

## ZHUANG ZI AND THE “GREATEST JOYOUSNESS”: WANG FUZHI’S APPROACH

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**ABSTRACT:** *The present article presents Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692 C.E.)’s reading of the eighteenth chapter of the Zhuang-Zi 莊子 (ZZ) by looking at his entry from Zhuang-Zi-Tong 莊子通 and other key glosses from Zhuang-Zi-Jie 莊子解. The philosophical upshot, I aim to show, is that Wang takes ZZ as presenting the consummation of “the greatest joyousness” (zhi-le 至樂) as requiring getting rid of joyousness as one’s desideratum. Using Derek Parfit’s work as a point of reference, I aim to show that this is not paradoxical or even inconsistent or even (directly or indirectly) self-defeating but is instead an interesting instance of a self-effacing theory.*

**Keywords:** *Daoism, Derek Parfit, Wang Fuzhi, Zhuang Zi*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth chapter of the *Zhuang-Zi* 莊子 (ZZ) opens with a question of some concern:

天下有至樂無有哉!

Is the greatest joyousness to be found under heaven or is it not?!<sup>1</sup>

Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692 C.E.) takes the chapter as attempting to answer this question, and the present essay, in turn, aims to address the question based on Wang’s reading.<sup>2</sup> I hope to show Wang provides an intriguing answer. In virtue of not having an “axe to grind” in contemporary academia, his answer is moreover refreshing. And more importantly, I hope to show his answer is indeed compelling.

In spelling out Wang’s reading, I aim to (1) contribute to the recent trend of focus

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<sup>1</sup> Wang 2016, 223.

<sup>2</sup> For background on Wang’s engagement with ZZ, see Fang 2008, 401-435 and Deng 2016, 147-188. For other key readings of the relevant passage, see Fang 2012, 779-842.

on the philosophical upshot of chapters that fall outside of the (so-called) “authentic core” of the ZZ (the “Inner Chapters”),<sup>3</sup> and (2) I attempt to help promote the trend of reading the ZZ over the shoulders of traditional authorities.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in presenting Wang’s reading two aspects of ZZ’s thought are made clear, which clarifies the stakes of subscribing to ZZ’s viewpoint on “the greatest joyousness”: (3) ZZ maintains reality outstrips our ability to think about reality, and (4) his theory of the “greatest joyousness” is a self-effacing theory. If one cannot accept either 3 or 4, then one must either reject ZZ’s viewpoint or proffer an alternative interpretation of ZZ’s viewpoint which is not committed to whichever of 3 or 4 is unacceptable.

The eighteenth chapter concludes with vital conceptual resources for answering the guiding question:

人又反入於機。萬物皆出於機，皆入於機。

Men come to resubmerge into the mysterious workings once more. The myriad things all emerge from the mysterious workings, and they all resubmerge into the mysterious workings.<sup>5</sup>

Wang’s answer to the guiding question revolves around the idea of the mysterious workings (*ji* 機): the greatest joyousness (*zhi-le* 至樂) comes to mean living in accord with the mysterious workings (*ji* 機) so as not to be one in whom “the mysterious workings of Heaven are shallow” (*tian-ji-qian* 天機淺) (Wang 2016, 131).

