. The sagely ruler will attend to them, but he or she will do so because of a direct apprehension of the situation at hand, not because of a rigid theoretical doctrine.

This presentation of government is not entirely negative. It does promise benefits, for example, although it leaves their precise character unspecified. Nonetheless, the passages leave one with a fairly definite sense of what the ruler will not do, without providing any corresponding certainty about the positive program. In this respect, however, the passages are consistent with Zhuangzi’s comprehensive epistemological and ethical teaching. If the world is constantly undergoing transformations, giving rise to new and unexpected situations, then it is futile to claim to possess final knowledge or a definitive plan of action. Instead, all that we can

not be taken as a categorical rejection of public affairs, but rather as a criticism of a certain kind of overzealous individual. I have modified the translation to render it “authentic man” rather than “true man.”
do, whether we are private individuals, ministers, or rulers, is to undergo the kind of self-cultivation that will allow us to live well in such a world.

5.10: Conclusion

I have argued that Zhuangzi’s text is less apolitical than it is often taken to be. It contains a political theory, in the sense of an account of how government works and the motives with which it is generally undertaken. Moreover, Zhuangzi offers an account not only of what government is like, but also of the ways in which it ought to be conducted. He indicates that inculcating moral precepts, such as those of the Confucians and Mohists, is exactly the wrong way to go about it. Doing so only generates conflicts with rulers, who tend not to be receptive to moral scolding. Instead, one should purify oneself of such goals, so as to best take advantage of whatever opportunities for fruitful change happen to emerge. This kind of openness serves as a form of protection for the advisor, but it is also manifest in the conduct of Zhuangzi’s ideal ruler. That ruler enjoys his or her own spiritual freedom, while allowing others to enjoy theirs. As we have seen, Zhuangzi’s skepticism has profound political consequences. He indicates his own teaching, rather than the more explicitly political doctrines of his rivals, offers the key to avoiding violent conflict and engendering the flourishing of diverse individuals and communities.
Chapter VI: Montaigne’s Politics: Beyond Partisanship and Moralism

“You take singular pleasure, moreover, when one displays for you a great leader of an army and a state; one must be an honorable man before one can be that perfectly: our Essays teach how to become one; one must pass through their sieve, if one does not wish to climb to such a height without legs. What school of war and statecraft, in particular, is that book? In the end, the nub of our quarrel is that Xenophon paints himself by means of war and statecraft, and Montaigne paints war and statecraft together with himself.”525

- Marie de Gournay, Preface to the Essays of Michel de Montaigne by his Adoptive Daughter, Marie le Jars de Gournay (1595)

6.1: Introduction

The aspect of Montaigne’s thought that links him most closely to modern political theory is his overwhelming concern for freedom. He seeks to avoid all impediments, both physical and mental, to free thought and action. His skepticism allows his readers to live and think more freely, by undermining dogmatic systems of thought. Some have suggested, however, that his search for freedom leads him to reject politics entirely, in pursuit of the more secure independence of the private sphere. His skepticism, they argue, is consistent only with the freedom of the private life, where one is unencumbered by obligations to the community.

In this chapter, I will argue that Montaigne is far from an anti-political quietist. He does suggest that public affairs, even under the best of circumstances, impose considerable limitations upon what one can hope for. None of this, however, rules out a certain kind of political involvement.

It is true that Montaigne’s account of politics often makes that activity seem tiresome and dangerous. Without denying that he has serious reservations, it is also important to recognize that this aspect of his presentation is linked to one of his rhetorical aims. He seeks to undermine certain traditional motives for pursuing political life, namely claims to ultimate knowledge of the

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best life and best political order. He does so not because politics is always something to avoid, but instead because these particular ambitions tend to make it such. When we enter into political life sure that we know what is best for all, or with the conviction that we must gain glory for ourselves at all costs, we end up stoking conflict and causing great harm. These ambitions have become the most prominent motives for pursuing the political life, because of both the examples of eminent statesmen and the influence of the great philosophers. As a consequence, Montaigne must first undermine his readers’ existing hopes for politics before he can lead them to a more moderate mode of political activity.

Skepticism is what diminishes those dangerous ambitions, and it is also a decisive element of his case for a new kind of political leadership. His case for skeptical politics must satisfy two demands. First, it must show that politics is good for the skeptic. He describes at great length the ways in which politics can ruin human wellbeing. Consequently, he must have had good reason to continue his involvement in public affairs and to recommend it, at least obliquely, to others. Just as importantly, however, he must show that the skeptic is good for politics. He does not make the ordinary claims to expertise that are characteristic of political leaders. Whatever expertise he does have, therefore, must be of a novel sort.

Montaigne’s responses to both of these challenges are connected to two central elements of his political philosophy. The first is his conviction that most political ambitions, whether personal or philanthropic, are premised on a faulty understanding of the human condition. Coming to understand this helps the community, because those same ambitions are the greatest source of political conflict. For this reason, eliminating them tends to produce peace and security. It also benefits the individual. Once we recognize that those ambitions are pointless, we will no longer put ourselves in physical and spiritual danger by giving too much of ourselves
to our political activities. We will, therefore, conduct ourselves more moderately. Skepticism is the primary means by which Montaigne tames these ambitions.

The second element of Montaigne’s philosophy that bears on his understanding of political activity is his claim that reasoning on the basis of experience, rather than according to abstract principles, is both most pleasurable and more fruitful. Engaging in politics becomes desirable, on Montaigne’s view, as a way in which one can deploy this form of reasoning on the highest matters. Moreover, because Montaigne enters politics without preconceptions, and reasons on the basis of his own experience, he is a better able to guide those who seek his counsel than those who rely upon general lessons from antiquity.

Taken together, these aspects of Montaigne’s thought open up the possibility of a more moderate and skeptical brand of statesmanship. This form of statesmanship aims primarily at securing the basic conditions for free thought and action, most importantly peace. It is not only more politically salutary, because it is based upon a more reasonable account of human capacities, but also more moderate in the demands that it places upon those who practice it. Consequently, we can see that Montaigne’s lifelong involvement in political affairs is not at all anomalous, but in fact results from his fundamental understanding of the nature of government and human knowledge.

6.2: Quietist or Statesman?

To begin to see how Montaigne’s skepticism might make a contribution to political life, we must understand the seemingly anti-political aspects of his thought as thoroughly as possible. Many have read Montaigne as an anti-political quietist, who mocks public life from the comfort of his study. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, offers the following account of Montaigne’s politics:
The superior mind will find itself equally at odds with the evils of society and with the projects that are offered to relieve them. The wise skeptic is a bad citizen; no conservative, he sees the selfishness of property and the drowsiness of institutions. But neither is he fit to work with any democratic party that ever was constituted; for parties wish everyone committed, and he penetrates the popular patriotism.\(^{526}\)

While Emerson takes these to be salutary features of Montaigne’s thought, Max Horkheimer finds in him the worst excesses of modern individualism. According to Horkheimer, skeptics like Montaigne “refuse to accept even in thought…anything against which the ego would decline in importance, or where the ego would extend beyond itself in solidarity.”\(^{527}\) We need not debate whether Emerson or Horkheimer’s assessment is more reasonable, because quietist readings conceal much of what is most significant about Montaigne’s political teaching. An adequate understanding of Montaigne’s thought and action requires us to recognize that, while he does subject many political projects to withering scrutiny, he does not deny that political activity remains a necessary part of human life.

One must consider that, in spite of Montaigne’s often stated reservations about public affairs, he participated in politics at the highest levels. While he retired from the Parlement of Bordeaux to devote himself to writing, he continued to be politically active throughout the tumults of the Wars of Religion. He served as an advisor to Henry of Navarre, later King Henry IV of France, and, like his father, as the Mayor of Bordeaux.\(^{528}\) Biancamaria Fontana observes

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\(^{528}\) In one sense, we might take Montaigne’s political involvement later in life as more significant than his early time in the Parlement of Bordeaux, given that it occurred after his philosophical position was better developed. For an account of Montaigne’s years in the Parlement, see Frame (1965), 46-62.
that, contrary to what the quietist reading would lead one to think, “when he died, those who had
known him were unanimous in paying tribute to his ability to handle with confidence and
experience “les affaires du monde.” Montaigne’s political involvement indicates that he is not
a skeptical recluse of the sort that some have supposed. While we cannot rule out the possibility
that his own political involvement is incompatible with his fundamental philosophical stance, we
should accept this conclusion only if no other seems plausible.

Montaigne does not refrain from engaging in politics nor offering a political philosophy. His philosophy, far from endorsing reclusive quietism, in fact supports the kind of active
political role that he took on. This is not to say that politics is without grave risks. Montaigne’s
philosophy places freedom, both physical and intellectual, at its center, and he certainly regards
political participation as a potential threat to freedom. Nonetheless, Montaigne argues that free
judgment can be put to use in the service of politics, where it confronts the greatest challenges
but also fruitful new opportunities for reflection. The open minded skeptic, who has cultivated
individual judgment, he argues, will turn out to be a better political actor than the angry partisans
who are often at the forefront of public affairs.

While Montaigne does have a political position, its substance is difficult to state with
precision. This is, in part, because he seems to make diverse, and even contradictory, claims
about government. Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, that even the scholars who have found a
substative political teaching in Montaigne’s work have been unable to agree about its content.
As John Christian Laursen has noted, “Montaigne has been accused of supporting almost every
recognized political ideology.”

529 Fontana, 7.
530 John Christian Laursen, The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant
we must follow whatever customs happen to be predominant within our communities. Nannerl Keohane and Rainer Forst defend this of this type.\footnote{Keohane (1980), 108.} This reading receives substantial support from his aptly titled essay “Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law.”

Another group of interpreters finds a liberal sensibility in Montaigne, albeit one that is not conjoined with either a theory of rights or the institutional prescriptions that would later become characteristic of liberalism. Judith Shklar suggests that Montaigne can serve as an inspiration for liberals because he teaches his readers to put cruelty first.\footnote{As Shklar puts it in “The Liberalism of Fear, “limited and responsible government may be implicit in the claim for personal autonomy, but without an explicit political commitment to such institutions, liberalism is still doctrinally incomplete. Montaigne was surely tolerant and humanitarian but he was no liberal” (23).} Through Shklar’s account of this “liberalism of fear,” Montaigne’s influence was transmitted to Richard Rorty.\footnote{Richard Rorty, \textit{Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 146.}

Alan Levine has argued that Montaigne’s view of the self can ground liberal ideas about toleration and the private sphere, even if his \textit{Essays} do not endorse specifically liberal institutions.\footnote{Levine (2001).} Pierre Manent, while granting that some of the implications of Montaigne’s position are conservative, notes that they nonetheless mark a decisive break with the Greek and Christian understandings of human life and action, and help to generate the modern understanding of the human subject.\footnote{Manent, \textit{Montaigne: La Vie Sans Loi}, 199-200.}

Others go further in reading Montaigne as a kind of proto-liberal. David Lewis Schaefer reads Montaigne as a revolutionary who hopes for a new kind of society oriented towards
freedom and prosperity. André Gide claims simply that "what Montaigne teaches us especially is what is called at a much later date "liberalism,"") and that this is “the wisest lesson that can be drawn from him at the present time, when political or religious convictions are so miserably dividing all men and setting them against one another.” These interpreters too have ample textual evidence from which to draw.

