

## DREAMING PHILOSOPHERS: THE DAOIST AND THE METAPHYSICIAN

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**ABSTRACT:** *Is this just a dream? Daoist philosopher Zhuang Zi and metaphysician Descartes both considered this question but came to very different conclusions. In his Dream Hypothesis, Descartes imagined that all of his beliefs about the external world could be mistaken, which led him to the realization that the only thing that he could be certain of was his own existence: “I think therefore I am.” But what am “I”? “I am a thinking thing”, he said and concluded that the existence of one’s mental self is clear, certain and indubitable, while the existence of a physical world was open to doubt. Zhuang Zi, in a similar vein, dreamt that he was a butterfly, and, on awakening, could not be sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming that he was a man. Rather than drawing a distinction between dreams and reality, or between certainty and dubitability, however, he concluded that our identities, like everything else in the world, are fluid and subject transformation and transmutation. The very different treatments of the dream scenario by these two thinkers stem from fundamentally different assumptions embedded in the two philosophical traditions. Analyzing them side by side, we realize how the resources of each intellectual tradition cast light on the unquestioned assumptions underlying the philosophy of the other. This cross cultural engagement highlights the ways in which these two varieties of skepticism fall short of complete, universal skepticism and potentially points the way towards a synthesis of the resources of Western rationalism and philosophical Daoism that may lead to novel formulations of radically skeptical world views.*

**Keywords:** *Butterfly Dream, Daoism, Descartes, Dream Argument, Zhuang Zi*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the seventeenth century in France, René Descartes dreamed that he was sitting by the fire reading, but when he awoke, he found, to his surprise, that he was naked in bed. Some 2000 years earlier in China, Zhuang Zi (莊子) dreamed that he was a butterfly<sup>1</sup> and awoke to find that he was a man. Two philosophers separated by time and space pondered on the common human experience of dreaming. If we can be so wrong about

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<sup>1</sup> I am following the tradition of assuming that the story of Zhuang Zhou’s butterfly dream was inspired by an actual dream by Zhuang Zi himself.

who we are or what we are doing in a dream, how can we have any confidence in our beliefs about ourselves when we are awake? In this way, dreams led both philosophers to skeptical enquiry.

Many people familiar with these two stories assume that Descartes's dream argument and Zhuang Zi's butterfly dream represent a convergence of thought between ancient Eastern and modern Western traditions – that a similar experience led both thinkers to a similar skeptical conclusion. I argue here that, on the contrary, differences in the cultural and philosophical traditions that the two philosophers were working within caused them to develop very different skeptical conclusions from their experiences of dreaming. I will first discuss Descartes's dream argument and Zhuang Zi's<sup>2</sup> description of the butterfly dream and then analyze how the two experiences led to radically different conclusions due to the different traditions in which they occurred.

## 2. DESCARTES'S DREAM ARGUMENT

Descartes introduced his dreaming experience as follows:

How many times have I dreamt at night that I was in this place, dressed, by the fire, although I was quite naked in my bed? It certainly seems to me at the moment that I am not looking at this paper with my eyes closed; that this head that I shake is not asleep.... But in thinking about it carefully, I recall having often been deceived in sleep by similar illusions, and, reflecting on this circumstance more closely, I see so clearly that there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep, that I am quite astonished by it; and my astonishment is such that it is now almost capable of persuading me that I am asleep now (Descartes 1968, 96-97).

Descartes's dream argument is one part of a longer thesis that casts doubt on the possibility of knowledge of the external world. That thesis incorporates the so-called "argument from previous error" and "evil genius argument", as well as the dream argument. However, in my summary here, I will focus on what Descartes can derive from the dream argument alone.<sup>3</sup>

From his experience of dreams, Descartes realizes that our perceptions are unreliable. He seemed to see and feel the fire, but these sensations were illusory. Relying on his sense perceptions while in a dream, he assumed that he was reading by the fire, but subsequently discovered that he had been completely wrong in that assumption. He concludes, therefore, that sense perception is not a reliable guide to knowledge and can, in fact, lead one to completely erroneous conclusions. At the same time, he realizes that all of his knowledge of the external world comes from sense perception. As a result, he deduces that his knowledge of the external world is uncertain

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of readability, I will speak of Zhuang Zi in the singular as the author of the *Zhuang-Zi*, even though the *Zhuang-Zi* is actually a collective work of several authors (Angus 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Borrowing from conclusions that are presented in the Meditations after his explication of the evil genius argument.

and that it is possible to imagine that all of his knowledge of the external world is illusory. In fact, he reasons, it is logically possible that the external world does not exist.

If it is possible that the external world does not exist, Descartes accepts that he may be wrong about all of his beliefs about the external world. Descartes then asks himself if there is anything that he can be sure that he is not wrong about. His answer to that question is encapsulated in the celebrated statement: “I think therefore I am.” In other words, he realizes that whether he is in a dream or awake, in a real world or in an illusory world, he is nevertheless able to think. Therefore he exists as a thinker – as the originator and experiencer of his own thoughts.<sup>4</sup> That gives him the certainty that he exists. However, the existence that he can be sure of is only his existence as a “thing that thinks” (Descartes 1968, p.106). More precisely, he describes himself as “a thing which doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also and which feels” (Descartes 1968, p.107). However, he cannot be sure that he is a man or has a body or lives in an external world.

In sum, Descartes concludes<sup>5</sup> that the only thing that he can be absolutely sure of is that he is a mind and that his mind contains thoughts, ideas, and perceptions<sup>6</sup>. The scope of his skepticism is therefore limited to the existence of the external world and is not extended to his subjective experiences or to his identity as a thinking thing, nor to the possibility of achieving knowledge through logical reasoning.

## 2.1 THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF DESCARTES’S SKEPTICISM

In order to understand the scope and limits of Descartes’s skepticism it is necessary to consider his education and background. Descartes was a devout Catholic all of his life. He was born into a Catholic family and as a child was educated for eight years at the Catholic Jesuit College of La Flèche in Anjou, France (Gaukroger 1995). It was there that Descartes was immersed in a school of scholastic philosophy that was firmly Thomist (i.e. following the works of Thomas Aquinas), and Descartes would have become thoroughly familiar with the philosophy of Aquinas while a student there (Ariew 1992, 60). Although in some ways a critic of scholasticism, Descartes himself attributed his success in philosophy to the scholars at La Fleche in a letter he wrote in 1638 to a friend, saying: “it is extremely useful to have studied the whole philosophy curriculum, in the manner it is taught in Jesuit institutions, before undertaking to raise one’s mind above pedantry, in order to make oneself wise in the right kind [of philosophy]” (Ariew 1992, 60). Indeed, it was apparently Descartes’s fondest wish that his books would be accepted by the Jesuits and replace Aristotle’s work as “an

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<sup>4</sup> Later critics have argued that the originator of thoughts and the experiencer of thoughts may be different entities [e.g., Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1973, 47) and Gassendi (Fisher 2003)]. However, Descartes did not consider this possibility.

<sup>5</sup> That is, he concludes by the end of the “Second Meditation”. His conclusions change in the third to sixth “Meditations”, as he repudiates his earlier provisional skepticism.