<sup>3</sup> See (e.g.) the abstract of a recent workshop involving a number of leading specialists (and, for whatever reason, me) on the ZZ: “The *Zhuangzi* is one of the masterpieces of Chinese philosophical literature, usually recognized as the second most important canonical text in the tradition of philosophical Daoism. But in spite of its immense intellectual depth, aesthetic intricacy, and cultural importance, Anglophone scholarly work has hitherto been almost exclusively focused on the first seven of its thirty-three chapters, known as “the Inner Chapters.” In this workshop, a group of internationally renowned *Zhuangzi* scholars will convene for the second time to attempt to redress this imbalance, excavating some of the most distinctive and intriguing unexplored passages in the “Outer Chapters” and “Miscellaneous Chapters” of the work for collective analysis and deliberation” (“Workshop: *Zhuangzi*: Beyond the Inner Chapters”—University of Chicago, October 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See (e.g.) Chai 2019 and Ziporyn 2009. The scholars Mark Csikszentmihalyi (University of California, Berkeley) and Tobias Benedikt Zürn (Reed College) have already begun such a project in earnest: “The classic *Zhuangzi* 莊子, a collection of sayings and anecdotes traditionally attributed to Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (trad. 369-286 BCE), has deeply influenced cultural life in East Asia and beyond. A key text in East Asian religious and literary history, it is still routinely cited in diverse discussions of ethics and philosophy, and informs practices from calligraphy to landscape painting. Despite its importance in East Asia, classrooms and journals around the world rarely engage the text’s influence over the last two millennia. Today, we tend to read the *Zhuangzi* as a literary expression or through the lens of the academic disciplines of philosophy or religious studies. With the help of this project on the global reception of the *Zhuangzi*, we are providing an avenue to the multifarious responses the *Zhuangzi* has triggered throughout the last two millennia. In other words, we show that the text has been multivocal and mutable over history, resisting narrowly defined categories and academic disciplines” (see: <https://www.zhuangzireception.org/>).

<sup>5</sup> Wang 2016, 226. I follow Watson’s rendering of this special usage of *ji* 機. Compare *tian-ji* 天機 in Wang 2016, 131.

In his *Zhuang-Zi-Tong* 莊子通, Wang spells this out:

1 群趨之樂，趨於萬物出入之機也；群爭之名，爭於人心出入之機也。

A mob tending toward (so-called) ‘joyousness’ is (really just) tending toward the mysterious workings whereby the myriad things emerge and resubmerge; a mob vying over (so-called) ‘names/titles’ is (really just) vying over the mysterious workings whereby human minds emerge and resubmerge.

2 憂樂定者，樂不以機；名實定者，爭不以機。

When the ‘worrisome’ and ‘joyous’ is determined in a definite fashion, then (the mob’s) joyousness does not accord with the mysterious workings; when ‘names’ and ‘actualities’ are determined in a definite fashion, then (the mob) vying (over names) does not accord with the mysterious workings.

3 故或謂之得，或謂之失，或謂之生，或謂之死，而皆非也。

Thus, sometimes they refer to this (process of emergence and submergence) as ‘gain’, sometimes they refer to it as ‘loss’, sometimes they refer to it as ‘life’, sometimes they refer to it as ‘death’, but in all cases they are wrong.

4 眾人出入乎機，內求之己而不得，則分得分失，分生分死，分樂分不樂，宜矣。

When the multitudes of people emerge and resubmerge into the mysterious workings, inwardly seeking these (fixed dichotomies) in themselves and not finding them, then their allocated gains and losses, allocated lives and deaths, and allocated joyousness and misery are apposite.

5 有常樂、有常名者，生死不可得而間，況榮辱乎!

Those with constant joyousness and a constant name/title cannot separate ‘life’ from ‘death’, much less ‘honor’ from ‘disgrace’!<sup>6</sup>

The first line pertains to a common theme in the ZZ: a fixation on title/names (*ming* 名) leads one astray, and so these should be “forgotten” (i.e., one should not be preoccupied with them). In parallel fashion it introduces the notion “joyousness” (*le* 樂) and claims the headlong rush to be joyous likewise leads one astray.<sup>7</sup> In both cases the mob of ordinary people misconstrues the human condition by failing to see it as a manifestation of broader processes, broader processes that routinely thwart our overly fixed categorizations. The second line spells this out in terms of trying to impose excessively fixed categories onto the overall process in a definite fashion (*ding* 定), including an excessively fixed conception of what it is to be joyous. This likewise does not accord with the way things are. Line three asserts that insofar as people impose these categorizations in a definite fashion, they are mistaken (*fei* 非). Line four indicates that when one realizes humans do not contain excessively fixed categories that can be effectively imposed on the course of experience, then they come to draw distinctions