I will argue that none of these three approaches fully captures Montaigne’s political stance. Those who claim him as a liberal or conservative often place an undue emphasis on questions concerning institutions and rules, questions that Montaigne does not place at the forefront of his political thought. His aim is not to offer an account of justice or political institutions generally, but rather to help his readers to cultivate a particular form of judgment. This is not to deny that the readings discussed above bring to light many important aspects of Montaigne’s thought. He is greatly concerned with individual freedom and the evils of cruelty. In this way, he shares a fundamental area of concern with liberals. It is also true that he does not endorse any particular regime without qualification, and that he suggests a certain degree of deference to custom. This is the conservative element in his work. These are, however, general tendencies rather than universal rules. Everything is left up to the judgment of the wise political actor who, it turns out, is the same open-minded skeptic that Montaigne valorizes throughout the Essays. Moreover, while the skeptic cannot give himself or herself entirely to public affairs, and must always maintain a certain sphere of freedom, there are genuine benefits to exercising individual judgment in political affairs. There is, therefore, a limited but genuine symbiosis that can exist between the community and the skeptic. Montaigne’s political philosophy is largely an

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account of political action and leadership, rather than an account of the best regime, and that account will be the subject of this chapter. In this way, he seeks to change the hopes and plans that we bring to the activity of governing. He leads his readers towards a more modest view of that task, primarily by emphasizing the obstacles that inevitably impede our wilder political ambitions. He is thus seeks to limit the scope of government not by developing a set of institutional constraints, but instead by changing what people will try to accomplish by means of government.

6.3: Montaigne and the Love of Freedom

“No judge has yet, thank God, spoken to me as a judge in any cause whatever, my own or another man’s, criminal or civil. No prison has received me, not even for a visit. Imagination makes the sight of one, even from the outside, unpleasant to me. I am so sick for freedom, that if anyone should forbid me access to some corner of the Indies, I should live distinctly less comfortably…All my little prudence in these civil wars in which we are now involved is employed to keep them from interrupting my freedom of coming and going” (“Of Experience”).

Montaigne is deeply concerned with freedom, and he seeks to obtain it through liberation from both physical and spiritual constraints. In this respect, he is a forerunner of liberal thought. His stance is, as the quotation above suggests, partly a consequence of the religious upheavals following the reformation. Montaigne lived as a Catholic among many Protestants, and had to ensure that he preserved good relations with them in order to survive the wars. He remarks elsewhere that he adopted the strategy of leaving his house totally open, thus unburdening himself of the need to take further precautions. This strategy seems to have worked

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538 Montaigne, III.13, 1000.
well, and he reports that he was able to do what he wanted unhindered, to the extent that nobody bothered interfering in the Catholic masses that he held in his own home.

Commenting on the passage quoted above, Richard Flathman observes that “Montaigne understood freedom to mean the absence of effective obstacles to and constraints upon thinking and acting.”\(^{540}\) These constraints are varied, and thus the kinds of freedom with which Montaigne is concerned are also varied. This passage captures Montaigne’s closely linked desires for physical and psychological freedom. He wanted to be able to move around, as is manifest in his lengthy travel diaries describing his journeys to Italy and elsewhere, but he also believed that his journeys brought about a form of spiritual liberation. Detaching ourselves from situations in which we would become emotionally entangled is one of his preferred remedies for worry. On this point he distinguishes himself from the Stoic and Epicurean thinkers whose influence upon him is often taken to be decisive, and also from Zhuangzi. Rather than hoping to overcome the attachments that cause him pain, he seeks to physically distance himself from them and thus weaken their hold upon him.

Moreover, his desire for psychological freedom is intimately linked to his hatred of cruelty. In work inspired by Montaigne, Judith Shklar has argued that freedom and cruelty are completely incompatible: "systematic fear is the condition that makes freedom impossible, and it is aroused by the expectation of institutionalized cruelty as by nothing else."\(^{541}\) We might consider, as evidence, Montaigne’s account of the cruelty of the French legal system. In “Of Experience” he describes a group of men who found another man bleeding to death in the woods, after having been stabbed several times. They were so afraid that convoluted legal procedures


would somehow implicate them in the stabbing that they could not even bring themselves to assist the victim. Their freedom to follow the dictates of their natural human concern for others was constrained by the fear of punishment.

He also attempts to cultivate what we might, in order to bring out the similarity between his view on this point and that of Zhuangzi, call perspectival freedom. As the circumstances of our lives change, our views of what is good for us can, and should, change as well. At least one powerful example has already been discussed. Montaigne describes his own changing perceptions of what is good and bad for his own body as he undergoes the aging process. He reports that, contrary to his previous expectations, that he was able to find pleasures even in the affliction of his kidney stones. He goes further and suggests that even death, when reconceived in the proper manner, need not give rise to paralyzing fear.

6.4: Preserving Freedom by Avoiding Attachments

One reason for thinking that Montaigne despises politics is because it involves the kinds of obligations and attachments that he consistently tries to avoid. As I have already noted, a central part of Montaigne’s strategy for avoiding encumbrances is simply to stay away from situations where they would arise. He is especially eager, for example, to leave the cares of tending his estate behind. He notes that he was “late in taking up the management of a household” and thus he “had already contracted a different bent, more suitable to my disposition.” He observes that when one entertains guests at home one is responsible for anything that goes wrong, but if one is staying with others and “a footman starts fighting” or “a dish is tipped over, you only laugh at it.”

While Montaigne’s desire to put his mind at ease in

542 Montaigne, III.9, 879.
543 Montaigne, III.9, 885.
these situations is understandable, it may not seem totally admirable. His host, after all, has to worry about all of these matters.

Even more questionable, one might think, is his desire to be unencumbered by moral responsibilities or obligations to others. While he is glad to have avoided the worst evils of the Wars of Religion, he is resentful that he owes this good fortune to “the kindness and benignity of the great.”544 This resentment arises in spite of the fact that it is his good reputation, and that of his family more generally, that protects him.545 He takes his desire for freedom to such an extreme that he welcomes “in gratitudes, affronts, and indignities” that relieve him of duties that he owes to particular people.546

If freedom is in tension with hospitality and even basic moral obligations, for Montaigne, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is also threatened by political duties. He claims that he is generally both unsuited and unwilling to engage in politics. He found that he was unsuited, he reports, when in his younger days he tried to bring his private policies into the public realm. He does not specify precisely what he has in mind here, but he does state that he found those standards “inept and dangerous” when it came to government.547 He summarizes his view of the demands of politics as follows:

He who walks in the crowd must step aside, keep his elbows in, step back or advance, even leave the straight way, according to what he encounters. He must live not so much according to himself as according to others, not according to what he proposes himself but according to what others propose to him, according to time, according to the men, according to the business.548

544 Montaigne, III.9, 896.
545 Montaigne, III.9, 896.
546 Montaigne, III.9, 898.
547 Montaigne, III.9, 922.
548 Montaigne, III.9, 922.
The fundamental conflict here is between the life lived according to the standards set by one’s individual experience, which as we saw in Chapter III can be quite particular, and the distinct demands of public life. Furthermore, as we see in this passage, those demands are themselves varied. Different times, different men, and different business call for different tactics. We risk losing ourselves in politics, as we take on so many commitments derived from external conditions rather than our own concerns.

Some critics have suggested that the conflict between the public and private in Montaigne can be understood as hinging on the conflict between private morality and the immorality required by public affairs. Nannerl Keohane, for example, argues that Montaigne “regards the public realm as peculiarly subject to the "sickly qualities" with which "our being is cemented" and draws a sharp distinction between the comparative purity and rigor of private morality and the tainted, twisted rules for action which must obtain in public life.”549 As we have already seen, however, Montaigne does not always place moral considerations at the forefront of his deliberations. The private life, for Montaigne, is not a life of stern moral duty. Indeed, he hopes to live as independently as possible so as to avoid unnecessary duties. His central private aim is preserving his autonomy, rather than going out of his way to benefit others. This is not to say that he would be eager to participate in immorality. His general stance seems to be to limit the scope of moral considerations within human life, by making them superfluous. At the very least, therefore, he does not take participation in government to be dangerous entirely because of the

549 Keohane (1977), 382. While this point is well taken, it is important to emphasize that Montaigne's concerns are not purely about the relative moral standings of the public and private spheres. While he is certainly concerned with such matters, he is just as concerned, if not more so, with his own personal needs: freedom, safety, and so forth. Dan Engster also suggests that Montaigne finds the public sphere too chaotic and uncertain, and thus urges withdrawal into a private sphere in which we can enjoy peace and freedom. See Dan Engster, “The Montaignian Moment," Journal of the History of Ideas 59 (1998): 625-650.
possibility of becoming complicit in immorality. This is not to deny that, for Montaigne, public affairs require actions that might be morally unacceptable in another context. As Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani emphasizes, Montaigne regards deception as a necessity in the public realm.\(^{550}\)

The problem suggested here is that there are conflicting needs, some tied to morals and some not, that one confronts in both public and private life. Moreover, there is no reason to think that they can all be accomplished harmoniously. Two further considerations are relevant in understanding the nature of this difficulty. First, as Montaigne demonstrates in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” and “Of Custom,” neither philosophy nor custom can provide universal standards for thought or action. Given that we need a fixed standard to maintain a minimally peaceful community, we must endorse, at least publicly, customs that we have no special reason to regard as good. Our concern for our own good, therefore, is largely redirected to the private sphere. Second, great political conflicts such as those of Montaigne’s time are tied to disagreements about public standards, so one cannot even enjoy the minimal peace provided by shared, if ultimately questionable, customs. In these respects, Montaigne’s critique of public life is closely connected to his skepticism.

Given that political life, for Montaigne, imposes alien standards upon our own diverse individual needs, it is unsurprising it exacts a psychological cost. Montaigne learned this from observing his own father, who also served as the Mayor of Bordeaux, upon which he reflected before deciding to take that position himself:

I remember in my boyhood having seen him old, his soul cruelly agitated by this public turmoil, forgetting the sweet air of his home, to which the weakness of his years had attached him long since, and his household and his health; and truly heedless of his life, which he nearly lost in this, engaged for them in long and painful journeys.\textsuperscript{551} Politics, as presented here, is the total negation of the freedom offered by the private life. While Montaigne travels in order to leave his cares behind, his father traveled for the sake of the cares forced on him by his office. This activity is presented as both physically and emotionally destructive.

Given all of these risks, it is unsurprising that Montaigne was reluctant to accept the Mayoralty of Bordeaux when it was offered to him. He notes that he was “informed that I was wrong, since the king’s command also figured in the matter.”\textsuperscript{552} This brief passage presents a number of interpretive difficulties. First, Montaigne does not state that his initial reluctance was in error. He says only that he was “informed” that it was so. He thus seems to distance himself from accepting the judgment. Moreover, the ruler’s command would seem to render his consent superfluous. Consequently, one might think that Montaigne had little interest in serving his city and instead was merely afraid of the consequences of defying this order. Elsewhere, he appeals to the example of Plato, who was “a master workman in all political government” who “nevertheless abstained from it.”\textsuperscript{553} We might think that Montaigne would have preferred to maintain the independence from government that he had enjoyed for some time, had the Mayoralty been merely a request or an offer, rather than a command.

Montaigne’s view of government is not nearly as hostile as these statements would suggest. As we shall see, all of this is part of an attempt to limit political ambitions, in order to

\textsuperscript{551} Montaigne, III.10, 935.
\textsuperscript{552} Montaigne, III.10, 934.
\textsuperscript{553} Montaigne, III, 9, 883.
encourage a more humane style of politics. The passage quoted above, in the context of that particular essay, serves to emphasize his own disinterestedness, which he regards as a qualification for rule, rather than to indicate a total rejection of government. Montaigne’s interest in politics and political leadership pervades his work as a whole. He discusses such figures as Alcibiades, Alexander, Caesar, and his own acquaintance Henry IV throughout the Essays. His treatment of these figures is certainly not universally hostile.

Montaigne presents politics in an unflattering manner in part because his predecessors have presented it in a manner that is all too flattering. Montaigne suggests that the widespread belief that public service is a lofty or ennobling task is a result of the influence of the ancient philosophers. They urged such activity in order to advance the common good, even knowing that it could be individually harmful. As Montaigne puts it, “it is not new for the sages to preach things as they serve, not as they are.” In other words, the common good requires that citizens are willing to devote themselves to public affairs, but devotion to public affairs often hinders rather than advances one’s private good. If people recognized this, they would likely sacrifice the common good for their own private goods, so the sages had to dissemble.