<sup>6</sup> Note that by having “perceptions”, Descartes is only committing himself to having the internal experience of perception (what later philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, A.J.Ayer and G.E. Moore refer to as “sense data”), and not that his perceptions are caused by external objects.

infrastructure to modern Christian thought” (Sutcliffe 1968, 9), and he sought the approval of the Jesuits in pursuit of that goal.<sup>7</sup> It can be seen by the full title of his *Meditations*, i.e., “Meditations on First Philosophy, in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated” (Descartes 1901), that Descartes did not regard his foray into skepticism as a goal in itself. Rather, he donned the garb of a skeptic in order to prove that his deeply held beliefs in the existence of God and immortal souls could be demonstrated through reason alone and required no prior religious commitments. Descartes’s stated goal was to rid his mind of all preconceived notions,<sup>8</sup> but the influence of his Catholic background interfered with this aspiration in various ways. As a Catholic, Descartes was the inheritor of a deeply dualist tradition,<sup>9</sup> while as a product of a scholastic education, he was taught to trust his own power of reason and to value the strength of his natural intuitions.<sup>10</sup> All of these factors played a role in limiting the scope of Descartes’s skepticism, in spite of his explicit aim of ridding his mind of all preconceived notions and take nothing for granted.

In the beginning of the “First Meditation”, Descartes explains his ambition to build a secure foundation for knowledge. Convinced that many of his opinions may be in error, he determines that, it being impractical to test each opinion individually, he must demolish all of his preconceived beliefs in a wholesale fashion and vow to retain only the beliefs that cannot be doubted.<sup>11</sup> In this way he could be sure that his new edifice of knowledge is built on a foundation of true propositions, i.e., propositions that are “entirely certain and indubitable” (Descartes 1968, 95). Descartes’s project is

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<sup>7</sup> Sadly for Descartes, his work in the *Meditations* and the *Discourse* were largely deemed heretical, and thus rejected, by Jesuit scholars (Ariew 1992).

<sup>8</sup> The opening lines of the *Meditations* are: “It is some time ago now since I perceived that, from my earliest years, I had accepted many false opinions as being true, and that what I had since based on such insecure principles could only be most doubtful and uncertain; so that I had to undertake seriously once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted up to then, and to begin afresh from the foundations, if I wished to establish something firm and constant in the sciences” (Descartes 1968, 95).

<sup>9</sup> The medieval theologian and scholastic philosophers St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas formulated a dualist Christian theology that integrated idealism and Aristotle’s metaphysics with the pre-Socratic philosophical belief that a person consists of a soul and a body which are separated at death. This medieval synthesis resulted in the dogma that a person consisted of a physical body and an immaterial soul. For Augustine, the soul and the body together are resurrected in heaven (Augustine 2021, 20), while for Aquinas, only the soul lives on after the destruction of the body (Aquinas 1912, IIIa, q.28, 1.2). Interestingly, both Augustine and Aquinas believed that the soul and the body together were required to complete a person. Thus, for Aquinas, a disembodied soul is not a whole person and lacked perception, personality and memory. It is Descartes’s version of dualism that is largely responsible for the popular modern Christian view that heaven is populated by immaterial souls that retain all of the mental properties of embodied people, including perception, personality and memory.

<sup>10</sup> From Augustine, for example: “But since we treat of the nature of the mind, let us remove from our consideration all knowledge which is received from without, through the senses of the body; and attend more carefully to the position which we have laid down, that all minds know and are certain concerning themselves.... For we have another and far superior sense, belonging to the inner man by which we perceive what things are just, and what unjust, —just by means of an intelligible idea, unjust by the want of it. This sense is aided in its functions neither by the eyesight, nor by the orifice of the ear, nor by the air-holes of the nostrils, nor by the palate’s taste, nor by any bodily touch....” (Augustine 2021, 90:27).

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 8.

ambitious in that he attempts to discover the fundamental truths that underlie all knowledge of the world through the use of his individual reason alone. His method may have been inspired by Augustine<sup>12</sup>, who argued that the way to discover eternal and immutable truth was to turn inwards, directing one's thoughts away from the body and the sensible world in order to focus on the soul and the world of the intellect (that is to say, to focus on what can be understood by reason alone without reliance on perception).<sup>13</sup> Descartes's project, however, diverged from Augustine, who believed that human reason was too fallible to succeed without God's guidance,<sup>14</sup> in his insistence on relying only on his own reasoning, without the help of Scripture or the word of God. Descartes, inspired by the rationalism of the Scientific Revolution, explicitly rejects taking the existence of God or the truth of the Bible for granted, in order, he explained, to provide proofs that would be convincing even to unbelievers.<sup>15</sup> His goal was to start with a clean slate, accepting only propositions that he found logically impossible to doubt. His criterion was that only clear and distinct ideas that are "certain and indubitable" (Descartes 1968, p.95) should be elevated to the status of accepted truths. This criterion may also have been inspired by Augustine who argued that we are justified in being certain only of knowledge that is immune to skeptical doubt through its self-evident certainty, such as knowledge of our subjective awareness<sup>16</sup> and knowledge of logical and mathematical truths.<sup>17</sup>

As can be seen from the above description, Descartes's skepticism was limited to those things that he deemed possible to doubt. Descartes does not extend his skepticism

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<sup>12</sup> At the very least, their close similarities are a testament to the fact that Augustine and Descartes were working in the same theological/philosophical tradition that prized logical argumentation and methodical explication and placed a higher valuation on rational analysis than on empirical study (in other words, both Augustine and Descartes were, to different degrees, rationalists).

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>14</sup> "The mind needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, because it is not itself the nature of truth. You will light my lamp, Lord" (Augustine 2019, IV.xv.25). Note that Augustine was a rationalist to the extent that he believed that reason was the path to truth, even though he also believed that faith was a necessary precondition to obtaining the ability to reason well.

<sup>15</sup> He explains this tactic in a dedication of the *Meditations* to "those Most Wise and Distinguished Men, the Dean and Doctors of the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris" (Descartes 1993, 1), and justifies himself with reference to Romans: "And again in the same passage [in Romans, Chapter 1] it appears we are being warned with the words: 'What is known of God is manifest to them,' that everything that can be known about God can be shown by reasons drawn exclusively from our own mind" (Descartes 1993, 1).

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Augustine developed a predecessor to Descartes's *cogito*: "...I am most certain that I am and that I know and delight in this. In respect of these truths, I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, 'What if you are deceived?' For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token, I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? for it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am" (Augustine 90:26).

<sup>17</sup> The striking similarities between Augustine's ideas and Descartes's have long been recognized by scholars, though there is debate as to whether Descartes was influenced by Augustine directly, through his own reading, or indirectly through the pervasiveness of Augustine's ideas in the philosophical and theological milieu of seventeenth century France (Mercer 2014, 47).

to his own experience of certainty or to the reliability of his feeling of certainty as a guide to the truth<sup>18</sup>. This was likely influenced by the view of Christians like Augustine that mental or spiritual certainty is a guide to truth (being conferred upon us by a benevolent God). Thus, although Descartes attempts to eliminate all reliance on God or the teachings of the Catholic church, it would appear that some of the lessons of his religious education managed to evade his skeptical scalpel.