<sup>6</sup> Wang 2016, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, some Song dynasty commentators quoted by the late Ming commentators—most explicitly the famed Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (1193-1271 C.E.)—take joyousness (*le*) as the core concept of the entire ZZ (see e.g. Cai et al 2017, 249). At any rate, it seems hardly controversial to maintain this is the theme of the eighteenth chapter. The notion is also discussed in the final passage of the seventeenth chapter, Wang Fuzhi’s treatment of which is addressed in Williams 2018, 93-104.

in a more fluid or apposite/fitting (*yi* 宜) fashion. The constant names/titles (*chang-ming* 常名) and joyousness (*chang-le* 常樂) are ironically held by those unable to draw the sorts of distinctions they are commonly based upon in an excessively fixed fashion. Ultimately, to consummate X requires not having an overly fixed conception of X as one's desideratum. That is how one comes to "ride along with the mysterious workings" (*cheng-ji* 乘機) (Wang 2016, 111).

Three key ideas are at work: (i) our ordinary comportments to the world involve drawing distinctions in a futile manner; (ii) our modes of desiring our ordinary desiderata are often problematic; and (iii) the greatest joyousness requires assuming a disposition that does not take a fixed conception of joyousness its desideratum. These ideas are addressed in turn.

## 2. DEFINITE DISTINCTIONS AS ANATHEMA TO THE GREATEST JOYOUSNESS

Saying "our ordinary comportments to the world involve drawing distinctions in a futile manner" comes to mean there is a clash between the mysterious workings (*ji* 機) governing nature and our efforts to draw distinctions in an excessively fixed manner. This introduces a few vital questions, chief among them: what are these mysterious workings (*ji* 機)?

The mysterious workings (*ji* 機) are the force compelling nature forward and adopting a perspective that is more aligned with these workings undercuts many overly fixed human categorizations. Guo Xiang 郭象 (252-312) remarks:

此言一氣而萬形，有變化而無死生也。

This means that the one breath-energy (*qi*) and its myriad forms have alterations and transformations but have neither a 'birth' nor a 'death'.<sup>8</sup>

Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (c. 608-669) adds:

機者發動，所謂造化也。

The 'mysterious workings' are the impetus which ZZ calls the 'Fashioner of Transformations' [ch. 6].

造化者，無物也。

The 'Fashioner of Transformations' is a non-thing.

人既從無生有，又反入歸無也。

Already from this non-thing people come into being, and they come to resubmerge back into this non-thing once more.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Guo Xiang, *Zhuang-Zi-Zhu* 莊子注 (apud. Guo 2012, *ad locum*). I follow Li 2016, 154 ff in translating "qi 氣" as "breath-energy".

<sup>9</sup> Cheng Xuanying, *Zhuang-Zi-Shu* 莊子疏 (apud. Guo 2012, *ad locum*); for an instructive treatment of ZZ's cosmology and the key notions mentioned by Cheng, see Qian Mu's "Zhuang-Lao-De-Yu-Zhou-

Wang takes up these ideas: from the perspective of the mysterious workings, the true impetus rendering things so, our (human) distinctions are undercut insofar as we (humans) wish to impose them in an excessively fixed and deliberate manner: we might want to value such and such, but the flow of experience routinely thwarts this desire. In particular, we (humans) have our distinction between life and death and the valuing of the former over the latter. And there is our (human) desire for a good name and for achievements despite unavoidable (*bu-de-yi* 不得已) circumstances indifferent to our (human) wishes.

Wang again comes to relate our existential situation to the question of the greatest joyousness, as did his famous forebears Guo and Cheng, in his *Zhuang-Zi-Jie* 莊子解:

莊子曰：“奚暇至於悅生而惡死”，言無暇也，非以生不可悅，死不可惡為宗，尤非以憐死惡生為宗；哀樂不入其中。

When ZZ says: ‘Why would he bother to delight in life and loathe death?’ [ch. 4], he means that he has no concern for this,<sup>10</sup> he does not take ‘life cannot be enjoyed and death cannot be loathed’ as an ideal, and all the more so he does not take ‘sympathizing with death and loathing life’ as an ideal;<sup>11</sup> ‘sorrow’ and ‘joyousness’ do not come into it.<sup>12</sup>

The means to the greatest joyousness are already suggested in this, but these will be addressed more directly in due course. What is interesting for now is that human pretensions to knowledge aside, excessive fixation on our distinctions and the values implicit in them is taken as problematic, particularly when drawn in an inflexible and deliberate manner. (More directly, of course, Wang is concerned with removing the impression that ZZ wants one to delight in death and loathe life as suggested by some of the chapter eighteen vignettes.)