This should not be taken to indicate that only dupes care for public affairs, unless Montaigne himself has been duped. Indeed, his political involvement is more substantial than

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554 Richard Flathman suggests, in a comment on “Of Husbanding the Will,” that Montaigne is trying to cultivate his own self-restraint, in order to avoid falling victim to temptations that would destroy his peace of mind. As Flathman puts it, “he attempted to convey his understanding of the ways in which one should maintain what Nietzsche was to call a “pathos of distance” from others.” See Richard Flathman, “The Self Against and for Itself,” 515.
555 Fontana argues that Montaigne believed that “nobody was especially qualified to rule, except in the sense that all men had the capacity to interact—for better or for worse—with their fellow human beings.” This claim is difficult to reconcile with his statements in praise of various rulers. While Montaigne does undermine conventional accounts of political acumen, he has his own view of successful political activity with which to judge rulers. See Biancamaria Fontana, Montaigne’s Politics, 140.
556 Montaigne, III.10, 935.
many philosophers, both ancient and modern, whose work is unquestionably political. His career does not, of course, prove that the *Essays* are without anti-political implications.\(^{557}\) We must, however, investigate whether or not there is some way of reconciling the life he actually lived, which was decidedly political, with his theoretical stance.

One must, Montaigne suggests, take on a political role only if one is prepared for these risks. As we shall see, Montaigne’s skepticism allows one to reconcile freedom with public activity at least to a limited extent. He does this, first, by calling into question our most grandiose political ambitions, thus encouraging us to adopt a more limited, and less psychologically and physically dangerous, mode of involvement. Second, he seeks to liberate his readers from an obsession with general rules that often leads to a psychologically stultifying and politically ineffective mode of government.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will argue that Montaigne’s philosophy is far more compatible with politics than is generally believed. He does not urge total withdrawal from public affairs or indifference to others. He seeks to offer an account of government that recognizes both the difficulties that it poses for individual wellbeing and also the ways in which a healthy political community helps to realize individual freedom. He defended this complex account of government, however, in a context in which many of his contemporaries were obsessed with seizing power in order to advance their preferred projects. They were, on Montaigne’s view, encouraged by the writings of many of the most eminent philosophers. Consequently, it was especially important for Montaigne to present the risks of politics in the

\(^{557}\) It is important to keep in mind that Montaigne claims to have been very reluctant to accept the office, and to have done so only after he realized that this was the king’s wish.
starkest possible terms. This should not, however, lead us to conclude that his full view of politics is contained in his most anti-political statements.

Montaigne’s political philosophy appears anti-political in part because it is so distinctive. Some elements of his thought appear radical, and others extremely conservative. To understand it adequately we must avoid such labels, which are surely inconsistent with a philosophy premised on avoiding generalization, and instead consider two central aspects of his thought. The first is his attempt to moderate the passions by demonstrating the limits of our knowledge. The second is his turn from abstract reasoning to experiential judgment. These efforts are anti-political only in the sense that they undermine past political thought and practice. At the same time, however, they create a new vantage point from which he and his later admirers could radically reassess the purpose of government.

6.5: Montaigne’s Skeptical Statesmanship I: Constraining the Passions

Montaigne’s skepticism clears away the inherited habits of thought that constrain human action. One such constraint is the passion for political power and glory. Montaigne seeks to undermine this passion by calling into question the assumptions upon which it is premised. This aspect of his project is closely related to the skeptical arguments of the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” insofar as both are concerned with humbling human pride. The primary target of the “Apology” is a religious view about the near-divine status of man. By showing that human beings are not so far above animals, Montaigne hopes to reorient ethical and political life in a way that centers the basic concerns of peace and security, marginalizes grand ambitions to transcend our embodied condition, and minimizes cruelty.

We see in later essays, however, that the desire to transcend the human condition is not always a product of religion. Political life, particularly as it is presented by the admirers of
antiquity, can also reflect this desire. Montaigne suggests that political ambition is often motivated by the hope of demonstrating one’s decisive superiority to other human beings. In doing so, we would become in some sense more than human. Political actors aim to achieve this in various ways. Some, such as Cato the Younger, seek to perform beautiful deeds of self-sacrifice. Other ambitions operate on a more modest scale. Those who possess them, such as the Duke of Burgundy, Marius, and Sulla, seek to gain material signs of distinction in order to set themselves apart from other human beings. Montaigne suggests that the two kinds of cases have more in common than one might think.

As the example of Cato indicates, the desire for political distinction sometimes takes on an impressive and even awe-inspiring character. Many later admirers would praise Cato’s resolute republican virtue. His example was used to inspire others to acts of civic devotion. By undermining the status of this exemplar, Montaigne might also seem to threaten any community that depends upon such devotion. It is for good reason that Montaigne notes that many will believe that he is not in fact devoted to public life at all. As we shall see, however, Montaigne’s deprecation of Cato has a civic aim. The passion for distinction, manifested both in people like Cato and those like Marius, is not an admirable spur to public service, but instead a dangerous incitement to zero-sum conflict.

Montaigne denies the charge of inadequate civic devotion. He offers himself as a new model of for such devotion. His is a more restrained and dispassionate model. His case for it is closely linked to the case against the classical alternatives. Montaigne’s own political career is, perhaps, not awe inspiring, but it gains its attraction in large part through a contrast with the

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558 As Ann Hartle notes, Montaigne regards the supposed efforts to advance the common good of many leaders as mere pretext for personal ambition. See Ann Hartle, *Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), xvii.
miseries that grander ambitions have wrought. He begins his defense of his tenure as Mayor, in “Of Husbanding Your Will,” by noting that some people accuse him of going “about it like a man who exerts himself too weakly and with a languishing zeal.” To this, he responds that he was not unwilling to devote himself to the needs of Bordeaux. He claims that “had the occasion arisen, there is nothing I would have spared for their service” and, moreover, that “I bestirred myself for them just as I do for myself.” Montaigne also admits his own limitations. He suggests that he is best in “tasks in which vigor and freedom are needed, tasks that require direct, brief, and even hazardous conduct.”

He presents his own political practice as largely defensive. He sought only to avoid exacerbating the existing conflict. His critics, he observes, accuse him “of inactivity in a time when almost everyone was convicted of doing too much.” It is true that Montaigne took care to protect himself from the psychological (and physical) dangers of political life. Yet he suggests that his critics err in supposing that individual security and the security of the community are at odds in this case. Montaigne indicates that these aims, at least under certain circumstances, can actually reinforce one another.

In spite of his reluctance to accept the position, Montaigne states emphatically that he was able to separate it from his private concerns so that he suffered no harm. He kept public affairs, in his words, “in hand, not in lungs and liver.” The passages that explain his approach suggest that, if he had not planned to serve, he was not much harmed in doing so. After quoting

559 Montaigne, III.10, 950.
560 Montaigne, III.10, 950.
561 Montaigne, III.10, 951.
562 Montaigne, III.10, 950.
563 Montaigne, III.10, 933.
a dictum from Statius, according to which “passion handles all things ill,” he makes the following remark:

He who employs in it only his judgment and skill proceeds more gaily. He feints, he bends, he postpones entirely at his ease according to the need of the occasions; he misses the target without torment or affliction, and remains intact and ready for a new undertaking; he always walks bridle in hand. In the man who is intoxicated with a violent and tyrannical intensity of purpose we see of necessity much imprudence and injustice; the impetuosity of his desire carries him away. These are reckless movements, and, unless fortune lends them a great hand, of little fruit.564

This passage clarifies two essential aspects of Montaigne’s political psychology. First, it emphasizes the ways in which the skeptic can avoid the psychological dangers of political involvement. Second, it makes clear that the skeptic is also the person who is best able to keep his or her bearings amidst the passions often stirred up by public affairs. These claims are closely connected to one another. Avoiding “torment and affliction” is desirable psychologically, of course, but it is also necessary in order to judge every political situation on its own terms, rather than in light of one’s previous successes or failures.

While Montaigne attacks some of the great political exemplars of the past, he also seeks to demonstrate that his preferred approach helps to account for the success of some eminent figures. He adduces both ancient and modern examples of leaders whose freedom from the passions allowed them to act more effectively and with greater freedom. Both aspects of his position are illustrated in his presentation of Henry of Navarre (King Henry IV), whose self-description he summarizes as follows:

He [Henry] sees the gravity of accidents like anyone else, but in those that have no remedy he at once makes up his mind to bear them; in the others, after making the necessary provisions, which he can do promptly thanks to his quick-wittedness, he composedly awaits what may ensue.565

564 Montaigne, III.10, 937.
565 Montaigne, III.10, 938.
Montaigne reports that he has verified the accuracy of Henry’s self-assessment, noting that “in truth, I have seen him at work, maintaining a great nonchalance and freedom in his actions and countenance throughout very great and thorny affairs. I find him greater and more capable in bad fortune than in good; his losses are more glorious to him than his victories, and his grief than triumph.” His comments here call to mind his remarks elsewhere on his admiration for the leisure enjoyed by Brutus and Alexander before decisive battles. Their serenity at such moments was indicative of their martial prowess and, presumably, their freedom from worry.

Skepticism is the theoretical basis for this stance. This is not to say that all of the political and military figures praised here were skeptics. It seems more plausible to say that these leaders naturally possessed characteristics that can also be reinforced by means of skeptical questioning. Skepticism is nonetheless an important aid in producing the tranquility that is necessary for effective political action. While some may possess the right frame of mind naturally, Montaigne regards such people as rare. An excess of passion, his account indicates, was much more characteristic of his own time.

Montaigne teaches his readers the limits of our knowledge in order to chasten their wildest ambitions. He believes that we tend to overestimate the significance of both ourselves and the honors and goods that we desire. Consequently, we are willing to risk too much to pursue them, often at great cost to our communities. The dangers of the passion for distinction

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567 As we see in this chapter, however, Montaigne does not regard Alexander as a good model generally. He was too concerned with establishing his superiority to all other men, and this led him to perpetrate acts of cruelty.
are not confined to politics. Montaigne observes that “even in actions which are vain and frivolous, in chess, tennis, and the like, this fierce and ardent involvement of an impetuous desire instantly casts the mind and limbs into thoughtlessness and disorder: we daze and hamper ourselves.” Consequently, those who are more moderate are “self-possessed” and increase the probability of victory.

Not only is this stance more beneficial for the individual and more conducive to success, it also seems to be more just. Montaigne remarks that because of his intellectual independence he can recognize the good and bad deeds on each side of the conflict, even while undertaking his political responsibilities. Those who cannot do this, he suggests, fall victim to fanaticism, because their ideas gradually drift farther and farther from reality. He notes the “undiscerning and prodigious ease with which peoples let their belief and hope be led and manipulated in whatever way has pleased and served their leaders, passing over a hundred mistakes one on top of the other, passing over phantasms and dreams.”

Montaigne denies that this independence from passionate political ambition rules out serious effort. He denies that he wants “a man to refuse to the charges he takes on, attention, steps, words, and sweat and blood if need be.” He reports that in spite of his own effort he has

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569 Compare this comment with one of Zhuangzi’s claims: “When men get together to pit their strength in games of skill, they start off in a light and friendly mood but usually end up in a dark and angry one, and if they go on too long, they start resorting to various underhanded tricks. When men meet at some ceremony to drink, they start off in an orderly manner but usually end up in disorder; and if they go on too long, they start indulging in various irregular amusements. It is the same with all things. What starts out being sincere usually ends up being deceitful. What was simple in the beginning acquires monstrous proportions in the end.” See Zhuangzi, IV, 28.
570 Montaigne, III.10, 938. This passage bears a strong resemblance to a passage in the Zhuangzi, discussed in the previous chapter, on the tendency for passionate conflict to arise from simple games.
571 Montaigne, III.10, 942.
572 Montaigne, III.10, 943.
573 Montaigne, III.10, 936.
been able “to take part in public office without departing one nail’s breadth from myself, and to give myself to others without taking myself from myself.” This stance allows him to live a good life regardless of the outcome of these public projects which, as Montaigne notes, are largely outside of our control.