Descartes's religious background also interferes with his efforts to turn his skepticism onto the question of his own existence and nature. Descartes begins with an attempt to doubt his own existence and concludes that this very act of doubting proves that he must exist. Thus, "I think therefore I am." This conclusion is to provide the cornerstone for his secure edifice of knowledge. However, as subsequent Western philosophers have pointed out (e.g., Nietzsche and Gassendi)<sup>19</sup>, Descartes's evidence is not sufficient for his conclusion. First of all, to experience a thought is not proof of having created a thought. The thinker and the experience of a thought need not be one and the same. Furthermore, the mere existence of a thought, or the experience of a thought, is insufficient to deduce the existence of an "I", unless that "I" is to refer only to a brief episode of awareness. But Descartes meant to refer to much more than a scrap of transient consciousness by his use of the word "I". He quickly follows his conclusion that "I" exist with an explanation of what that "I" is. He says, "I am a thinking thing" and elaborates on the meaning of a thinking thing as a "thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses" (Descartes 1993, p.30). In other words, from the evidence of an experienced thought ("do I exist?"), he precipitously assumes that he is an independent mental entity that exists over time and has a host of mental attributes. Note that in the description of his dream as quoted above, Descartes takes it for granted that he is the same entity that 1) had a dream of being by the fire, 2) had had in the past an experience of (apparently) actually sitting by a fire, 3) remembers accurately that he has had the experience of (apparently) actually sitting by a fire, and 4) is now able to rationally reflect on his experiences of having (apparently) actually sat by a fire and having dreamt that he sat by the fire. In other words, he assumes throughout the vignette that he is a stable, persisting mental entity that has had and accurately remembers various experiences. The fact that Descartes can so easily doubt the existence of an external world, but seems not even able to consider the possibility that he could exist only momentarily or transiently, or that his memories could be false, or that any mental properties that he takes himself to be composed of could be mistaken, can be traced to his religious and philosophical background. For Descartes, to exist at all (as a mind or a soul) is to be a stable, fully-formed, independent, rational being with a continual existence over time that comprises a past, a persisting

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<sup>18</sup>One of Descartes's four initial precepts in the *Discourse* is "never to accept anything as true that I did not know to be evidently so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to include in my judgments nothing more than what presented itself so clearly and so distinctly to my mind that I might have no occasion to doubt it" (Descartes 1968, 41).

<sup>19</sup>Nietzsche (1973); Gassendi cited in Fisher (2013). The following is my own explication of the problem, inspired by the critical commentary of Nietzsche and Gassendi.

memory and a presumptive future. That is because, for Descartes, to exist mentally (to be a thinking thing) is to have a soul<sup>20</sup>.

The Christian conception of a persisting, immutable, immaterial soul was tied so closely to Descartes's conception of existence as a mind (i.e., the subject of a thought) that he was unable to unravel them, or even, apparently, to realize that they were separate concepts that could have independent criteria for existence. In this way, Descartes's religious, philosophical and cultural background provided him with the resources to imagine that all sense perception was dubious and the external world was an illusion, beginning a conversation that has occupied countless Western philosophers in the ensuing centuries and that continues unabated today. At the same time, however, this same intellectual background, being so dominated by the notion of an individual soul, hobbled his ability to effectively extend his skepticism to beliefs about the existence of a stable self, the essential nature of a mind or the power of rational thought.

### 3. ZHUANG ZI'S BUTTERFLY DREAM

In the second chapter of the *Zhuang-Zi* is a description of an incident involving Zhuang Zhou<sup>21</sup>. Here is my very literal translation of this passage:

#### Zhuang Zhou Dreamt a Butterfly

庄周梦蝶

昔者庄周梦为蝴蝶

栩栩然蝴蝶也自喻适志与

不知周也

俄然觉则蘧蘧然周也

不知周之梦为蝴蝶与

蝴蝶之梦为周与

周与蝴蝶则必有分矣

此之谓物化

(庄子·齐物论) (*Zhuang-Zi*, "*Qi-Wu-Lun*")

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt to be a butterfly

Vividly a butterfly, doing as it pleased

Not knowing Zhou.

Suddenly awakening, then solidly Zhou

There is no knowing: Zhou dreamt to be a butterfly?

A butterfly dreamt to be Zhou?

Between Zhou and a butterfly, there must be a distinction

This is called Things Change<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller discussion of Descartes's concept of a soul, see below in Section VII, 2, ii.

<sup>21</sup> Although Zhuang Zhou is traditionally taken to refer to Zhuang Zi himself, I remain neutral regarding this identification, since the story is written in the third person.

<sup>22</sup> In this spirit of providing the most literal and pre-interpretive translation possible, I have rendered *wu-hua* (物化) as 'things change.' However, it would be remiss to offer this translation without attempting to clarify what the concept of "things change" signifies in the context of the *Zhuang-Zi* as a whole and the Daoist tradition in which it is embedded. *Wu-hua* denotes not chaotic and indiscriminate change (such as in the Buddhist tradition), but rather the transformation of entities from one distinct form to another within the eternal and constant *Dao*. Rendering *wu-hua* as 'transmutation' might better convey this concept, glossed by Bo Mou as "all [distinct] things being unified into one" (Mou 2015). (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their help in clarifying this point).

There are many different interpretations and translations of this short passage. Some translations in English utilize a first person voice, which has the effect of making the passage sound closely parallel to Descartes's dream argument—describing the philosopher's experience of dreaming followed by doubts as to his perception of himself as a man.

Consider, for example, what is one of the earliest and most influential translations in English, by Herbert A. Giles:

Once upon a time, I, Zhuang Zi, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a barrier. The transition is called *Metempsychosis* (Giles 1926, 47).

Through the use of the first person voice, there is an explicit identification of “I, Zhuang Zi” with the “I” that thought he was a butterfly. This theme is reinforced by phrases such as “my individuality as a man” and “myself again”.<sup>23</sup> This forceful identification of the philosopher, the butterfly and the narrator is not indicated in the original Chinese. Moreover, Giles concludes the passage with the introduction of the ancient Greek philosophical concept of “metempsychosis”. “Metempsychosis” (the transmigration of souls after death) implies a great deal that is beyond the literal meaning of this line in the *Zhuang-Zi*, which is simply that “things change/transmute”. In this way, Giles's translation inappropriately interprets the initial description of the butterfly dream in a way that makes it conform very closely to Descartes's treatment of the dream argument, while interpreting the closing remarks in a way that inappropriately evokes an ancient Greek philosophical concept—specifically one that emphasizes the interpretation that the entire passage concerns one indivisible soul (and a soul, moreover, that can presumably survive death through transmigration).

A close literal reading of the passage, however, tells a different story. For a start, there is no “I” in this passage in the original Chinese and there is, in fact, no personal pronoun that explicitly or implicitly connects the existence of Zhuang Zhou to the existence of the butterfly. Moreover, there is no indication that Zhuang Zhou himself even remembered his dream or reflected upon it. The author, of course, reflected on the significance of such a dream, but as the passage is written in the third person, we have no justification for identifying the character of Zhuang Zhou with the author. The passage does not state (as in Giles's translation) that “I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a

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<sup>23</sup> Other popular translations into English carry a similar implication. In Burton Watson's version, for example, although the first-person voice is avoided, it is clearly stated that “He [the butterfly] did not know he was Zhuang Zhou”, clearly implying that the consciousness of the butterfly and the consciousness of Zhuang Zhou belong to the same entity.



man.” It merely states that the actual situation is not known (likely implying that the actual situation is not knowable and possibly even indeterminate<sup>24</sup>).

By eliminating pronouns that may be improperly inferred, we are left with a passage that simply describes a dreaming man, a butterfly in a dream and a man awakening. There are at least two characters in this small drama: a man and a butterfly<sup>25</sup>. There is no common pronoun (whether “I” or “him”) that necessarily links these two characters together as a single being. There is therefore no suggestion of a common stream of consciousness that exists first in the apparent body of a man and then in the apparent body of a butterfly. Unlike Descartes’s description of dreaming and awakening, there is no common point of view between the butterfly and the man. The butterfly does not know Zhuang Zhou<sup>26</sup> and the passage does not tell us that Zhuang Zhou himself remembered being a butterfly or that Zhuang Zhou himself doubted whether he were not actually a butterfly dreaming that he was a man. The passage merely states that it is not known whether Zhuang Zhou dreamt a butterfly or a butterfly dreamt Zhuang Zhou.