The mysterious workings outstrip our conceptualizations and values, and moreover outstrip our capacity to grasp what is going on “around” us and “in” us with our understanding (*zhi* 知) faculties. “Mysterious workings” (*ji* 機) is a placeholder for the many unknown factors at play in shaping our fates (*ming* 命). What comes to be defined as “I do not know why I am thus but I am thus” (*bu-zhi-wu-suo-yi-ran-er-ran* 不知吾所以然而然) (Wang 2016, 236). Wang goes even further and maintains: “all the

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Lun” “莊老的宇宙論” [“The Cosmology of Zhuang Zi and Lao Zi”] in Qian 1991, 143-189, a key part of which is addressed in Williams 2022, 164-171.

<sup>10</sup> Literally, he has “no leisure” (*wu-xia* 無暇) or “surplus energy” for this because optimally he is instead “riding along with things with his roving mind and entrusting himself to the inevitable in order to cultivate his equilibrium” (*cheng-wu-yi-you-xin, tuo-bu-de-yi-yi-yang-zhong* 乘物以遊心，託不得已以養中) (Wang 2016, 116), which is said to be the “supreme” (*zhi* 至) comportment for “roving in the world of man” (*you-yu-ren-jian-shi* 遊于人間世) (Wang 2016, 116). In this connection, Wang also speaks in terms of “riding along with the mysterious workings” (*cheng-ji* 乘機) (Wang 2016, 111).

<sup>11</sup> Wang explains away the passages which seem to advance these ideals, e.g., the roadside skull vignette from the eighteenth chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Wang 2016, 223.

functions of our organs<sup>13</sup> and bones, including the wondrous consciousness of our minds, are merely transformations of the mysterious workings of the vital energy” (*ju-fan-guan-hai-zhi-yong, xin-zhi-zhi-ling, jie-qi-ji-zhi-bian-er* 舉凡官骸之用, 心知之靈, 皆氣機之變耳) (Ziporyn 2009, 160; Wang 2016, 101). To come to realize this is termed “the understanding consciousness coming to rest in what it does not know” (*zhi-zhi-qi-suo-bu-zhi* 知止其所不知) (Ziporyn 2009, 160; Wang 2016, 101).

It should be noted that in maintaining aspects of reality outstrip our ability to conceptualize them, ZZ is at odds with a common tendency in recent philosophy diagnosed by Thomas Nagel: “There is a significant strain of idealism in contemporary philosophy, according to which what there is and how things are cannot go beyond what we could in principle think about.”<sup>14</sup> ZZ is opposed to this contemporary form of idealism where “idealism” is “the view that what exists in the widest sense must be identified with what is thinkable by us in the widest sense.”<sup>15</sup> (Wang Fuzhi’s) ZZ like Nagel rejects these attempts to “cut the universe down to size.”<sup>16</sup>

### A DIGRESSION

At this stage, Wang’s reading might be distinguished from two broad trends in contemporary Anglophone discourse on the ZZ: (1) the skeptic, relativist, perspectivist, and/or anti-intellectualist readings on the one hand, and the (2) fixation on skill stories and know how on the other. In stating the “mysterious workings” (*ji* 機) is a placeholder for unknowable forces structuring our lives, the claim is that the human understanding (*zhi* 知) cannot wholly grasp these aspects, but the spirit (*shen* 神) in some sense can.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Note that *guan* 官 as “organ” is typically a technical term referring to the sense organs, not the bodily organs in general. See TLS.