Montaigne notes that he is willing to do whatever duty required, but also that he “easily forgot those that ambition mixes up with duty and covers with its name.” He suggests that personal ambition is the true source of much of what passes for civic devotion. In the sections already discussed, we saw how private concern for honor can lead to great conflicts. Here he attempts to minimize the significance of honor for human life. He grants that some, such as Alexander and Alcibiades, may be unable to do without it. He remarks that “this malady is perhaps excusable in so strong and full a soul” but that for most of the “dwarfish and puny soullets” who “behave like vain baboons and think to spread their name for having rightly judged an affair or continued the order of the guards at a city gate, the more they hope to raise their heads, the more they show their tail.” While his point at first seems to be that we must distinguish small pseudo-honors from truly great honors, he goes on to say that “in proportion as a good deed is more brilliant, I deduct from its goodness the suspicion I have that it was performed more to be brilliant than to be good.” In other words, even seemingly great deeds often result from motives that are petty and thus undeserving of honor. He then returns to his

Montaigne, III.10, 937.
Montaigne, III.10, 951.
Montaigne, III.10, 952. It is interesting to consider this passage together with Zhuangzi’s attack on the pride of officials: “Therefore a man who has wisdom enough to fill one office effectively, good conduct enough to impress one community, virtue enough to please one ruler, or talent enough to be called into service in one state, has the same kind of self-pride as these little creatures. Song Rongzi would certainly burst out laughing at such a man.” See Zhuangzi, I, 3.
Montaigne, III.10, 953.
account of his own conduct, noting that “innovation has great luster, but it is forbidden in these times, when we are hard pressed and have to defend ourselves mainly against innovations.”

Montaigne’s detached and rather inactive mode of governing, therefore, was particularly well suited to his age.

The love of honor is dangerous, according to Montaigne, not only in his own time, but also in the ancient world. Cato the Younger chose to kill himself rather than submit to Caesar, supposedly because of his commitment to the republican order. This earned him the praise of many admirers of that order, both ancient and modern. Montaigne, however, wonders whether his sacrifice really did anyone any good. It did not stop Caesar, or ensure the wellbeing of his community. If anything, it seems to have reflected his desire to demonstrate his superiority through beautiful deeds. His lofty attention to personal excellence, Montaigne suggests, distracted him from ordinary human concerns such as the happiness of his neighbors. As he observes, “in Cato we see very clearly that his is a pace strained far above the ordinary; in the brave exploits of his life and in his death we feel that he is always mounted on his high horse.”

Moreover, Montaigne suggests that a belief in one’s own excellence can weaken our capacity for compassion towards others. His most important example is that of Alexander. He describes that ruler becoming so angered by the courage with which a man named Betis resisted his attack that he “ordered Betis’ heels to be pierced through and had him thus dragged, alive, torn, and dismembered, behind a cart.” Alexander, Montaigne speculates, may have regarded courage

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578 Montaigne, III.10, 953.
579 Richard Flathman suggests, quite plausibly, that Montaigne takes Cato to have been most concerned with acting as a spectator of his own excellence. See “The Self Against and For Itself,” 56.
580 Montaigne, III.12, 965.
581 Montaigne, I.1, 5.
as “so peculiarly his own that he could not bear to see it at this height in another without passionately envious spite”.

It is not only those of the stature of Cato and Alexander, of course, who fall under the influence of grand political ambitions. Montaigne points, for example, to the conflict between the Roman leaders Marius and Sulla, which he believes began the downfall of the Roman Republic, as a manifestation of the human tendency to seek distinction by overvaluing what is truly trivial. Both played crucial roles in the Roman campaign against Jugurtha, the King of Numidia. Sulla gained acclaim, much to Marius’ chagrin, for capturing the defeated Jugurtha. Plutarch’s *Life of Marius* describes the scenario as follows:

This was the first seed of that bitter and incurable hatred between Marius and Sulla, which nearly brought Rome to ruin. For many wished Sulla to have the glory of the affair because they hated Marius, and Sulla himself had a seal-ring made, which he used to wear, on which was engraved the surrender of Jugurtha to him by Bocchus. By constantly using this ring Sulla provoked Marius, who was an ambitious man, loath to share his glory with another, and quarrelsome. And the enemies of Marius gave Sulla most encouragement, by attributing the first and greatest successes of the war to Metellus, but the last, and the termination of it, to Sulla, so that the people might cease admiring Marius and giving him their chief allegiance.

The ring becomes, for reasons that are not at all rational, a symbol of personal superiority. Marius believes that he must set himself apart from Sulla, and is willing to be drawn into conflict on the basis of the slightest provocation. Montaigne also points to an example that occurred closer to his own time and place. The story involves a particular Duke of Burgundy, whose ambitions also centered on a worthless object that became a mark of distinction. The relevant episode is not described in this essay, but it is assessed in the writings of Philippe de Commines. Commines was a contemporary observer who served both in the court of Burgundy and that of

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582 Montaigne, I.1, 6.
583 Montaigne, III.10, 947.
its French enemies. The Duke of Burgundy became embroiled in a conflict with the Swiss Confederacy that would ultimately destroy him. The description of the Duke offered by Commines illustrates precisely the errors discussed by Montaigne:

And what was the cause of this war? A miserable cart-load of sheep-skins that the Count of Romont [a follower of the Duke] had taken from a Swiss, in his passage through his estates. If God Almighty had not forsaken the Duke of Burgundy, it is scarce conceivable he would have exposed himself to such great dangers upon so small and trivial an occasion, especially considering the offers the Swiss had made him, and that his conquest of such enemies would yield him neither profit nor honour; for at that time the Swiss were not in such esteem as now, and no people in the world could be poorer.\(^5\)

The Duke of Burgundy was, according to Montaigne, unable to distinguish between what was truly important and conducive to his wellbeing and practically worthless cargo. If the Duke were better able to detach himself from the passions of the moment and his obsession with his own greatness, then he would be able to better advance his own interests and those of his people.

The desire for supremacy that leads to disastrous conflict is not only manifested by major political actors. It is also, on Montaigne’s view, reflected in the devotion of ordinary people to their factions. Montaigne observes that his countrymen had become fanatical partisans, who were always on the lookout for any trivial characteristic that might demonstrate the superiority of their preferred leaders. Their partisanship, like the passions of Marius, Sulla, and the Duke of Burgundy, is rooted in an unreasonable overestimation of the significance of insignificant things. This, on Montaigne’s view, is what allows these petty feuds among elites to degenerate into massive conflicts. As he puts it, he rejects “this bad form of arguing: ‘He is of the League, for he admires the grace of Monsieur de Guise.’ ‘The activity of the king of Navarre amazes him: he is

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What Montaigne is describing is an inability to judge adequately when considering those who arouse our passionate commitment to superiority.

There are two related errors here, both of which are remedied by the sort of skeptical detachment that Montaigne teaches. First, we overestimate the importance of minor slights and losses, such as those that motivated Marius and Sulla, and overvalue the significance of our own distinction, as in the case of Cato’s rapturous self-sacrifice. Both tend to distract us from more practical political aims such as peace and security. Second, we tend to associate one kind of distinction with excellence in general, as when we become partisans of some leader on the basis of eloquence or good looks. These errors both involve taking some particular object or trait as an ultimate and comprehensive source of political guidance when doing so is both intellectually unjustifiable and politically dangerous.

Taken together, these passages indicate the outlines of Montaigne’s model of political conflict. Those who are overly concerned with honor, and thus extremely sensitive to perceived slights, take offense at some particular deed committed by others who are probably quite like themselves. These elite feuds draw in fanatical partisans, who do not adequately judge the merits of the case in question, but instead line up to defend their preferred faction. The petty squabbles of Marius, Sulla, and the Duke of Burgundy may seem far removed from the republican virtue of Cato. Montaigne’s skepticism, however, unmask both in a similar manner. As we have already seen, Cato’s fanatical commitment to virtue, for Montaigne, reflects his desire to demonstrate his superiority to ordinary human beings. He connects this desire to transcend the human condition in general, and mortality in particular, to the acts of fanatical cruelty that he saw during his own time.

\[586\] Montaigne, III.10, 942.
Marius, Sulla, and the Duke of Burgundy manifest the same desire, albeit in a more ridiculous way. All of them seek an honor that is immortal and immune to the vicissitudes of fortune. At the same time, however, this ambition is thwarted by the most mundane of causes. Marius finds his honor threatened by Marius’ ring and Burgundy fights over the sheepskins that were denied to him. Their very hopes for imperishable glory are undermined by the perishability of the goods upon which said glory depends. Montaigne’s skepticism destroys all doctrines that would provide a basis for rising above the ordinary human condition. In this way, it chastens not only the ambitions of both great leaders like Alexander and Cato, but also those of ordinary partisans in the Wars of Religion.

### 6.6: Montaigne’s Skeptical Statesmanship II: Experience and Judgment

Montaigne gave ample evidence of his own belief in his aptitude for governing, both in his writings and in his political career. Both are obscured, to a certain extent, by his attempt to play down his career in order to avoid stoking wild ambitions and sectarian strife. The case for a skeptical politics, he thus indicates, must be made in a manner consistent with its theoretical substance. Nonetheless, by considering Montaigne’s statements on his own career and politics generally, we can come to see why he felt qualified to take office, and why he was willing to do so. We have seen that his ability to remain dispassionate and to avoid grand ambitions allows him to engage in politics without threatening his own spiritual freedom. The second crucial aspect of his preferred mode of skeptical statesmanship is the ability to take one’s guidance from experience and the contingent features of particular situations, rather than general rules. Montaigne often indicates his attentiveness to, and pleasure in, “the infinite diversity of human actions.” He claims that the rigid systems of the legislators of the past were unable to deal with
this diversity.\textsuperscript{587} Consequently, their laws produced misery. His own political philosophy, however, points the way to a new form of statesmanship that is true to the phenomena and thus more humane. To understand this line of thinking, we might first turn to Montaigne’s presentation of the practice of giving political advice.

While Montaigne seems to have accepted the mayoralty with some reluctance, he does indicate a readiness to engage in an advisory role. Given his oft-stated concerns about committing himself to political tasks, it is perhaps surprising that he describes the role of an advisor to a king as one of his preferred modes of employment. Moreover, he makes this statement in his final essay and his most powerful statement on his own preferred alternative to dogmatic rationalism, “Of Experience.” He asserts that he is qualified for this role by his “fidelity, judgment, and independence.”\textsuperscript{588} He would, he argues, be able to teach his sovereign effectively, because he is better able to recognize the complexity of human character than those who offer “general, schoolmasterly lessons.”\textsuperscript{589} Moreover, his independence of mind would allow him to tell his ruler uncomfortable truths that would, ultimately, prove beneficial.

Montaigne seems to take pride in the fact that his own efforts at self-examination prepare him “also to judge passably of others,” and he observes that “there are few things of which I speak more felicitously and excusably.”\textsuperscript{590} He goes so far as to say that he is able to understand his friends better than they understand themselves. His talent as an observer is derived from his willingness to deploy experiential reasoning that is attentive to the diversity of human phenomenon. As he puts it, “I do not attempt to arrange this infinite variety of actions, so

\textsuperscript{587} This quotation, and his criticism of the legislators, are found in XXX.13, 993.
\textsuperscript{588} Montaigne, III.13, 1006.
\textsuperscript{589} Montaigne, III.13, 1005.
\textsuperscript{590} Montaigne, III.13, 1005.
diverse and disconnected, into certain types and categories, and distribute my lots and divisions distinctly into recognized classes and sections.\textsuperscript{591} This kind of reasoning is particularly suited to assessing political life because it can do justice to the varied nature of human beings. Even rulers lack unity of character. He notes that King Perseus of Macedon’s activities were eclectic, in the sense that he “kept wandering through every type of life and portraying such a flighty and erratic character that neither he nor anyone else knew what kind of a man he was.” Montaigne immediately notes, however, that this description seems to him to “fit nearly everybody.”\textsuperscript{592} He points out that he knows a contemporary ruler, who is generally assumed to be Henry IV, who manifests this kind of diversity to a remarkable degree.\textsuperscript{593}

Understanding political affairs is a matter of understanding human beings. Such understanding could be reduced to a set of general maxims only if human nature was sufficiently constant to allow for it. Montaigne’s point here is that even excellent human beings, for example Henry IV, will exhibit a high degree of variety in their choices and experiences. The entirety of the Essays documents the ever-fluctuating experiences of another such human being, Montaigne himself. His turn from reason, by which he means an abstract and generalizing kind of rationality, to an attempt to learn from the contingencies of experience, which Montaigne defends in “Of Experience,” is motivated in this way.