The passage thereby implies that although Zhuang Zhou feels solid and certain in his existence, this existence may be no more substantial or enduring than a butterfly’s dream. This is consistent with the pervading Daoist view of self portrayed in the *Zhuang-Zi*: there is no separate and enduring self<sup>27</sup>, there is no distinct and independent consciousness, there is only change<sup>28</sup>. Between a man and a butterfly, there must be some distinction, but that distinction itself is only a temporary manifestation of the *Dao* (道). The *Dao* exists throughout distinct and various forms, and the forms transmute from one to the other<sup>29</sup> -- “This is called Things Change”.

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<sup>24</sup> Zhuang Zi’s general skepticism about the possibility of knowledge can be seen in this passage: “Suddenly there is being and nonbeing. But between this being and nonbeing, I don’t really know which is being and which is nonbeing. Now I have just said something. But I don’t know whether what I have said has really said something or whether it hasn’t said something” (Watson 2013, 12-13). Also: “Nie Que asked Wang Ni, ‘Do you know what all things agree in calling right?’ ‘How would I know that?’ said Wang Ni. ‘Do you know that you don’t know it?’ ‘How would I know that?’ ‘Then do things know nothing?’ ‘How would I know that?’” (Watson 2013, 14-15). Note that Zhuang Zi’s skepticism about knowledge does not equate to nihilism about knowledge, since, as the second quotation above illustrates, he was also skeptical of claims denying the possibility of knowledge.

<sup>25</sup> Moeller (2010) suggests that there may be three characters: Zhuang Zhou before sleeping, the butterfly, and Zhuang Zhou upon awakening. Some interpretations take the narrator to be an additional character.

<sup>26</sup> Note that my strictly literal translation avoids the implication transmitted in many common translations that the butterfly “did not know he was Zhuang Zhou” (thereby linking the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou as a single entity from the point of view of the narrator).

<sup>27</sup> “The ten thousand things are really one” (Watson 2013, 177).

<sup>28</sup> See below for discussions of the concepts of change and self in the *Zhuang-Zi*.

<sup>29</sup> “This Way [*Dao*], whose spiritual brightness is of the greatest purity, joins with others in a hundred transformations.... There is nothing in the world that does not bob and sink to the end of its days, lacking fixity.... [The *Dao*] seems not to exist and yet it is there; lush and unbounded, it possesses no form but only spirit; the ten thousand things are shepherded by it, though they do not understand it—this is what is called the Source, the Root” (Watson 2013, 178-9). Also, “the ten thousand transformations continue without even the beginning of an end” (Watson 2013, 170).

Thus, a fresh interpretation of this passage, unburdened by Westernized expectations, and guided by an understanding of Zhuang Zi's Daoist perspective, reveals the profound difference between Zhuang Zi's story and Descartes's dream argument<sup>30</sup> and the different types of skepticism that they evoke. Zhuang Zi's skepticism is directed at the significance and stability of the self and the very possibility of knowledge (particularly self-knowledge), the two things that Descartes seems to take for granted. On the other hand, Zhuang Zi's skepticism is not aimed at the ultimate reality of the tangible world, which is the target of Descartes's dream argument<sup>31</sup>.

### 3.1 DAOISM AND CHANGE

The belief that change is the fundamental property of the universe is intrinsic to ancient Chinese tradition and is a major theme in Daoist philosophy. The importance of change is illustrated by the prominence of one of the earliest of the Chinese classics, the *Yi-Jing* (易經) (*The Book of Changes*)<sup>32</sup> dating from around 1000 B.C. Recognizing the inevitability of change, the *Yi-Jing* was (and is) used as a divination text in order to help individuals to understand and manage the changes that inevitably confront them. Carrying on this traditional reverence for change, the Daoist classic, the *Dao-De-Jing* (道德經), attributed to a sixth century B.C. sage known as "Lao Zi (老子)"<sup>33</sup>, describes reality as a ceaseless process of change and transformation. The *Dao-De-Jing* teaches that all things are interconnected, coming into being and going out of being in constant transformation through the interplay of opposite and complementary elements. Everything is composed and defined by its relationship to opposing aspects<sup>34</sup>. Thus, contrasting concepts such as yin and yang, masculine and feminine, dark and light, and

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<sup>30</sup> In my interpretation, I am indebted to the insights of Hans-Georg Moeller (2010), Han Xiaoqiang (2009) and Agne Budriunaite (2014).

<sup>31</sup> My understanding of Zhuang Zi's skepticism is informed by Hansen (2019).

<sup>32</sup> The meaning of the word *Yi* (易), 'change' in *The Book of Changes*, like the phrase *wu-hua* ('things change') discussed above, is complex. Though normally denoting change, it is to be understood as changes within the component parts of a holistic, dynamic and eternal cosmos, where "everything is part of a totality, a group dance that never stops" (Hon 2019).

<sup>33</sup> 'Lao Zi', literally 'old man', is the customary name of the author of the *Dao-De-Jing*, although, like the *Zhuang-Zi*, the *Dao-De-Jing* is now considered to be a compilation of Daoist wisdom written by multiple authors over hundreds of years. Lao Zi is popularly taken to be Zhuang Zi's predecessor, and sometimes teacher, although in fact there may be some overlap in the timing of some of the contributions to the *Zhuang-Zi* and the *Dao-De-Jing*, and it is not always clear in which direction the influence of thought occurred. However, the evident similarities between these two fundamental Daoist texts indicate that the authors of the *Zhuang-Zi* and the *Dao-De-Jing* arose within the same cultural milieu, and drew from many of the same sources of Chinese folk philosophy, history and religion prevalent in the late Zhou dynasty (such as the *Zuo-Zhuan* and *The Book of Changes*, as well as the established philosophies of Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism, etc. (Watson 2013, xiii-xiv).

<sup>34</sup> "For truly Being and Not-being grow out of one another; Difficult and easy complete one another. Long and short test one another; High and low determine one another. Pitch and mode give harmony to one another. Front and back give sequence to one another" (*Dao-De-Jing*, Ch.2, translated by Waley 1997, 5).

life and death<sup>35</sup>, are not in conflict but rather are complementary and necessary to each other<sup>36</sup>. No side can exist without the complementary/opposite side. Dark cannot exist without light, death cannot exist without life, etc. Furthermore, things do not belong fixedly to one category, but rather exist in constant transformation from one pole to its complementary pole. Just as day and night are temporary aspects of the day/night dyad, so life and death are temporary aspects of the life/death dyad. Nothing continues forever in the aspect in which it begins, but all change collectively creates the one unity: the eternal and everlasting *Dao*. One of the most famous passages of the *Dao-De-Jing* says, “the *Dao* gave birth to one, one gave birth to two, two gave birth to three, three gave birth to the ten thousand things” (*Dao-De-Jing* ctext.org/ *Dao-De-Jing*, Ch. 42, my translation)<sup>37</sup>. Thus, the ten thousand things<sup>38</sup> arose through the transformation of the *Dao*. The vicissitudes of the ten thousand things collectively comprise the unchanging and eternal *Dao*<sup>39</sup>. Change, in the sense of transmutation of forms of the *Dao*, is the only constant.