<sup>14</sup> Nagel 1986, 9, see 90, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Nagel 1986, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Nagel 1986, 109.

<sup>17</sup> For Wang, the eschewed type of knowing (*zhi* 知) comes to mean “conscious understanding” (Ziporyn 2009, 129; Wang 2016, *ad locum*), and such “conscious understanding”—whether “small/narrow” (*xiao* 小) or “large/capacious” (*da* 大)—is said to be “bounded and limited” (Ziporyn 2009, 131, 141; Wang 2016, *ad locum*), “to be limited to the known” (Ziporyn 2009, 150, Wang 2016, *ad locum*). In contrast to ordinary conscious understanding, there is the “Genuine Understanding” (*zhen-zhi* 真知) of “using illumination” (*yi-ming* 以明) (Ziporyn 2009, 137, 145; Wang 2016, *ad locum*), which comes to involve “availing oneself of the mysterious workings of the vital energies” and allowing them “to begin and end on their own, without affecting their reality” (Ziporyn 2009, 153; Wang 2016, *ad locum*). But this itself cannot “be taken as one definite theory, lest it become something fully formed” (Ziporyn 2009, 153, Wang 2016, *ad locum*), and thus “using illumination” comes to mean pointing to whatever is before one without putting it in opposition to some other thing (Ziporyn 2009, 153-154; Wang 2016, *ad locum*). Brook A. Ziporyn (2009, 157) puts the point this way: “conscious of everything but without “understanding it.”” Tan Mingran (2015, 239-240) further spells out the point: “[Wang Fuzhi] assumes... that if a person acts according to his spirit instead of his cognition, he will be able to enter a marvelous realm. He sees that spirit, as the intuitive power, is able to grasp the essence of all things. If a person acts following the instructions of his spirit, he will be able to confront ferocious fire and deluge without losing his ease and tranquility of mind; he will also be able

This is a key rupture point between many traditional readings in contrast to those construing ZZ as a skeptic, relativist, perspectivist, and/or anti-intellectualist: (i.e.) there is a mode of knowing at play, that pertaining to the spirit (*shen* 神), and little doubt is expressed regarding the efficacy of the spirit (*shen* 神).

Those who wish to explain this reductively in terms of “knowing how” as opposed to “knowing that” also leave much unaddressed. Many traditional readers provide rich accounts of spirit (*shen* 神)-based “knowing” and related ideas that (however implausible they seem to the contemporary reader) are indeed at play in the ZZ at key junctures: (e.g.) “following the Du meridian as one’s constant guide” (*yuan-du-yi-wei-jing* 緣督以為經) (Wang 2016, 104)<sup>18</sup> and “concentrating one’s spirit” (*qi-shen-ning* 其神凝)<sup>19</sup> (Wang 2016, 80). The latter is taken as the key phrase of the entire ZZ, according to Wang’s son Wang Yu 王啟 (1656-1731 C.E.) (Wang 2016, 80). The former becomes one of the clearer means of explaining how to accord with the mysterious workings:

The central meridian of energy along the front of the body is called the Ren [任], that along the spine is called the Du [督]. The Du meridian remains still, leaning neither left nor right, occupying the position of a channel of energy but without palpable physical form. To follow along the Du is to proceed along the empty channel with a clear, weightless, subtle energy, halting wherever one cannot further proceed. This flow is naturally smooth, for it always finds the center. By not claiming renown for goodness, you stay far from the punishment for evil, so your roaming never fails to be unfettered and far-reaching. You live out your years fully and then come to an end, making no choice about what you will then overflow into. Fully living out your years, your responses to things will bring no harm anywhere in the world. Resting at peace in the unknowability of the “ten thousand harvests [before and after your life]” [ch. 2], give yourself over to “the ending of the firewood” [ch. 3]. Then all the years you have life, you will be alive. Though dead, such a life continues on firm and unperishing (Ziporyn 2009, 167; Wang 2016, 104-105).<sup>20</sup>

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to empathize with other things and transform them without any sign of coercion. He even assumes that all phenomena, including Heaven and earth, are just the tips, or residue, of the transformation of spirit... Wang’s description shows that he emphasizes the mental or unfathomable power of *shen* and, like Zhuangzi, sees it as intuition and empathy.”