Aside from his carefully cultivated experiential judgment, Montaigne’s claim to excellence as an advisor to rulers is that he will speak honestly, whereas others say only what

\textsuperscript{591} Montaigne, III.13, 1004.
\textsuperscript{592} Montaigne, III.13, 1005.
\textsuperscript{593} As we have already seen, it is the world and not just the minds of these rulers that are diverse and thus comprehensible only to a mind that is attentive to particularity. This point is tied to Montaigne’s rejection of the claims that human affairs can be understood in terms of general laws and that moral and political activity can proceed according to general rules. See Schiffman, “Montaigne and the Rise of Early Modern Skepticism.”
they think the ruler wants to hear. This addresses a problem that Montaigne takes to be endemic to kings. He argues that “there is not one of us who would not be worse than the kings if he were as continually spoiled as they are by that rabble.” It is unsurprising that kings are spoiled, since, on Montaigne’s view, “there are few who can endure frank criticism without being stung by it,” even though “those who venture to criticize us perform a remarkable act of friendship.”

This is, of course, a particular problem for one who holds the power of life and death over those who would perform this “act of friendship.” Not only does this prevent rulers from achieving self-understanding, it also leads them to become “the object of hatred or detestation of their people.” This is because “people have formed the habit of concealing from them anything that disturbs their plans,” including, presumably, the likely consequences of those plans.

Montaigne is well suited to advise rulers, he claims, because of both his frankness and his attentiveness to particularity. It seems, furthermore, that he sees that activity as something more than just an encumbrance. We know, of course, that he did engage in it, although he sometimes writes as if the chance has passed him by. We have letters that he wrote to King Henry IV, in which he does in fact offer the king serious advice. In a letter that may have been written in January of 1590, for example, Montaigne expresses to Henry his regret about the conduct of the ruler’s troops during a battle at Paris. He reminds the leader that “it has always been observed that where conquests, because of their greatness and difficulty, could not be thoroughly completed by arms and by force, they have been completed by clemency and magnanimity.”

Moreover, he seems to see such advisory efforts as, in important respects, compatible with his intellectual activity. It is the same judgment that is cultivated in his personal self-examinations,

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594 Montaigne, III.13, 1006.
595 Montaigne, III.13, 1005.
596 Montaigne, III.13, 1007.
597 Frame, Collected Works, 1333.
to which we are witness when we read the *Essays*, that allows him to judge others well. Consequently, we can suppose that the pleasures involved in both are the same.

For these reasons, it seems that Montaigne’s defense of the private life of reflection upon one’s experience is compatible, at least under certain circumstances, with public affairs. Both offer the opportunity for the cultivating and utilizing good judgment, in which Montaigne finds pleasure. In envisioning this private advisory role, Montaigne seems to be developing a model of political engagement that is shorn of its more troublesome aspects. To this point, our examination of Montaigne’s attack on abstract reasoning in politics has itself been rather abstract. It will be useful to consider one application of this general line of thinking--his attack on moralism in politics.

6.7: Montaigne’s Realism

Montaigne’s skepticism is not exactly a normative doctrine, although it is deployed with the humane intention of reducing cruelty and bloodshed. Montaigne encourages his readers to reject the cruelty of men like Alexander not because it violates some philosophical principle, but rather because it is premised on an erroneous view of the human condition and thus fails to reflect our natural sympathy for others. Montaigne’s skepticism, however, is not a mere substitute for a conventional morality. It also points towards the limits of such a morality, by preparing the way for a more context-sensitive approach to political action. It has sometimes been suggested that this leads Montaigne to endorse a radical split between the ruthlessness of politics and a more tranquil private sphere. While this reading rightly begins from his unwillingness to accept categorical restrictions on political practice, this is better understood as a consequence of his more general rejection of fixed rules, for example those derived from
philosophy or theology. Moreover, his rejection of moral rules in politics serves ends that are, in some sense, themselves moral, namely peace and stability.

Montaigne was not alone in his attempt to determine the extent to which morality and political life can be reconciled. Many scholars of the sixteenth century were preoccupied with this question, which they often explored by aligning themselves with the work of either Cicero or Tacitus. Many of the Ciceronians believed politics was compatible with, and indeed a part of, the moral life. Earlier in the sixteenth century, Cicero was the decisive influence on European humanists. Some Ciceronians believed in various forms of monarchy, while others defended republican citizenship, but they were in agreement on a particular picture of the relationship between politics and ethics. The legitimacy of government, whether monarchical or republican, depended on its connection to virtue.598

The Tacitists of the sixteenth century believed that moralism had contributed to the political chaos that had engulfed Europe. Consequently, they turned to Annals of Tacitus for an exposition of how politics really worked.599 On their view, Ciceronian humanism presented an overly moralistic view of politics, which was more concerned with how things ought to be than with the policies that genuinely conduced to success.600 Writers at the French court, such as Guy de Pibrac and Jacopo Corbinelli, who were influenced by both Tacitus and more recent writers such as Francesco Guicciardini, argued that only a strong and ruthless monarch could maintain order and suppress sectarian religious strife. They argued in defense of measures such as the St.

Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, which Pibrac thought necessary to avoid a Protestant revolution. This was a purely pragmatic defense of religious violence, and they maintained a flexible stance towards matters of faith.\textsuperscript{601} While Montaigne is deeply concerned with the issues that divided the Ciceronians and Tacistists, he cannot readily be classified among either.

*The Limits of Morality: “Of the Useful and the Honorable”*

Montaigne presents a sustained examination of the relationship between morality and politics in “Of the Useful and the Honorable.” The relationship between honorable actions and useful ones was a central question for Cicero, in works such as the *De Officiis*, and his early modern admirers. Cicero was thought to teach that what is honorable (*honestum*) is also useful (*utile*). If this is the case, one might think, we can trust that virtuous actions will not lead to political ruin.\textsuperscript{602} In this essay, Montaigne seeks to demonstrate that what is useful and indeed necessary is not always what is honorable. In this respect, he advocates a kind of harsh realism about political life. A willingness to accept the provisional character of some supposed moral dictates may be another consequence of Montaigne’s skepticism about the capacity for human reason to generate universal rules to guide human life.

\textsuperscript{601} Tuck, 41-42. As Tuck notes, Corbinelli later became critical of the Catholic faction. He was unwilling, this suggests, to subordinate the political needs of the monarchy to any moral or religious strictures.

\textsuperscript{602} Many interpreters have pointed out that Cicero is much more critical of Stoic virtue than he might at first appear. Marcia L. Colish, for example, draws attention to the ways in which Cicero uses the standard of the useful to change the character of the honorable. When we understand what he is doing here, Colish argues, it becomes apparent that early modern thinkers such as Machiavelli would have found him a much more sympathetic source than one would think given common “untested assumptions about the ethical content and directionality of Cicero’s argument in *De officiis*” (93). See Marcia L. Colish, “Cicero’s *De Officiis* and Machiavelli’s *Prince.*** The Sixteenth Century Journal 9.4 (Winter 1978): 80-93.
In this essay, Montaigne suggests that human life can never be conducted on a purely moral basis. This is because there are aspects of human nature that are not entirely good. He cites a rather shocking example, give his often stated aversion to cruelty.

"Our structure, both public and private, is full of imperfection. But there is nothing useless in nature, not even uselessness itself. Nothing has made its way into this universe that does not hold a proper place in it. Our being is cemented with sickly qualities: ambition, jealousy, envy, vengeance, superstition, despair, dwell in us with a possession so natural that we recognize their image also in the beasts—indeed even cruelty, so unnatural a vice. For in the midst of compassion we feel within us I know not what bittersweet pricking of malicious pleasure in seeing others suffer; even children feel it…Whoever should remove the seeds of these qualities from man would destroy the fundamental conditions of our life."\(^{603}\)

Montaigne suggests a political corollary that arises from these principles. He argues that “in every government, there are necessary offices which are not only abject but also vicious.”\(^{604}\) This raises several distinct questions. First, why are these vices useful, rather than unfortunate, aspects of human nature? Second, what is the relationship between private vice and public vice?

Montaigne suggests that one of the primary merits of vice is in counteracting the effects of other, more harmful, instances of vice. He argues, for example, that “perfidy may in a given case be excusable; it is so only when it is employed to punish and betray perfidy.”\(^{605}\) He cites as an example a deed of a Roman named Pomponius Flaccus. The Romans had sought to mediate between two competing leaders in Thrace. One violated the terms by capturing and killing his rival under the pretense of a friendly invitation. Consequently, “justice required that the Romans obtain satisfaction for this crime.”\(^{606}\) It was not possible to achieve this without deception, and instead Pomponius Flaccus succeeded by “drawing the other into his nets by deceitful words and

\(^{603}\) Montaigne, III.1, 727.
\(^{604}\) Montaigne, III.1, 727.
\(^{605}\) Montaigne, III.1, 733.
\(^{606}\) Montaigne, III.1, 732.
assurances,” after which “instead of the honor and favor he had promised him” he “sent him bound hand and foot to Rome.”

Montaigne claims that the common good often requires actions that would be conventionally regarded as immoral, and thus such actions are not always unjustifiable. He does, however, add two important caveats. Such deeds are justifiable only when the public good, not one’s private good, is at stake. Moreover, under most circumstances morality must be observed even in public life. It would not be sufficient, Montaigne indicates, to break one’s word merely for pecuniary gain. He condemns a particular instance in which the Roman Senate demanded payment from some cities that had previously paid to be exempted from just that kind of demand. Géralde Nakam has argued that Montaigne’s political position should not be equated with that of Machiavelli or “reason of state” theorists such as Giovanni Botero. She notes, for example, that Montaigne does not share Machiavelli’s interest in the exploits of Ferdinand the Catholic. While this is reasonable enough, it is also important to note that his disagreement with these thinkers does not result from any conviction that politics can be made fully moral.

While Montaigne regards amoral and even conventionally immoral deeds as necessary, at least some of the time, he prefers to leave them to others. He claims that rulers know that he is

607 Montaigne, III.1, 733.
608 Montaigne, III.1, 736.
609 Montaigne, III.1, 737.
611 Pierre Manent suggests another way of understanding the difference between Montaigne and Machiavelli. Manent argues that Montaigne leads his readers to accept their bodily existence in a fundamentally passive manner, rather than seeking to overcome their condition or change the world. See Montaigne: La Vie Sans Loi, 367. He also notes that Montaigne “hopes for nothing from a Machiavellianism that claims to correct the vices of the time, dissimulation and cruelty, through the same vices” (217). Translation mine.
not to be given such responsibilities. He presents this stance, however, more as a consequence of his own personal distaste for such things rather than as any real departure from the claims just discussed. Montaigne gives us little reason to think that everyone could, or should, refrain from the conventionally blameworthy actions he regards as necessary. Moreover, even if he remains distant from these harsh realities due to his personal dispositions, they are nonetheless linked on a theoretical level to his philosophical skepticism. His conviction that moral rules are not without exceptions follows as a direct consequence from his belief that there are no fixed rules in human affairs.