Immersed in a culture informed by the ideas of proto-Daoism, the *Dao-De-Jing* and the *Book of Changes*, Zhuang Zi was working within a tradition that takes change to be inevitable and that celebrates change and transformation as beautiful. There is a story in the *Zhuang-Zi* that illustrates the celebration of this inevitability very well:

When Zhuang Zi’s wife died and Hui Shi came to convey his condolences, he found Zhuang Zi squatting with his knees out, drumming on a pan and singing. “You lived with her, she raised your children, and you grew old together”, Hui Shi said. “Not weeping when she died would have been bad enough. Aren’t you going too far by drumming on a pan and singing?”

“No,” Zhuang Zi said. “When she first died, how could I have escaped feeling the loss? Then I looked back to the beginning before she had life. Not only before she had life but before she had form. Not only before she had form, but before she had vital energy. In this confused, amorphous realm, something changed and vital energy appeared; when the vital energy was changed, form appeared; with changes in form, life began. Now there is another change bringing death. This is like the progression of the four seasons of spring and fall, winter and summer. Here she was, lying down to sleep in a huge room, and I followed her sobbing and wailing. When I realized my actions showed I hadn’t understood destiny, I stopped” (Ebrey 1993, 28-31).

<sup>35</sup> Compare this with Zhuang Zi: “Life is the companion of death; death is the beginning of life” (Watson, 2013, 177).

<sup>36</sup> Compare this with Zhuang Zi: “east and west are mutually opposed but ... one cannot do without the other” (Watson 2013, 130).

<sup>37</sup> This is echoed in the *Zhuang-Zi*: “In the Great Beginning, there was nonbeing; there was no being. No name. Out of it arose One; there was One, but it had no form. Things got hold of it and it came to life and it was called Virtue (*De* 德)

... Out of the flow and flux, things were born... If the nature is trained, you may return to the Beginning. Being identical, you will be empty; being empty, you will be great... you may join with Heaven and earth” (Watson 2013, 88-89).

<sup>38</sup> The phrase “the ten thousand things” (*wan-wu*) is used to mean myriad things or all things.

<sup>39</sup> Compare with Zhuang Zi: “the ten thousand things belong to one storehouse... life and death share the same body” (Watson, 2013, 85).

Death is not the end of life but merely a transmutation<sup>40</sup> of life from one form to another<sup>41</sup>, and the recognition of this inevitability is a source of joy. It is muddle-headed to mourn for the end of a particular life and enlightened to delight in the eternal transmutations of the *Dao*.

The notion that all living things are connected through constant transmutation, is illustrated in another passage of the *Zhuang-Zi*:

The seeds of things have mysterious workings. In the water they become Break Vine, on the edges of the water they become Frog's Robe. If they sprout on the slopes they become Hill Slippers. Hill Slippers ... turn into Crow's Feet ... turn into maggots and their leaves turn into butterflies. ... butterflies are transformed and turn into insects ... insects become birds called Dried Leftover Bones. The saliva of the Dried Leftover Bones becomes Ssumi bugs ... become Vinegar Eaters.... I-lo bugs are born from the Vinegar Eaters, and Huang-shuang bugs from Chiu-yu bugs. Chiu-yu bugs are born from Mou-jui bugs and Mou-jui bugs are born from Rot Grubs and Rot Grubs are born from Sheep's Groom. Sheep's Groom ... produces Green Peace plants. Green Peace plants produce leopards and leopards produce horses and horses produce men. Men in time return again to the mysterious workings. So all creatures come out of the mysterious workings and go back into them again (Watson 1968, 143-144).

With this in mind, we can understand how profoundly the story of the Butterfly Dream differs from Descartes's account of his dream. In the Butterfly Dream, there is a transformation of a man and a butterfly<sup>42</sup>. There is no constant and unchanging perspective that links their existences<sup>43</sup>. The anecdote does not convey that a real, stable, consistently existing entity with a personal consciousness mistakenly dreamt that he/it had a different physical form. Unlike Descartes, Zhuang Zi does not describe a single unchanging mind that underwent different experiences. Rather, Zhuang Zi says that there is no real or objective description of what occurred: "It is not known...". The only certainty in the anecdote is the conclusion "things change". Just as the *Dao-De-Jing* had taught, the only constancy is constant change within the eternally unchanging *Dao*.

Thus the butterfly dream illustrates a thorough-going skepticism regarding the existence of any concrete and enduring mode of being. Where Descartes concludes

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<sup>40</sup> This "transmutation" is not like the popular understanding of reincarnation (or metempsychosis), where there is a distinct entity (or soul) that first inhabits one body and then enters another. Rather, Zhuang Zi's "transmutation" is a transformation of the all-pervading *Dao* essence from one form to another. In other words, it is not that any individual or self survives the change, but rather that the one spirit or essence that pervades all things takes myriad forms, and these forms are constantly changing. In this way, it is comparable to the modern concept of energy. Energy is never created or destroyed, but it is transferred from one form to another.

<sup>41</sup> Zhuang Zi: "The Way [*Dao*] is without beginning or end, but things have their life and death" (Watson 2013, 132).

<sup>42</sup> Or a transference of essential being from the transitory form of a man to the transitory form of a butterfly.

<sup>43</sup> The two existences are only linked by their nature as forms of the *Dao*, but the *Dao* itself has no perspective, being both everything and nothing.

from his experience of dreaming that the only thing he can be certain of is his own mind, Zhuang Zi concludes that all forms of being, mental and physical, are mere transient manifestations of the formless *Dao*. This is indeed a very different form of skepticism.

#### 4. COMPARISON OF DESCARTES'S AND ZHUANG ZI'S PHILOSOPHICAL TREATMENT OF DREAMS

The differences in Descartes's and Zhuang Zi's philosophical response to the uncertainty born from dream experiences reflect systematic differences between the Daoist philosophy of ancient China and the rationalism and scholasticism of Descartes's world. I will discuss two categories of differences: differences of form and differences of substance.

##### 4.1 DIFFERENCES OF FORM

Descartes's dream argument is one part of an extended analytical work that uses the dream hypothesis as part of the foundation for a philosophical system that is logically laid out and carefully explained. For Western philosophers in the rationalist and scholastic tradition, in particular, philosophy is the careful explication of theory backed by analysis and dialectical reasoning<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, Descartes's work follows in a tradition of philosophy as personal journey. Descartes's works are unquestionably the products of a single author and are presented in a biographical and discursive format, not merely explicating a theory, but telling the story of how an individual thinker came to have the insights presented. In this manner, he follows the style of many earlier works that blended philosophy with biography and told a story of one man's intellectual search for the truth, such as the *Confessions* of Augustine, the *Meditations* of Aurelius and the *Essays* of Montaigne. Typical of his predecessors in the rationalist tradition, Descartes work is explicit and individualistic, and relies heavily on logic and reasoning.

Zhuang Zi's butterfly dream, by contrast, is a short anecdote in a collection of short stories and whimsical passages that collectively suggest a Daoist understanding of the world. Rather than explicitly offering a systematic theory, it provides a single clue among many to the understanding of a skeptical worldview which then must be interpreted by the readers, scholars and commentators.

Furthermore, the *Zhuang-Zi* could not be further in style from the kind of rational, methodical discourse and first-person story narration of Descartes's works. In fact, the names 'Zhuang Zi' and 'Zhuang Zhou' appear only sporadically in a few passages of the *Zhuang-Zi*. The majority of the anecdotes in the text concern a varied collection of colorful characters, including contemporary or near-contemporary philosophers of the

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<sup>44</sup> Descartes is sometimes regarded as the father of modern philosophy and a precursor of analytic philosophy, but the emphasis on logical analysis and reasoning owes a debt to scholastic philosophy (e.g., Aquinas and Augustine), as well as to Aristotle [Descartes disliked many aspects of Aristotle, but was nonetheless heir to his system of logic and meticulous methodology, through his Jesuit education (see the discussion of Descartes's education above)].