<sup>18</sup> Brook A. Ziporyn (2009, 22 n. 5) spells out the point: “The “central meridian” is *du* 督. In Chinese medicine, this term, which in other contexts means “controller,” is used for the current of energy that runs vertically through the middle of the human back... This flow tends toward the central (hence, if left to itself, never going too far toward either good or evil), is unseen (hence, it is opposed to “the knowing mind”), and is the real controller (as opposed to the knowing mind’s pretensions to control and direct life).”

<sup>19</sup> Tan Mingran (2015, 248) explains Wang’s interpretation: “Concentrating spirit is to keep spirit intact and preserve it from cognition.”

<sup>20</sup> See Zhou 1992, 13-50 for an instructive article on these aspects of the text and see Chong 2016, 7 for the upshot of Zhou’s difficult article. I quite like and thus follow Ziporyn’s translation of this key gloss. The original reads thus: “身前之中脈曰任，身後之中脈曰督。督者居靜，而不倚於左右，有脈之位而無形質者也。緣督者，以清微纖妙之氣循虛而行，止於所不可行，而行自順以適得其中。不居善

Wang's explanations of familiar passages likewise trade on these notions. Explaining this as know how is to generalize away from what is distinctive (but perhaps unpalatable) in the service of making a point of contact between disparate philosophical traditions. Plato scholars feel no need to hide the more antiquated and perhaps less plausible parts of his writings, and one imagines a day where that is true in the Anglophone ZZ scholarship.

The appearance of the work of Romain Graziani (2021, 143) in English is most welcome, as he makes plain that something more is at play than skill cultivation, know how, or adapting to changing circumstances:

This activity includes all the spontaneous workings by means of which the body acts, reacts, adapts, and regulates itself in every instance. The constant flow of this *qi*-based activity enables our motions and our thoughts to proceed with a spontaneous understanding of what surrounds us and interacts with us. It draws on an implicit non-verbal knowledge that far exceeds the powers of consciousness and will...The workings of Heaven are not fundamentally amenable to mental representations and verbal formulations and we can only get to know them indirectly by means of free-ranging consciousness, advancing from the known to the unknown, towards the sinews of the power within that lies buried under layers and layers of verbal knowledge and mental images.

This is indeed difficult to pin down, but that does not render it inessential. In fact, the difficult to pin down aspects of reality often seem to be among its most interesting features to the authors of the ZZ. And if the foregoing is correct, then Wang Fuzhi's ZZ, in agreement with Graziani's ZZ, goes so far as to maintain that there is no reason to suppose that these difficult to pin down aspects are even in principle capable of being pinned down by human thought.

### 3. THE SELF-UNDERMINING CHARACTER OF OUR ORDINARY DESIRES

Beyond outstripping our conceptualizations and values, the mysterious workings outstrip our desires and render our ordinary modes of desiring futile. Some fixed desiderata form a special class of fixed conceptualizations, because ZZ does advocate them (e.g., "the greatest joyousness" and "non-deliberate action"), and the key is curiously not setting them up (e.g., "joyousness" or "non-deliberate action") as definite desiderata in the first place. It is not just problematic to impose an excessively fixed notion of joyousness that is stymied by the mysterious workings of nature, but also the very act of deliberately striving for joyousness undercuts its ultimate consummation. (It seems to me that this is where Wang's reading goes beyond a stereotyped interpretation of the eighteenth chapter and becomes philosophically interesting, and

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之名, 即可以遠惡之刑。盡年而遊, 不損其逍遙; 盡年而竟, 無擇於曼衍; 盡年而應, 不傷于天下; 安萬歲之不可知, 而聽薪之盡。則有生之年皆生也, 雖死而固不亡也。” (Wang 2016, 104-105)



so the other aspects of Wang's above translated glosses are set aside for the remainder of the essay.)