6.8: Conclusion

As we have seen, Montaigne’s philosophy is far more political than is often supposed. It is, to be sure, not political in the same sense as that of writers who place great hopes in political life and expect commensurate sacrifices. Montaigne is certainly too attentive to his own private activity to adopt their position. Nonetheless, he can still endorse the activity of governing because he understands the relationship between the public and private realms in a new way. He calls into question much supposedly public spirited activity, on the grounds that it is in fact a manifestation of a private, and ultimately misguided, concern for personal honor. Moreover, he makes governing more attractive by linking it to the practice and cultivation of good judgment. In this way, one’s private interests direct one towards public affairs. The cultivation of judgment, disciplined by skepticism, however, is not only personally satisfying, it also serves the common good. The skeptical politician is not interested in wealth, personal aggrandizement, or violent conflict. This mode of judgment avoids two opposing vices. It avoids dangerous passions such as the obsession with honor and the fanatical hatred of one’s enemies. It also, however, overcomes a naïve moralism that prevents one from acting effectively amidst the harsh
realities of political affairs. Both errors are tied to dogmatic theoretical commitments, and thus they are decisively undermined by Montaigne’s skeptical arguments.

Montaigne’s skepticism leads to a reinterpretation of the activity of government, replacing a more expansive and ambitious view with a more cautious and modest one. He is not a partisan of limited government in the sense with which we are now most familiar. He does not provide a list of rights that governments must not transgress, nor does he provide an institutional framework designed to limit the extent to which political power can be abused. Instead, he undermines the theoretical basis for the most ambitious political projects (e.g. saving souls). He directs the efforts of those in government towards more modest goals, most notably avoiding cruelty and securing peace.

In redirecting the efforts of government in this way, as Shklar notes, Montaigne contributes to the intellectual transition towards the liberal understanding of politics without himself being a liberal.612 His aversion to rules and institutional prescriptions is not, however, merely an idiosyncrasy that would eventually be remedied by liberalism. Montaigne claims that the basic political ends that he endorses cannot be achieved through rigid rule-following. He believes that there are times that the preservation of peace and the mitigation of cruelty is best advanced by means that might, under other circumstances, rightly be taken as immoral. Similar considerations reveal why Montaigne prefers to consider the forms of self-cultivation necessary for political life rather than make institutional recommendations. Because there are no fixed rules, and thus judgment is necessary, we cannot determine in advance the particular policies that

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612 Shklar remarks that “Limited and responsible government may be implicit in the claim for personal autonomy, but without an explicit political commitment to such institutions, liberalism is still doctrinally incomplete. Montaigne was surely tolerant and humanitarian but he was no liberal.” See Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” 23.
our leaders ought to pursue. The same course of action might be permissible and, indeed, necessary, in one circumstance, but utterly unacceptable in another.

In addition to this, talking about the best possible institutions is politically relevant only if one supposes that such discourse can become efficacious in practice. Its political efficacy would, presumably, depend on either the possibility of general enlightenment or on the influence of some enlightened group. Because Montaigne is not optimistic about the former possibility, and at best cautiously hopeful about the latter, he must find other means to encourage a healthier form of communal life. The most that we can hope for, he seems to suggest, is to engage in the kind of reflection aimed at purging ourselves of destructive ambitions, which will in turn prepare us to make the most of the political opportunities available to us, whatever they turn out to be. His political philosophy is thus a modest one in two distinct respects. It is modest in its account of the goals that government ought to pursue. Just as importantly, however, it is modest in its expectations about the extent to which we can reshape political life according to this, or any other, way of looking at the world.
Chapter VII: Conclusion: Skepticism, Self, and Political Philosophy

7.1: Skepticism and Modern Politics

I have argued that philosophical skepticism provides a sturdy foundation from which to construct a defense of some of our most central modern political norms: freedom, toleration, and a constrained view of government. This is not entirely surprising, as early modern skepticism made an important contribution to these ideas as they were articulated in the European tradition. What this investigation has attempted to demonstrate, however, is that this is not an arbitrary connection of interest only to intellectual historians. As I have argued, skepticism has grounded quite similar conclusions in a very different context: ancient China during the Warring States era. By comparing the two contexts, we can clarify the reasons why a seemingly abstract epistemological doctrine has carried with it normative changes of such massive significance.

Skepticism can advance freedom by clearing away intellectual dogmas that constrain free thought and action. Both Montaigne and Zhuangzi understand freedom as desirable because there are a multiplicity of valuable human activities and ways of comprehending the world. When we take on some rigid dogmatic system, we close off many of them. It is for this reason that they deploy their skeptical arguments against the established standards of their communities. If they can undermine those standards, both those derived from custom and those backed by argument, they can help to bring about a healthier way of living that responds directly to the plurality of the world.

We have seen, furthermore, that skepticism can make a powerful contribution to the case for toleration. This is because intolerance is generally tied to claims to knowledge of how others ought to be living. This seems to be true as an empirical generalization, and it may even be bound up with the concept of intolerance itself. Intolerance is not simply a synonym for harm. It
is, instead, a harm that has a particular kind of basis—an intolerant attitude. That attitude has an object, the person or views that are not being tolerated, but this attitude generally goes beyond a mere gut reaction. At least in most cases, it is tied to judgments of a particular type, specifically the judgment that the object of intolerance is pernicious, foolish, and so forth. Those judgments, as Montaigne and Zhuangzi demonstrate, may well be radically defective. We are often tempted to place more confidence than is warranted in our own familiar ways of living and thinking. When we become too confident, we may become willing to impose our preferred ways of living upon others. Both Zhuangzi and Montaigne seek to demonstrate the profound limits within which human knowledge is constrained in order to combat such intolerance.

Skepticism also transforms the way in which we think about the task of government by calling into question the grand ambitions with which it is often associated. Political life involves claims to knowledge, whether implicit or explicit. The most central of these are claims to knowledge of the nature of the good life and the good society. Some enter politics for the sake of glory. Others do so in order to advance the interests of their communities. Both decisions presuppose claims to knowledge. The former presuppose that glory is in fact good for us. The latter presuppose knowledge of what is good for the community as a whole. Zhuangzi and Montaigne show that these political projects are, in crucial respects, misguided. Most of us do not in fact know what we claim to know when we engage in the tasks of government. Once we have recognized this we may still engage in those tasks, but we will do so in a decisively different spirit.

It is no longer novel to assert that we should attend to the limits of our knowledge, seek freedom, tolerate diverse ways of living, and limit our political ambitions. These commitments gain broad assent within many contemporary societies. For this reason, they might not seem to
require any theoretical justification. Furthermore, exploring such justifications by examining centuries-old, or millennia-old, texts might seem, even to those who are interested in such questions, like the preoccupation with “dead skeletons” for which Lu Xun chastised some of his classically-minded contemporaries.

There are at least two important reasons to return to texts that emerged from disparate contexts in order to assess our contemporary commitments. The first is that studying thinkers from times and places quite different than our own helps us to see the ways in which central concepts in political theory might be formulated in radically unfamiliar ways. Zhuangzi account of “wandering” (*you*), for example, provides an alternative to Western views of freedom, although it bears striking affinities to them as well. The second advantage of the comparative approach is that it helps us to see how these commitments can be defended when they do not already possess a lengthy history and substantial cultural prestige. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to examining each of these aspects of the argument.

**7.2: Body and Spirit in Montaigne and Zhuangzi**

To this point I have emphasized crucial affinities shared by Montaigne and Zhuangzi, with regard to both their epistemological and practical positions. There is an important reason for this. If systems of thought, whether of individuals or cultures, were totally incommensurable, then productive dialogue would be impossible. We must not assume that thinkers from other traditions are merely offering variants of the positions that have been articulated within Western political thought. At the same time, however, if we want to learn from unfamiliar texts and thinkers we must be able to recognize how their concerns could be concerns for us. In the absence of such recognition, it is difficult to see how we could ever treat them as anything more than historical artifacts. It is not even entirely clear how we could properly interpret their
arguments on their own terms without presupposing that we can identify motives or experience common to both contexts. Consider, for example, Mencius’ famous example of the child about to fall into a well. He supposes that all human beings respond to such conditions in the same way, by manifesting a concern for the child, because they all share the sprouts of humaneness. If the experience of concern for other human beings in danger were totally alien to us, it would cast doubt on Mencius’ empirical claim. It would also, however, make it difficult for us to understand that claim at all. When I read Mencius and assume that I know what he is talking about, it is because I am familiar with how I respond when I see others in distress. In this way, shared concerns are essential to the interpretation of Mencius (and Zhuangzi), not just to their normative evaluation.

An exclusive focus on shared concerns, however, carries with it certain risks. One of the merits of a comparative approach, especially one that explores works that have been neglected within Western political theory, is that it brings to light new and transformative ways of thinking about the central questions of political theory. Zhuangzi is not entirely alien to us. The experiences he describes are comprehensible to contemporary readers, and at least some of his concerns are shared by many of them. That being said, we must read him in a way that does not reduce his text to a mere antecedent of liberalism, and that avoids the temptation to seek only confirmation of commitments that are fundamentally shaped by other writers.

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613 This is one variant on a more general problem concerning the possibility of understanding other systems of thought that are supposedly incommensurable. Donald Davidson, in a famous treatment of the problem, argues that recognizing conceptual systems as incommensurable would require that we can properly understand both, but that once we have understood both we have no reason to think of them as being totally distinct. For this reason, he thinks, the problem of incommensurable conceptual schemes does not arise at all. See Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association 47 (1973-1974): 5-20.

614 As Leigh Jenco points out, when we engage in comparative political theorizing “the process may trouble the very terms through which we understand what it is we are doing: it may come to replace the
Reading a thinker like Zhuangzi allows us to see new ways of thinking about freedom, toleration, and the limits of government. If many twentieth century critics of those ideas are to be believed, they are urgently in need of such reconsideration and reformulation. Many theorists have suggested that these ideas are mere masks for unsavory phenomena such as economic and political domination, or passive acceptance of the status quo. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, for example, argued that “freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking” but also that “the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression that which is taking place everywhere today.” Herbert Marcuse claimed that what passes for toleration in modern societies is in fact a way of upholding the status quo and its oppressive power relations.

Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse argued that the Enlightenment account of freedom contained a fatal flaw or internal contradiction. Whatever one makes of such criticisms, the extent to which many theorists have found them plausible suggests that we might do well to consider pre-Enlightenment or non-Enlightenment accounts of these ideals. This is one of the attractions of reading Montaigne and Zhuangzi today.

While Montaigne did not live through the Enlightenment and rejects some of its key tenets, notably its optimism concerning the powers of human reason and the possibility of general rationality, Horkheimer attributes to him the supposed errors of the era. He calls very grounds from which we launched our inquiry and the language we once used to describe and evaluate it.” Jenco, Changing Referents, 23.


Montaigne the “founder of modern skepticism,” and claims that in his work “the firmly grounded order with its relative freedom, which belongs to the presuppositions of bourgeois commerce, has become a decisive personal need for the representative of the skeptical attitude.” This attitude, he goes on to argue, is linked to domination in both the political and economic realms.

As I argued in Chapter VII, Horkheimer’s reading of Montaigne vastly overstates the extent to which he urges selfishness and isolation from others. That being said, it is certainly true that he directs his attention to the body and its needs. He does not, however, suggest that such needs are best satisfied by a market economy. In fact, he devotes very little attention to economic and what we would now call technological considerations. This point, by itself, does not necessarily obviate Horkheimer’s concerns. It is possible that Montaigne’s way of thinking was an influence upon the attitudes that Horkheimer decries, even if he never manifested those attitudes himself.

Suppose that this interpretation is correct. We would still have to assess whether or not those who Montaigne influenced had arrived at a reasonable understanding of his thought. Does his core teaching contribute to these ills? The comparative approach suggests that the answer is no. The skeptical arguments that Montaigne offers for toleration, freedom, and limited government are not tied to any particular economic system, as we see once we recognize their crucial affinities with the thought of Zhuangzi, who lived under economic conditions that were quite different than those that existed in early modern Europe or most contemporary societies. The comparative approach, however, also offers us something more.