Zhou Dynasty (such as Confucius (孔子), Mo Zi (墨子), etc.), gods and spirits, historical figures, legendary celebrities, fictionalized philosophers, such as Hui Zi (惠子), idealized Daoist sages and a panoply of humorous and grotesque characters, such as Shushan No-toes, mad man Jie Yu, Nameless Man, Big Concealment, Cloud Chief, Aided-by-Ink and Mr. Lame-Hunchback-No-Lips<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, it is not always clear which character is meant to be representing the views of the author. The various stories and flights of fancy do not reliably tell a coherent story and certainly do not form a logical argument for the Daoist way of thinking. Rather their chaotic cacophony of views, behavior, experiences and debates exemplify the essentially chaotic nature of the world. Zhuang Zi does not merely eschew rational argumentation and logical analysis—he actively disparages such practices. In the *Zhuang-Zi*, Confucians are frequently skewered for their rigid rules of morality (e.g., Watson 2013, 115), Mohists for their inflexible principles (e.g., Watson 2013, 289-90) and the logicians for their quibbling and caviling (e.g., Watson 2013, 10). In fact, the very pursuit of knowledge is condemned as a practice that warps the in-born nature of a person<sup>46</sup>. Thus, traditional morality, hyperrationality and the drive to better oneself are all cited as the cause of immorality, discontent and true ignorance (i.e., ignorance of the natural way of the *Dao*)<sup>47</sup>. The anarchy of the *Zhuang-Zi* thus reflects the commitments of the Daoist to the affirmation of differences, the embrace of opposites, and the ultimate unity of the seemingly distinctive and contradictory ten thousand things<sup>48</sup>.

In this way, Descartes and Zhuang Zi are representative of the different cultural styles of their traditions: one personal, rational, methodical and explicit; the other holistic, evocative, esoteric and anti-rational.

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<sup>45</sup> The translations of these names are all taken from Watson (2013).

<sup>46</sup> “Put a stop to the ways of Zeng and Shi; gag the mouths of Yang and Mo; wipe out and reject benevolence and righteousness; and for the first time, the Virtue of the world will reach the state of Mysterious Leveling.... So great is the confusion of the world that comes from coveting knowledge!” (Watson 2013, 71-73). (Note: although Zhuang Zi seems elsewhere to celebrate confusion, in this instance “confusion” is certainly cited as a bad thing. This is but one example of the many contradictions on display in the *Zhuang-Zi*.)

<sup>47</sup> This, of course, leaves Daoism open to a paradox—if the ideal is to be ignorant and natural, isn’t it counterproductive to try to learn from a teacher like Zhuang Zi? This apparent paradox did not seem to worry Zhuang Zi overmuch – unsurprisingly, as Zhuang Zi seems to revel in paradoxes of all sorts.

<sup>48</sup> In the last chapter of the *Zhuang-Zi* is this description of Zhuang Zhou’s methods: “Zhuang Zhou heard of their [ancient sages’] views and delighted in them. He expounded them in odd and outlandish terms, in brash and bombastic language, in unbound and unbordered phrases, abandoning himself to the times without partisanship, not looking at things from one angle only. He believed that the world was drowned in turbidness and that it was impossible to address it in sober language.... Though his writings are a string of queer beads and baubles, they roll and rattle and do no one any harm. Though his words seem to be at sixes and sevens, yet among the sham and waggery, there are things worth observing, for they are crammed with truths that never come to an end.... Nevertheless, in responding to change and expounding on the world of things, he set forth principles that will never cease to be valid....” (Watson 2013, 296).

## 4.2 DIFFERENCES OF SUBSTANCE

In substance as well as form, Zhuang Zi and Descartes reveal disparate attitudes to the role of individuals and the resulting conceptions of the self/mind.

### 4.2.1 DESCARTES'S INDIVIDUALISM

Descartes was working within a tradition that for millennia has emphasized the importance of each individual self. In comparison with the philosophies and religions of the East, the Catholicism and scholastic philosophy that formed Descartes intellectual background are distinctly individualistic or protoindividualistic traditions.

Here I must explain my use of the word 'protoindividualism'. 'Individualism' is a loaded term in European intellectual history, and can mean anything from rugged self-reliance, to valuing individual welfare over the interests of the state, to rejecting all responsibilities of citizenship or family ties, to the promotion of individual genius and a downplaying of cultural influences on thought or works of art, to a promotion of anarchistic forms of government, to social Darwinism, liberalism, and/or laissez-faire economics. For the purposes of this paper I would like to stipulate a simpler and barer sense of the word 'individualism' which I will call 'protoindividualism'. By this term, I mean the focus on the intrinsic value of individual human beings and a belief in the autonomy and ultimate separateness of individuals. The belief in the autonomy of the individual underlies the belief in the appropriateness of both accepting moral responsibility for one's own actions and thoughts, and applying moral responsibility to the thoughts and actions of others<sup>49</sup>. In other words, individuals make their own decisions on the basis of their own interests<sup>50</sup> and are rightly judged on the basis of their individual actions and (even and especially) by their personal inner thoughts (i.e. by the contents of their hearts)<sup>51</sup>. This protoindividualism is so deeply rooted in

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<sup>49</sup> And, significantly, not applying moral responsibility or retribution for individual actions to groups to which they belong, such as a family, tribe or clan.

<sup>50</sup> People are repeatedly exhorted in the New Testament, for example, to be kind to others, love their neighbors and even love their enemies, not because their neighbors and enemies are deserving of such good treatment (Jesus makes it clear that God will decide what they deserve and many of them deserve everlasting hellfire), but rather so that they will be rewarded in heaven. It is in their interests to help others. ("Love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest" (Luke 6:35 KJV); "whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones... he shall in no wise lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42, KJV); "avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written: Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in doing so thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head" (Romans 12:20, KJV).

<sup>51</sup> "For from within, out of the heart of man, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23, KJV). In Christianity faith and good intentions are generally touted as far more important than the actual effect of one's good deeds (consider, for example, the widow's mite—the poor widow gets more praise (and ultimately more heavenly reward) for her tiny contribution to charity than the rich do from their substantial contributions,

Western culture, that it may be hard to even recognize as an ideology until one considers the existence of societies both past and present in which the individual is not sacrosanct nor even particularly important: societies in which the flourishing of the family, the prosperity of the state or the enhancement of the church, the clan, the ethnic group or even the species is the primary good and the primary justification for moral rules. Protoindividualism can also be brought into sharp relief by contrasting it with philosophies and religions in which the ultimate good is an abstract notion that applies to the universe as a whole and which is not reducible to the interests of any individual unit therein, such as in the philosophies of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism<sup>52</sup> or the Aristotelian concept of the Prime Mover<sup>53</sup>.