Fixation on the desideratum of joyousness undercutting its ultimate consummation is moreover supposed to generalize to other desiderata (though I see no reason to commit Wang to the claim that it generalizes to all desiderata): fixation on desideratum X undercuts the ultimate consummation of X. If true, this indeed renders our (human) situation peculiar, and one must ask how to consummate the greatest joyousness (*zhi-le* 至樂) in the face of this peculiar situation. Furthermore, as our (human) conceptualizations are expressive of such desires, as Wang supposes they at least sometimes are, then they are subject to the same critique as all other such desires (insofar as the claim generalizes, as Wang supposes it does): there is a self-undermining character to our ordinary modes of desiring our ordinary desiderata.

(Formally, this general model of apparently self-undermining desires when desiderata are explicitly fixed and fixated upon seems to be what authors have in mind when discussing a "paradox" of *wu-wei* 無為. These parallels are interesting, though in neither case is there strictly speaking a paradox, as discussed in the next section.)

#### 4. THE GREATEST JOYOUSNESS

In teasing out the greatest joyousness in his *Zhuang-Zi-Jie*, Wang compares and glosses the thirteenth chapter of the *Dao-De-Jing* 道德經 (DDJ):

老子曰：“吾有大患，唯吾有身；及吾無身，吾有何患？”

Lao Zi says: “I face great calamities only when I have (*you*) my person; when I am without (*wu*) my person, then what calamities do I face?” (DDJ 13)

有者，有身之見；無者，忘己以忘物也。

What is (meant by) the “*you*” is cognizance of one's person; what is (meant by) the “*wu*” is forgetting all about oneself to forget all about (mere) things.<sup>21</sup>

The upshot is plain given the context: being preoccupied with one's person and mere (trifling) things is anathema to joyousness. Setting up joyousness as an overt desideratum is a form of being preoccupied with oneself or one's person, and thus one must avoid this habit insofar as one is to fully consummate one's joyousness.

If this were to be stated schematically (bearing in mind all the problems attendant with such accounts), it would look like this: the general problem is preoccupation with oneself, one manifestation of this preoccupation is explicitly fixing and fixating upon certain desiderata, and examples of such desiderata include titles/names (*ming* 名), achievements (*gong* 功), and (according to at least the eighteenth chapter) joyousness (*le* 樂). Joyousness and non-deliberate action (*wu-wei* 無為) are a special class of such

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<sup>21</sup> Wang 2016, 223.

desiderata,<sup>22</sup> since ZZ does seem to promote them at least tacitly, while he realizes that to consummate them one must not hold onto them.

(Not being preoccupied with the self should not be construed along Buddhist lines. For Wang it is to take oneself lightly, to be able to laugh at oneself and be unmoved by praise or blame (see Ziporyn 2009, 131, 133-137, Wang 2016, *ad locum*). Promoting anything of positive value is often said to go against ZZ's skepticism, relativism, perspectivism, or anti-intellectualism, but for Wang and traditional readers this is not a problem, since these aspects of ZZ's philosophy only pertain to one species of knowing, while there are also the other more difficult to pin down species pertaining to the spirit that are *not* eschewed.)

The key is being without “preferential attachments” to consummate what appear to be “preferential attachments” (Ziporyn 2009, 153; Wang 2016, *ad locum*). One might think this is paradoxical or even inconsistent or even self-defeating, but it is strictly speaking none of these. Derek Parfit might be instructive here.

First, Parfit (1987, 3) maintains “We can describe all theories by saying what they tell us to try to achieve.” For Wang the eighteenth chapter of the ZZ is telling us how best to consummate the greatest joyousness (*zhi-le* 至樂) insofar as it is achievable for beings like us.