Montaigne may offer a way out of some of the difficulties for which Horkheimer blames him, but his way out is not necessarily the only one. Zhuangzi offers an account of freedom that

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617 Horkheimer, 266, 270.
is much less closely linked to the needs of the body. In this way, he is further removed from the concerns that, according to the Frankfurt school, led to the crises of the twentieth century. For this reason, his thought may provide a powerful way of challenging our own preconceptions concerning the character of freedom, toleration, and limited government.

Zhuangzi and Montaigne agree that the self is elusive, and that its elusiveness accounts for many of the constraints upon human knowledge. They disagree regarding the extent to which our embodied nature provides a unifying factor that persists in spite of our ever-fluctuating experiences. Both attack abstract doctrines and rigid customs and turn us towards modes of thinking and acting that are more responsive to complexity, heterogeneity, and contingency. Both seek forms of harmony that are achieved through responsiveness to change. The locus of these changes, on Montaigne’s view, is primarily the body, while for Zhuangzi it is reality as a whole, or the dao. To regard oneself fundamentally as an embodied subject, as Montaigne teaches us to do, would for Zhuangzi suggest an arbitrary constraint upon the diversity of our experiences.

Montaigne’s view of the self leads us to see ourselves as physical beings who share fundamental similarities with other animals. One sees this, for example, in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” where he provides copious arguments purporting to demonstrate that human beings are no better than other animals. He remarks that humanity is “subjected to the same obligations as the other creatures of his class, and in a very ordinary condition, without any real and essential prerogative or preeminence.” One sees this as well in “Of Experience,” where Montaigne documents his ailments, his aging body, his preferences for food and drink, and so forth. Rather than emphasizing the universal claims of reason, Montaigne draws attention to his

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618 Montaigne, II.12, 408.
own particularity, and especially to the ways in which it is manifest in the details of his bodily existence. He takes as his standard of action the needs of his own body, as it has been shaped both by his initial inclinations and the habits that he has developed.

Both in health and in sickness I have readily let myself follow my urgent appetites. I give great authority to my desires and inclinations.619

Zhuangzi’s picture of the world rests on a very different metaphysical foundation. This is, in part, because the dualistic contrast between material and spiritual realms did not exist in ancient China. There was no concept of an immaterial heaven separated absolutely from our ordinary material world. It was for this reason that, two millennia after Zhuangzi’s lifetime, competing schools of Catholic priests would debate whether or not it was even possible to express Christian theological doctrines using Chinese concepts.620 Consequently, while Zhuangzi does urge his readers to preserve themselves rather than pursuing illusory ambitions (e.g. fame), he never claims that the preservation of one’s physical body is the ultimate aim. Instead, as Francois Jullien has noted, Zhuangzi urges us to “nourish life” (yang sheng 養生). This might sound like a materialistic view, perhaps of a Hobbesian sort, but Jullien argues that this kind of reading is a mistake. Zhuangzi does not believe in a dualism of body and spirit, and thus he cannot be classified as a materialist, an idealist, or any other such thing. As Jullien puts it, “the meaning of “to feed one’s life” cannot be narrowly concrete and material, but neither does it veer off into the spiritual, for the life in question here is not eternal life.”621

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619 Montaigne III.13, 1014.
620 See Haun Saussy, The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 37-45. Leibniz took the view that one could indeed do so, while a group of more conservative Catholic priests took the opposing view.
While he does not accept an absolute body-spirit dichotomy, he does discuss what we might refer to as the needs of the body and those of the soul. He takes both to be central aspects of our experience. His crucial claim, however, is that neither one is decisive. We do not have fixed self, whether physical or spiritual. Our bodily experiences, like other aspects of our experience, are fundamentally varied. This is part of what he means when he doubts that there is a “true lord” among the different parts of our body.  

We cannot say that the inclinations of our bodies, much less those of some part of the body, are authoritative. Zhuangzi recognizes the importance of both material and spiritual needs, to use terms that are not his own. When he extols the benefits of uselessness, as in the story of the useless tree discussed in Chapter V, he is generally teaching his readers how to protect themselves from physical harm. Avoiding physical punishment is also a recurring theme of the imaginary dialogues between Confucius and Yan Hui. Even these examples, however, point to something beyond mere physical self-preservation. Duke Zigao of She asks for the advice of Zhuangzi’s Confucius even though he declares from the outset that he will likely be likely be treated respectfully on his diplomatic mission. He suffers from extreme worries about his ability to succeed in his task that, as Confucius note, may even produce physical maladies. As we see here, there is a kind of dynamic interplay between the physical and spiritual aspects of Zhuangzi’s position. Material and spiritual dangers cannot be entirely disentangled. Similarly, when Zhuangzi mocks the narrow perspective of the political actor who has “wisdom enough to fill one office effectively, good conduct enough to impress one community, virtue enough to please one ruler, or talent enough to be called into service in one state,” we might imagine this person being at risk in both respects. 

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622 Zhuangzi, II, 9.
623 Zhuangzi, I, 3.
wellbeing, but it also prevents one from being open to the full variety of phenomena in the world. In this way, it is spiritually stultifying as well as dangerous.

7.3: Metaphysical Disagreements and the Relevance of Context

Understanding the most distinctive features of these teachings is possible only if we adequately take into account the disparate contexts in which they were developed. The different roles played by the body, and material things generally, in each thinker’s position are products of genuine theoretical disagreements. Their presentations of these issues, however, are also shaped by the dangers that they observed around themselves. Montaigne emphasizes the demands of the body, and the satisfactions that it can provide, at least in part as a deliberate effort to discourage the kind of metaphysical speculation that contributed to religious conflict. Sectarian bloodshed, which was occurring all around him, resulted primarily from disagreements concerning the proper care of the soul. As a result, Montaigne encouraged his readers to turn their attention to the care of the body. The underlying moral and political motive of this shift in the subject matter of philosophical inquiry is made evident in his comment that the two things that he finds to be “in singular accord” are “supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct.”\(^{624}\) For this reason, what might seem, from the point of view of a twentieth century reader like Horkheimer, to be narrow and selfish concerns are in his work tied to a decidedly ethical project.

While Zhuangzi was concerned with the ways in which systems of thought, whether inculcated by culture or disputation, constrain the “free and easy wandering” that he describes, he did not need to worry about the kind of sectarian bloodshed that was common during Montaigne’s age. Confucians and Mohists competed for influence at court, but the representatives of each school did not meet on the battlefield or massacre one another in the

\(^{624}\) Montaigne, III, 13, 1043.
streets. Moreover, these disputes took place among a fairly narrow part of the population. Their conflicts, therefore, were both less violent and less pervasive than those of the Catholics and Protestants of sixteenth century France.

On top of all of this, the theoretical conflicts of the Warring States era were much more worldly than those of Reformation-era Europe. They concerned the organization of society in this world, not the fate of souls after death. This may, at least in part, be a consequence of the non-dualistic character of early Chinese thought. The Confucians and Mohists, however, were fairly practical and modest in their speculations, even by the general standards of Chinese religious beliefs during the period. While the precise nature of religion during that era is a matter of some dispute among scholars, it is clear that there was a strong belief in the power of spirits to influence the course of human events. This belief had a long pedigree. The first instances of Chinese writing to which we have access are the oracle bones of the Shang dynasty (approximately 1760-1046 BCE), which were turtle shells and ox scapula that had been engraved with questions and then thrown into the fire. Diviners then inspected them in order to determine what sort of answers the spirits had given. The results were used by rulers in order to plan many aspects of policy. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, belief in the need to gain the favor of the spirits in order to bring success to one’s affairs remained strong in many quarters.

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625 The Mohists did cultivate expertise in warfare, albeit generally defensive warfare. Many chapters of the Mozi offer practical instructions on how to defend cities against attack.
626 For a thorough account of the oracle bones and their significance, see David N. Keightley, Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
Confucius did not speculate on the influence of spirits, and even urged his followers that they should attend to human things before worrying about such matters.\textsuperscript{628} Mozi criticized the Confucians on this very basis, arguing that it was socially irresponsible not to teach that spirits reward good behavior and punish bad. Even here, however, his concern was not with spirits for their own sake, but instead with the religious basis for social order. Early modern European religious disagreements raised the stakes of political conflicts, by linking them to the eternal fates of individual souls, whereas those of the Warring States period did not do so.

Given his context, Montaigne had good reason to turn the attention of his readers from the soul to the body. Devoting attention to our basic physical needs would provide a way of avoiding the contentious religious and metaphysical questions that motivated the Wars of Religion. This might seem to lead to the unlimited pursuit of one’s material interest, but Montaigne saw matters differently. The needs of the body, on his presentation, are comparatively more modest than the more grandiose spiritual ambitions of his contemporaries. Zhuangzi’s opponents, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with practical matters of government, rather than with a separate spiritual realm. Thus, he was free to engage in wild speculation, radically divorced from ordinary experience, without fear of inflaming spiritual conflict.

Another way to put this basic contrast is to note that both Zhuangzi and Montaigne are concerned about the ways in which custom constrains human life. Both argue that custom imposes fundamentally arbitrary limitations on us and thereby threatens our ability to respond freely to our particular situations. Zhuangzi attempts to liberate our thoughts and actions by providing tales of radically unfamiliar perspectives. Montaigne does this too. At the same time,

\textsuperscript{628} Consider, for example, \textit{Analects} 11.12. See also the discussion in Graham, \textit{Disputers of the Tao}, 15-18.
however, he does so in a more oblique way, that seeks to avoiding nourishing sectarian
bloodshed. Understanding the relationship between the two bodies of thought requires us to
understand the distinct contexts in which they were developed.

7.4: Ethical and Political Consequences of their Metaphysical Disagreements

While we cannot neglect the role of the relevant political and religious contexts in
shaping each view, the differences are not simply the results of pragmatic or rhetorical responses
to these conditions. As we have already seen, there is a genuine difference in their underlying
stances towards central metaphysical questions, particularly those concerning the self. For
Zhuangzi, there is little that is constant about the self, no matter how one conceives of it—
materially, psychologically, or in terms of systems of thought. Montaigne’s position, on the
other hand, is that our bodily experience gives a certain continuity to our lives. We each have
what he calls a “ruling pattern” that persists even in spite of almost constant physical and
intellectual changes. Consequently, Montaigne seeks to know himself, albeit in a novel manner,
while Zhuangzi teaches the practice of “forgetting,” which helps to liberate us from what turn out
to be spurious “selves.”

These metaphysical concerns have practical implications in both the personal and
political realms. Montaigne’s account of individual particularity is such that human association
has to be rethought in a new, and radically individualistic, way. Unlike some classical thinkers,
Montaigne does not present the political community as the natural fulfillment of the life of the
individual. It is merely a group of human beings united by whatever customs happen to have
emerged in some particular time and place. He does, however, belief that the human good is
intimately linked to one particular form of human association—friendship. Montaigne suggests
that the individual natures of himself and Étienne de La Boétie, his closest friend who died only
a few years into their relationship, were such that they naturally fit with one another. He remarks that “in the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again.”

With regard to his friendship with La Boétie, he declares that “if you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.” Montaigne declares that, in comparison with the four years spent with La Boétie, his subsequent life was “nothing but smoke, nothing but dark and dreary night.”

The self, for Zhuangzi, is elusive and in flux at an even deeper level than Montaigne suggests, and thus there is no possibility of a union of selves of the sort just described. This becomes evident if one compares Montaigne’s “Of Friendship” with Zhuangzi’s account of friendship in the “Great and Venerable Teacher”:

> Master Sanghu, Mengzi Fan, and Master Qin Zhang, three friends, said to one another, “Who can join with others without joining with others? Who can do with others without doing with others? Who can climb up to heaven and wander in the mists, roam the infinite, and forget life forever and forever?” The three men looked at one another and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and so they became friends.