Western ideological history has tended towards protoindividualism since long before the humanism of the Renaissance or the rise of individualism as a social, political and philosophical movement in the nineteenth century. In fact, it is already prominent in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as can be illustrated by the fact that the God of the Old Testament is portrayed (particularly in Genesis) as an individual, personal, human-like God. The Old Testament God takes the singular pronoun, is described as walking and talking, has human-like emotions such as anger and jealousy, and, most significantly, looks like a person (he is said to have made man “in his own image”). However though God is appears to share many characteristics of an individual person, and though the stories of the Old Testament are a compilation of histories of individual characters, the focus in the Old Testament is still more on the clan, i.e. the flourishing of the Jewish people, than on the ultimate fates of those individuals. It is in the New Testament, that the protoindividualism of the Christian tradition really develops. In the Gospels, Jesus tells people that they are important to God as individuals<sup>54</sup>, that they will be individually rewarded in Heaven based on their actions and their faith in this life<sup>55</sup>, and that their relationship to God is a personal and private matter<sup>56</sup>. Moreover,

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because her tiny contribution is a greater sacrifice for her and therefore reflects better on her personal character (Mark 42-44, KJV)).

<sup>52</sup> Confucianism is considerably more human-centered than Buddhism or Daoism, but Confucianism nevertheless promotes the idea that the proper functioning of human society is in conformity with the all-encompassing, all-important *Dao* (i.e. the Way of the Universe).

<sup>53</sup> Note that, although Aristotle was one of the important influences on Descartes, his cosmology was distinctly less protoindividualistic than the Christian tradition.

<sup>54</sup> As Jesus exhorted his disciples: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without the will of your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10: 29-31, KJV).

<sup>55</sup> “He [the Son of Man] shall reward every man according to his works” (Matthew 16:28, KJV). “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (II Corinthians 5:10, KJV).

<sup>56</sup> “Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them; otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven... But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; That thine alms may be in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into the closet, and when thou hast shut thy door,



there is a significant inward turn to the teachings of the Gospels. What matters primarily is not how you benefit the community (good deeds are important, but primarily as a way of demonstrating your faith and serving God), nor how you are perceived by others, but by the content of your heart – specifically your faith in God and your personal relationship with God. It is true that Christian churches have always been communal affairs and that there is a lot of emphasis on the need to convert others to the faith, but in the end, you will be rewarded or punished based on your individual deeds, thoughts and character. Your eternal future does not depend on anyone but yourself. It is also in the New Testament that people are told explicitly that they will live eternally, whether in heaven or hell. This is an important development. The Jewish tradition was not unified in its belief in an afterlife, but Jesus makes it clear to his followers that they have an individual life that is treasured by God and that is immortal. The solidification of protoindividualism (i.e., the intrinsic and everlasting value of the individual) could not be more clear, and this is the tradition that Descartes arose within. This tradition laid the foundation for Descartes’s ability to see his own soul as having an essence that was absolutely independent of either society or nature. This is the assumption with which he was working when he considered the problems evoked by the deceptive nature of dreams. Descartes initial conclusion from the dream argument is that it is conceivable that all the world is an illusion and that he alone exists. This is a striking example of individualism taken to its logical extreme – to view the world (even hypothetically) as comprising only oneself. This is likely a vision that would never occur to anyone that was not raised in a protoindividualistic culture and educated in an individualistic tradition<sup>57</sup>.

#### 4.2.2 DESCARTES AND THE SOUL

Descartes’s Catholic background also strongly influenced his view of what existence as an individual consists of. As discussed above, Descartes leaps precipitously from the conclusion that he exists to the conclusion that he is “a thinking thing”, that is “a thing which doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also and which feels” (Descartes 1968, 107). Thus to exist at all to Descartes is to have a mind or a soul<sup>58</sup>. Descartes argues that if the soul exists, it is separate from the body (since he can clearly conceive of the possibility that he has a soul without a body, but cannot conceive of the possibility that he has a body but not a soul<sup>59</sup>—this poor logic is a result

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pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:1-6, KJV).

<sup>57</sup> If your essence is composed of and created by your relationships to others, it makes no sense to imagine your existence as divorced from the web of being that surrounds and sustains you.

<sup>58</sup> Descartes uses the terms ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ interchangeably (Cottingham 1992), and identifies his mind/soul as ‘myself’ throughout the Meditations and the Discourse on Method. Descartes’s concept of mind is commonly referred to as the ‘Cartesian ego’ or ‘Cartesian self’ (“Cartesian Self”, APA Dictionary of Psychology, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/cartesian-self>).

<sup>59</sup> In his synopsis to the Meditations, Descartes writes: “The human mind... is a pure substance [distinct from the body... And it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish, the mind is immortal by its very nature” (Descartes 1993, 9).

of Descartes's conclusion that what he can clearly conceive must be true<sup>60</sup>. Moreover, he argues that the soul must be immortal since it is not dependent on the body for existence. This leap of logic was challenged by Father Mersenne some 10 years after the publication of the *Meditations*, who argued that “to establish the incorporeality of the soul ... is not eo ipso to establish its immortality; God might, for example, have endowed it with ‘just so much strength and existence as to ensure that it came to an end with the death of the body’” (Cottingham 1992, 238). Again the fact that Descartes seems to so eagerly embrace these dodgy conclusions is most likely because the conclusions so happily conformed to his Catholic faith and specifically to the teachings of the Jesuits. The Jesuits taught that “the intellective soul is truly the substantial form of the body”, that “there is a distinct and proper soul in each man” and that “the intellective soul is immortal” (Ariew 1992, 65) and although Descartes challenged many of the tenets of Aristotle taught by the Jesuits, he accepted “all the theological and philosophical opinions concerning God, angels, and man that the Jesuits were required to sustain and defend” (Ariew 1992, 66). In the dream argument, therefore, having once logically proven his own existence, Descartes immediately sees himself as the kind of soul conceived of in the scholastic tradition<sup>61</sup>. Specifically, Descartes sees himself as an incorporeal mind that can dream and can wake and can reflect on its dreaming and waking experiences reliably. Unlike Zhuang Zi, he does not consider applying a skeptical attitude to the persisting existence of himself as a unified thinking thing throughout these experiences, nor to the reliability of his memory or his reasoning processes.

#### 4.2.3 ZHUANG ZI'S HOLISM

Zhuang Zi operated in a tradition that has consistently emphasized the larger society and the web of relationships in which any individual finds its role. In China, both before Zhuang Zi's contribution and long after, individuals have tended to be regarded as less important than the systems in which they operate. Chinese morality, unlike Western morality, deemphasizes the effects of moral action on the individual (i.e., the fate of their soul) in favor of emphasizing the effects of morality on the welfare of others, whether family, society or state. Thus, in Confucianism, a person is defined in terms of the five relationships—s/he is foremost a subject or ruler; a spouse; a parent or child; a brother or sister; and a friend (Csikszentmihalyi 2021).

Daoism, however, surpasses Confucianism in the extent of its holism. Daoism distinguished itself in part as a reaction to the focus on the human world that characterizes Confucianism. While philosophers like Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi agreed with Confucians with regard to the crucial role of harmonious relationships both in the origination and significance of human life, they argued that the importance of relationships extended beyond the human world to encompass the natural world as well

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<sup>60</sup> “I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (Descartes, 1993, 24).

<sup>61</sup> Although Descartes's understanding of the soul departs from scholastic orthodoxy in some ways, certain basic elements are the same, for example, the soul's incorporeity, its unity and its immortality.

(“Philosophical Daoism” 2021). Thus, an individual human being is merely a small component of society and his or her life has no enduring significance. Furthermore, even the whole of human society is only a small component of nature (*tian* 天) and has no more significance than other parts of nature. This is diametrically opposed to the protoindividualism discussed above.