Second, Parfit (1987, 3) distinguishes the substantive and formal aims of a theory in terms of moral theories and theories of rationality: “According to all moral theories, we ought to act morally. According to all theories about rationality, we ought to act rationally. Call these our *formal* aims. Different moral theories, and different theories about rationality, give us different *substantive* aims.” The formal aim of the eighteenth chapter of the ZZ according to Wang would be to consummate the greatest joyousness (*zhi-le* 至樂) insofar as it is achievable for beings like us, whereas the substantive aim is eschewing joyousness as a desideratum.

This introduces a vital question: Is it legitimate for the substantive aims to run contrary to the formal aims? This brings us to Parfit (1987, 7-12)'s third point: a theory is not self-defeating merely in virtue of these seeming clashes. That is, it does not make the account “fail on its own terms” or “condemn itself” (Parfit 1987, 7, 23). The apparent tension is between two claims: (1) we desire to consummate the greatest joyousness insofar as this is possible for beings like us, and (2) we should not have joyousness as a desideratum if we are to fully consummate it. The first claim is our

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<sup>22</sup> For a number of key traditional commentators these are defined in terms of each other and linked in various ways, see (e.g.) Wang Pang 王雱 (1044-1076 C.E.): “Only when you can forget yourself and act non-deliberately (*wu-wei*), then the greatest joyousness (*zhi-le*) exists of its own accord.” (惟能忘己無為，則至樂自有。) (*Nan-Hua-Zhen-Jing-Xin-Chuan* 南華真經新傳 apud Fang 2012, 787). And Lu Shuzhi 陸樹芝 (fl. 1796 C.E.): “This chapter [ch. 18] maintains that the greatest joyousness (*zhi-le*) lies in non-deliberate action (*wu-wei*), whereas the wealth, honor, longevity, and excellence which are the joyousness of the vulgar world are all entanglements to one's person.” (此篇言至樂在於無為，而世俗所樂之富貴壽善，皆身之累也。) (*Zhuang-Zi-Xue* 莊子雪 apud Fang 2012, 780). ZZ 18 itself establishes the link, so this is not too terribly surprising: “I rely on acting non-deliberately (*wu-wei*) to be truly happy.” (吾以無為誠樂矣).

formal aim, while the latter is our substantive aim. The claims are only conflicting if the formal aim is treated as a substantive aim, which it is not. The substantive aim is informing us of the disposition (allegedly) needed to best consummate our formal aim. The substantive aim requiring us to remove the formal aim from the scene is not self-defeating but is rather self-effacing (see Parfit 1987, 23).

(In a largely isomorphic manner, the so-called paradox of *wu-wei* is likewise dissolved. It is curious that the consummation of our formal aims requires distinct substantive aims, including a substantive aim that explicitly eschews our formal aims. The aim of acting non-deliberately is likewise self-effacing, but again a paradox it is not. Indeed, it is only problematic when the formal aim is conflated with and treated as one's substantive aim or vice versa.)

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE UPSHOT

What is distinct about the eighteenth chapter of the *ZZ*, as read by Wang, is that the best way to consummate the formal aim of achieving the greatest joyousness is to not set joyousness as one's desideratum. That is, not having joyousness as a desideratum is the substantive aim to best consummate the formal aim of consummating the greatest joyousness, i.e., a formal aim which curiously does indeed take joyousness as its desideratum.

One potential objection to this broad picture of what meaningfulness and wellbeing consists in has been responded to by putting the *ZZ* into conversation with contemporary works of philosophy and thereby distinguishing formal from substantive aims and introducing the prospect of a self-effacing formal aim.

This is an advance, as this style of reading the *ZZ* and other "Daoistic" texts has long been dismissed in the Anglophone scholarship on the charge of incoherence in setting out to do something by not setting out to do that something. For instance, Chad Hansen (1992, 209) claims "Do not abide by prescriptions, but let things take their course" is problematic:

The problem is that "Give up prescriptions" prescribes something. "Abandon knowledge" is a prescriptive *dao*, a bit of guiding discourse. If you obeyed it, you would be disobeying it!

The distinction between formal and substantive aims and the prospect of a self-effacing formal aim carves out a space for taking Wang Fuzhi's manner of interpreting the greatest joyousness seriously insofar as it removes this standard concern.

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