Later on, Master Sanghu dies, and Confucius sends a disciple named Zigong to take part in the funeral. Zigong is shocked to find the other two friends singing:

> Ah, Sanghu!
> Ah, Sanghu!
> You have gone back to your true form
> While we remain as men, O!

The friendship manifested by these three masters is not tied to their individual personalities. Their most evident similarity seems to be their indifference to ordinary human ties, which is why

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629 Montaigne, I.28, 169.
630 Montaigne, I.28, 169.
631 Montaigne, I.28, 174.
632 Zhuangzi, VI, 49.
633 Zhuangzi, VI, 49.
they seek, paradoxically, to “join with others without joining with others.” Each seeks union with the totality of all things, rather than with some particular person and his or her idiosyncratic features. Consequently, Zhuangzi praises only a radically reinterpreted mode of friendship. This does not necessarily mean that Zhuangzi rejects all friendships of a more conventional sort. In one later passage, he even suggests that his own reflections cannot continue as fruitfully as they once did because Huizi, his great interlocutor and rival, is no longer living. It is clear, however, that Zhuangzi’s more radical form of skepticism radically diminishes the significance of most human attachments. He prefers union with the whole rather than union with some particular individual.

Their political teachings differ along similar lines. Zhuangzi urges the ruler to see himself as part of the whole, which for him generally amounts to a policy of non-interference that allows each part of the world to proceed according to its natural tendencies. Montaigne, on the other hand, suggests that politics should be aimed at the preservation of the bodily wellbeing of individuals. This gives his political thought a definiteness that Zhuangzi’s sometimes lacks. Zhuangzi’s view of government is, in fundamental respects, open ended. This is captured in his remark that the “enlightened king” rules in such a way that he “lets everything find its own enjoyment.” The ruler, on Zhuangzi’s view, allows things to proceed according to their own

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634 The story goes as follows: “Zhuangzi was accompanying a funeral when he passed by Huizi’s grave. Turning to his attendants, he said, “There was once a plasterer who, if he got a speck of mud on the tip of his nose no thicker than a fly’s wing, would get his friend Carpenter Shi to slice it off for him. Carpenter Shi, whirling his hatchet with a noise like the wind, would accept the assignment and proceed to slice, removing every bit of mud without injury to the nose, while the plasterer just stood there completely unperturbed. Lord Yuan of Song, hearing of this feat, summoned Carpenter Shi and said, ‘Could you try performing it for me?’ But Carpenter Shi replied, ‘It’s true that I was once able to slice like that—but the material I worked on has been dead these many years.’ Since you died, Master Hui, I have had no material to work on. There’s no one I can talk to any more.” Zhuangzi, XXIV, 205-206. This appears in the so-called “Miscellaneous Chapters,” and thus may represent a different body of thought than the section from the “Great and Venerable Teacher” just discussed.

635 Zhuangzi, VII, 57.
way of doing things (ziran 自然, also translated as “spontaneity”). This is not a mere omission, or an indication of indifference towards questions concerning government. It reflects his view that achieving unity with the dao is of the highest significance, whether one is participating in government or not.

Montaigne also rejects attempts to impose a single framework upon all human lives, whether through political means or otherwise, but he does think that human beings share enough to provide us with some general guidance. We can pursue whatever ways of living are appropriate to our particular situations only if some basic conditions have been satisfied. We require stability and freedom from cruelty. It is impossible, on his view, to rise so far above our bodily needs that we can remain indifferent to these things. As we have seen, he believes that the very attempt to overcome them often leads to even more violence and cruelty.

How one pursues these aims, for Montaigne, will depend on the political context in which one lives. Because we cannot expect to gain universal agreement through rational argument, he suggests a healthy respect for the conventions of our particular communities. Habit provides the real basis for social cohesion, and thus the crucial means for maintaining stability. At the same time, however, he recognizes that some customs can cause grave harm, and he criticizes them freely and often, if sometimes also obliquely. He does not provide any universal rules indicating when to defer to the status quo and when to reform it. The essential thing for Montaigne, as for Zhuangzi, is to cultivate oneself in such a way that one can respond freely to the particular conditions that one confronts.

As we have seen, the shared ethical and political concerns of Montaigne and Zhuangzi are developed in quite different ways, on the basis of disparate metaphysical presuppositions, and in response to distinct cultural and political contexts. This requires that we interpret each
thinker with care, but it also opens up promising theoretical possibilities. It allows us to see the ways in which these commitments can be articulated and defended under diverse conditions, as well as the ways in which certain difficulties characteristic of some formulations might be avoided. This leaves us with the question of how such teachings, having been developed in radically different contexts than our own, can inform contemporary political life.

**7.5: Skepticism and Public Life**

The foregoing arguments have demonstrated the extent to which skepticism can play a significant theoretical role in motivating some of today’s most widely shared political commitments. This immediately raises a crucial question. To what extent can skepticism serve as a motive for these commitments in political practice? One might be tempted to answer that they can do so to whatever extent the arguments just described are compelling. That line of response has been rejected, however, by the twentieth century’s most prominent liberal theorist, John Rawls. While avoiding any particular comment on the normative significance of skepticism, as well as its philosophical plausibility, Rawls suggests that affirming it while seeking a basis for principled political agreement within a liberal democracy would be improper. The underlying concern is that we cannot expect citizens to agree about obscure epistemological questions, or philosophical positions more generally, while we certainly want them to agree on at least some shared political commitments, such as freedom, equality, and so forth.

Because of both the legitimate political concerns that his position raises, and his influence on contemporary political thought, it is worth reflecting on Rawls’ attitude towards skepticism more extensively. Rawls shares two crucial points of agreement with Montaigne and Zhuangzi. First, he is struck by the prevalence and persistence of deep disagreement. Second, he does not
expect that these disagreements will disappear as a result of some sort of rational convergence through argument. In these respects, Rawls too is concerned with the limits of human argument.

In spite of these affinities with skeptics like Zhuangzi and Montaigne, Rawls is eager to distinguish his position from skepticism of any sort. His rejection, however, is political rather than philosophical. His point is not that skepticism is false. It is, instead, that its truth or falsehood is a disputed philosophical question, and therefore it is not appropriate to assume agreement on it within a pluralistic democratic society. As he puts it, “skepticism must be avoided if an overlapping consensus of reasonable doctrines is to be possible.” His concern is that some people will be both (a) reasonable and (b) non-skeptical, and thus they will be excluded from any consensus that takes skepticism as one of its features. We might imagine religious believers who are willing to cooperate with their fellow citizens on fair terms, but who also cannot accept these types of skepticism given their theological commitments.

Two points must be raised in response to these Rawlsian concerns. First, it is not clear that any theory can avoid this problem. There is no guarantee that any given group of people of goodwill can be expected to agree about anything substantive. This concern can be alleviated, perhaps, by simply claiming that a consensus among reasonable people, in Rawls’ sense, necessarily entails certain liberal commitments, because those commitments are built into the

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636 He does recognize that skepticism “may seem to be suggested by the account of the burdens of judgment [in Political Liberalism].” The burdens of judgment are the “sources of reasonable disagreement,” including, among other things, the vagueness of all concepts and the difficulty of assessing “different kinds of normative considerations.” The reason why the burdens of judgment do not lead directly to any form of skepticism is that skeptical arguments involve claims about the conditions under which knowledge is possible. Rawls, or at least his political liberalism, takes no particular position on those claims. The burdens of judgment are simply explanations for disagreement, not a view of their comprehensive epistemic significance. See John Rawls, Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 57.

idea of reasonableness itself. While this would eliminate the problem at the theoretical level, it does little to contribute to the creation of any such consensus in practice. In this respect, Rawls’ approach is in no better condition than the one described here.

Second, Montaigne and Zhuangzi do not expect that everyone will become skeptics or endorse the practical conclusions to which their skepticisms are connected. Indeed, from their points of view, to begin from an assumed consensus would be to abstract away from one of the most important facts of social and political life: the existence of unreasonable people who threaten to do harm to others. As we have seen in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, both Montaigne and Zhuangzi devote much of their effort to finding ways in which we can mitigate the harm done by such people. In both cases, skepticism is a crucial component of the remedy.

Neither Montaigne nor Zhuangzi can be faulted for failing to provide a public doctrine for the good society because they did not attempt to do so. Both had ambitions that were, in a crucial sense, more modest. They sought to show how a person might reform his or her own life in a way that would, first, protect personal wellbeing, and, second, prepare that person to make a contribution to his or her community when circumstances permitted. Montaigne’s assumption,

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638 The idea of reasonableness, as Rawls deploys it, is somewhat ambiguous. David Enoch has observed that “often, perhaps relying on some pre-theoretical intuitions about a non-technical concept of reasonableness, public reason theorists write as if the unreasonable are pretty much the Nazis and the murderous psychopaths.” (122). He goes on to note, however, that when one looks at Rawls’ actual account of reasonableness it seems that doubts about “the burdens of judgment and their epistemic significance” and the rejection of the public reason account of political legitimacy, among other things, are sufficient to make one unreasonable” (122). Consequently, Enoch remarks, “for any public-reason theorist, the ones excluded as unreasonable—that is, the ones justification to whom is not necessary for legitimacy—arguably include also such people as John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Joseph Raz, Jean Hampton, pretty much all contemporary epistemologists, probably most of those offering a rival public reason account, presumably the early Rawls—oh, and me” (122-123). See David Enoch, “Against Public Reason,” *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume I*, eds. David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 112-143.

639 Rawls, on the other hand, presupposes, at least for the sake of his theorizing, compliance with the demands of justice. This positions him on the “ideal” side of the ongoing debate about the merits of ideal and non-ideal approaches to political theory.
for example, seems to be that the public views that prevail within a particular society will always be a matter of history, custom, and so forth. Those views may be refined, but they still provide the foundation for public life and their content cannot be dictated independently by philosophers. It is one consequence of his skepticism that we cannot hope for a general rational agreement on political principles.

Once these constraints have been accepted, however, a decisive benefit of the approach under discussion emerges. Rawls’ approach seems to presuppose the existence of a particular kind of community, namely one committed to liberal principles or at least “reasonableness” in general. He avoids tethering his position to deeper philosophical questions in order to ensure that nobody reasonable will be excluded from the consensus whose contours he examines. Precisely because of this admirable aim, his own views on freedom, toleration, and limited government are not given the kind of theoretical justification that is intended to appeal to those outside of the community of “reasonable” people.

Zhuangzi and Montaigne are engaged in a somewhat riskier activity. Rather than attempting to theorize an already existing consensus within some particular community, they seek to show that the vast majority of their peers are deeply mistaken about the matters most important to them. Under such circumstances, it would not be surprising if a consensus fails to be obtained. This, however, is less a failure of the arguments themselves, and more a consequence of the seriousness of the initial challenge.

The challenge that Montaigne and Zhuangzi take up is one that remains pressing today. Without denying that there is a need for liberals to articulate the precise nature of their commitment to freedom, toleration, and limited government, we must also recognize the need to defend those principles to those who do not share them. This is most obvious when we consider
the fate of those who live under illiberal regimes, who may be unable to make appeals to any reasonable consensus within their societies. There remain many such societies, in spite of the continued dominance of liberal powers on the international stage. Indeed, as Judith Shklar has noted, “liberalism has been very rare both in theory and in practice in the last two hundred odd years, especially when we recall that the European world is not the only inhabited part of the globe.” While liberalism may have made considerable inroads into some new communities since Shklar wrote this in 1989, the underlying challenge remains. Nor is this challenge limited to illiberal communities. Even putatively liberal societies are home to many who reject, or interpret in inconsistent ways, the commitments that supposedly undergird their regimes.

In light of all of this, we cannot avoid confronting the problem of justifying our most crucial commitments, among them freedom, toleration, and a more modest or restrained view of government. Because such arguments must be addressed to those who do not share our ethical and political stances, we should seek foundations that are not limited to some particular tradition or community. It is for this reason that we ought to reconsider the ethical and political implications of the skeptical stances of Montaigne and Zhuangzi.

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