However, while neither Confucianism nor Daoism would qualify as protoindividualistic, they are nevertheless very different from each other in terms of another sense of individualism. Whereas Confucianism might be properly described as collectivist and is greatly concerned with forms of relationships, public rituals and rites, Daoism frequently emphasizes the solitary pursuit of the individual. In this sense, Daoism is highly individualistic. For Zhuang Zi, enlightenment is largely a solitary affair and frequently requires turning one’s back explicitly on societal obligations and conventional values. The sage does not depend on society for guidance, but chooses to go his or her own way, rejecting unnatural constraints and mores fabricated by society in order to free their mind. The important difference between this pursuit and a similar pursuit of truth by, say, a Christian monk, is that the enlightenment that a Daoist sage seeks is an understanding and acceptance of the interconnectedness of all things<sup>62</sup> and the illusory character of individual existence<sup>63</sup>. In other words, the method may be individualistic but the ultimate goal is a realization of the truth of holism<sup>64</sup>.

Zhuang Zi frequently expresses skepticism about the self—“What’s more, we go around telling one another, I do this, I do that – but how do we know that this ‘I’ we talk about has any ‘I’ to it?” (Watson 2013, 51). He advocates that a sage should abandon this conception of a self in order to have true understanding – “Therefore I say, the Perfect Man has no self” (Watson 2013, 3). He advises:

Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget you are a thing among things, and you may join in the great unity with the deep and boundless. Undo the mind, slough off spirit, be blank and soulless, and the ten thousand things will return to the root – return to the root and not know why. Dark and differentiated chaos – to the end of life, none will depart from it (Watson 2013, 81).

Obsession with our petty individual forms is merely an obstacle to peace and joy<sup>65</sup>, thus:

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<sup>62</sup> “Whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Xishi, things ribald and shady, or things grotesque and strange, the Way [*Dao*] makes them all into one” (Watson 2013, 11).

<sup>63</sup> “Pure spirit reaches in the four directions, flows now this way, now that – there is no place it does not extend to. Above, it brushes Heaven; below, it coils on the earth. It transforms and nurses the ten thousand things, but no one can make out its form. Its name is called One-with-Heaven... you will become one with spirit, with pure essence, which communicates and mingles with the Heavenly Order” (Watson 2013, 121). Note that by ‘heaven’ (*tian*) Zhuang Zi means nature (Watson 2013, xi).

<sup>64</sup> “The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see” (Watson 2013, 14).

<sup>65</sup> “How much more then does he [the sage] hate the ‘I’ who distinguishes between Heaven and man” (Watson 2013, 198).

A man's stops and starts, his life and death, his rises and falls – none of these can he do anything about. Yet he thinks that the mastery of them lies with man! Forget things, forget Heaven, and be called a forgetter of self. The man who has forgotten self may be said to have entered Heaven (Watson 2013, 89).

To understand this passage, it is necessary to remember that for Zhuang Zi “entering Heaven” means becoming one with all of nature (*tian*). It is in sharp contrast to the Christian concept of receiving personal immortality in a realm beyond the natural world.

Shaped by their respective traditions and personal philosophical commitments, Zhuang Zi and Descartes began with two different views of the self with which to respond to their dreaming experiences, which subsequently led them to contrasting conclusions regarding the state of their own existences.

Descartes deduced from his experiences with dreams that his own mind is the only thing that he can be certain exists. In this way, he reasoned, the mind is different from the body. The body can be doubted while the mind cannot; thus, he concluded, they are different types of substances. Descartes goes on to characterize the mind, self or soul as indubitable, unchanging, immortal, and distinct from the physical world. Moreover, to Descartes, the mind/soul was supernatural<sup>66</sup>, unique to human beings and of supreme importance.

Zhuang Zi, on the other hand, viewed the mind or self or soul as merely one transient form of the eternal *Dao*, which flows, changes and transmutes from one form to another<sup>67</sup>. Just as Zhuang Zhou may be no more than a brief dream in the mind of a butterfly, every form of being will pass or change to another, while only the eternal existence of the *Dao* persists. In Zhuang Zi's view, the mind or self or soul is subject to doubt, illusory, constantly changing, integrated with all other forms of being, natural, and not unique to humans. Moreover, far from being important, our concept of our self as a separate entity is an obstacle to enlightenment and joy.

#### 4.2.4 DUALISM IN ZHUANG ZI AND DESCARTES

Likewise, reflecting their worldviews, Descartes and Zhuang Zi both utilized concepts of a kind of dualism that were nonetheless very different.

Cartesian dualism is the dualism of the body and the mind. The body and the mind are thought to belong to distinct ontological realms, the former being physical and the latter non-physical. The body is composed of the same substance as composes inanimate objects such as rocks, tables and trees. The mind is seemingly composed of a substance of the same type that composes angels, demons and God. Moreover, the body and the mind are only contingently connected. A body can exist without a mind

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<sup>66</sup> Supernatural in the sense that it is a non-physical substance (see the discussion on Descartes's dualism below).

<sup>67</sup> “He who arrives at the Way [*Dao*] forgets about his mind” (Watson 2013, 246).

and a mind can exist without a body. Thus, body and mind (physical and non-physical being) are independent and distinct.<sup>68</sup>

This is in sharp contrast to the dualism of Yin and Yang that informs Daoism. There is no ontological divide between *Yin* and *Yang*. They exist within the same level of reality. Moreover, they are interdependent and indivisible. You can't have Yin without Yang or Yang with Yin, just as you can't have light without darkness or life without death. The two define each other and it is necessarily only through their interactions that the multitude of objects, animals and people exist<sup>69</sup>.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Descartes's dream argument comes from a scholastic and rationalist tradition that is individualistic and analytical, and it leads Descartes to a skepticism that is limited to doubting the existence of the external world. Far from exhibiting doubt as to his own self/mind, his argument bolsters his view that the self is indubitable, important and distinct from the physical world. Zhuang Zi's butterfly dream, in contrast, stems from a tradition that is collectivist and holistic and it leads Zhuang Zi to envision the self as a temporary illusion within a real world of constant change. In this way, Zhuang Zi's skepticism is both more radical than Descartes's, in that the self/mind is not excluded from skeptical doubt, and less radical than Descartes's, in that he does not question the reality of a world that comprises all things, although he does question its stability and its knowability. Hence we can see that, far from converging on a common insight into the problem of knowledge, the two philosophers develop radically different forms of skepticism and conceptions of the self: one in which the world may not exist but the self is indubitable, immutable and immortal, and another in which the world is not subject to doubt but the self is thought to be as fragile and fleeting as the phantasm of an insect on the wing.

While it is tempting to see the dream argument and the butterfly dream as converging upon a universal insight into the uncertainty of knowledge, considering the two passages in the context of the distinctive character of the intellectual worlds they arose in, and contributed to, reveals that the difference between their varieties of skepticism is deeper than the superficial similarity. Moreover, a careful comparative analysis of the skeptical theories developed by these two philosophers from the intellectual resources of the respective traditions throws into high relief the ways in which each theory falls short of the kind of radical and universal skepticism that Descartes, at least, if not Zhuang Zi, explicitly aspired to. The critical engagement of

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<sup>68</sup> "from the fact that I know I exist, and that at the same time I judge that nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing. And although ... I have a body that is very closely joined to me, nevertheless, because on the one hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it" (Descartes 1993, 51).

<sup>69</sup> "Perfect Yin is stern and frigid; Perfect Yang is bright and glittering ... the two mingle, penetrate, come together, harmonize, and all things are born therefrom" (Watson 2013, 169).

these two schools of thought, facilitated through the type of comparison offered here, has the potential to lead to fruitful new perspectives and insights into skeptical possibilities that surpass those offered by either philosopher alone.

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