

# Early Confucian “Human Supremacy” and Its Daoist Critique

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## Abstract

The early Confucian texts *Mengzi* 孟子 and *Xunzi* 荀子 introduce strict distinctions between the human and non-human realms and formulate genealogies and theories of “human supremacy”. Starting from the claim that humans are superior to animals and other non-human beings, they draw the sociopolitical conclusion that the former ought to enact supremacy by dominating and domesticating the latter. Taking up non-humanist ideas formulated in the *Laozi* 老子, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 forcefully challenges those genealogies and theories. Numerous stories in the *Zhuangzi* express a Daoist anti-humanism seeking to subvert “humanist supremacy”, and, especially, its sociopolitical and moral practice. It is concluded that this specific Daoist anti-humanism is embedded in a wider project of promoting a state of human ease, and that its function is therapeutic rather than ideological.

**Keywords:** humanism, anti-humanism, Mengzi, Xunzi, Zhuangzi

## Zgodnjekonfucijanska »človekova superiornost« in njena daoistična kritika

### Izvilleček

Zgodnjekonfucijanski besedili *Mengzi* 孟子 in *Xunzi* 荀子 uvajata strogo razlikovanje med človeškim in nečloveškim svetom ter oblikujeta genealogije in teorije »človekove nadvlade«. Izhajajoč iz trditve, da so ljudje nadrejeni živalim in drugim nečloveškim bitjem, teksti oblikujejo družbenopolitični sklep, da bi moral človek uveljaviti svojo nadvlado z obvladovanjem ter udomačevanjem živali in drugih nečloveških bitij. *Zhuangzi* 莊子, ki prevzema nehumanistične ideje, oblikovane v besedilu *Laozi* 老子, odločno izpodbija te genealogije in teorije. Številne zgodbe v *Zhuangziju* izražajo daoistični antihumanizem, ki skuša spodkopati »humanistično prevlado«, zlasti pa njeno družbenopolitično in moralno prakso. Ugotovljeno je, da je ta specifični daoistični antihumanizem vpet v širši projekt spodbujanja stanja človeške lahkosti ter da je njegova funkcija terapevtska, in ne ideološka.

**Ključne besede:** humanizem, antihumanizem, Mengzi, Xunzi, Zhuangzi

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## Introduction: Confucian Humanism

Quite rightly, Confucian philosophy (and religion) is often characterized as “humanist”. In this context, Tu Wei-Ming, a major spokesperson of contemporary Confucianism, has advocated a “Confucian Humanism as a Spiritual Resource for Global Ethic” (Tu 2009). Tu’s approach is representative of a significant part of modern-day academic Confucianism that not only focuses on scholarly exegesis but also aspires to promote Confucianism as a living tradition that can foster human excellence and ethically improve global society. Another example of a such humanist Confucianism of and for today is Roger T. Ames’ recent magnum opus *Human Becoming: Theorizing Persons for Confucian Role Ethics* (Ames 2021).

Traditional Confucian philosophy lends itself very well to modern humanist readings—after all, one of its central values is *ren* 仁, or “humaneness”, and its teachings tend to outline the intricacies of *ren lun* 人倫 or “human relationships”. A focus on both *ren* and *ren lun* connects contemporary Confucian philosophers like Tu and Ames with core texts of early Confucianism such as the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*. More so than contemporary Confucian humanism, however, early Confucian texts attempted to establish a clear distinction between the human and the non-human realms, for instance with regard to the difference between the domains of a “civilized”, agricultural society and the wilderness that surrounds and threatens it. A vital concern with separating humans from animals and other living or non-living beings is quite characteristic for early Confucianism and distinguishes it, at least to some extent, not only from modern Confucianism, but, more crucially, from other early Chinese intellectual traditions, and especially from Daoism. In the debates among early Chinese philosophies the distinction human/non-human was in turn distinctive, and the texts or schools of thought which highlight this distinction may be classified as humanist due to an emphasis on human superiority. In contrast, those that challenge this distinction, including Daoism, may be regarded as anti-humanist because they subvert the idea that humans are somehow special. Moreover, the very challenge of human distinctiveness goes along with a sort of methodological non-humanism: it critiques the assumption that what makes humans special ought to be a central question that philosophy addresses.

A significant suggestion of a divide between a Confucian humanism—in the just outlined sense of a serious concern with the distinction between the human and the non-human—and a (at least tendentially) Daoist refusal to prioritize the human is found in *Analects* (18: 6).<sup>1</sup> Here, Confucius (Kongzi 孔子) travels with his

1 All references to chapters and sections in early Chinese texts in this essay follow the database *Chinese Text Project* (n.d).

followers through the countryside searching for a place to cross a river. Encountering two farmers, he sends his student Zilu 子路 to ask them for directions. The ensuing dialogue portrays the farmers in an “agriculturalist” (*nong jia* 農家) or proto-Daoist way. Recognizing Confucius, and apparently displeased with his teachings, they do not answer the question where to find a ford but instead berate Zilu and suggest that rather than following Confucius, he should “follow a man who avoids society” (從辟世之士). This somewhat paradoxical advice (to follow someone who avoids human company) is dismissed by Confucius who insists that he, Confucius, must remain in human company because “with birds and beasts one cannot associate (鳥獸不可與同群)”. Confucius’ remark points to a difference between Confucian and other teachings of the time hinging on a recognition of the primacy of the human over the non-human realm.

The first main point of this essay is to show that Confucius’ indication of the primacy of the human over the non-human is radicalized in the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* not merely to a general postulation of human superiority, but, crucially, to a normative plea for human supremacy. Both texts argue not only that humans are “better” than animals and other forms of “wildlife”, but—in correspondence with the mode of production in an agrarian society—that they ought to *dominate* and *domesticate* animals and wildlife due to their superiority. The notion of “supremacy” (as in the notorious idea of “white supremacy”) draws *sociopolitical interferences* from a supposedly naturalistic difference. Moreover, the second main point of this essay is that the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of Confucianism is also aimed at this socio-political idea of human supremacy rather than merely at the dubious claim of a biological or ontological superiority.

### Human Supremacy in the *Xunzi* and the *Mengzi*

Possibly alluding to Confucius’ remark on the impossibility to associate (*qun* 群) with animals in *Analects* (18: 6), the *Xunzi* later formulated an explicit theory of human sovereignty over all other living and non-living beings based on the “capacity to associate” (*neng qun* 能群):

Water and fire have *qi* (energy), but no life. Grasses and trees have life but no knowledge. Birds and beasts have knowledge, but no righteousness. Humans have energy, life, knowledge, and righteousness. This is why they are the most valuable under Heaven. They are not as strong as bulls and not as fast as horses, but they make use of bulls and horses. How? Because humans can associate and those cannot.

水火有氣而無生，草木有生而無知，禽獸有知而無義，人有氣、有生、有知，亦且有義，故最為天下貴也。力不若牛，走不若馬，而牛馬為用，何也？曰：人能群，彼不能群也。(Xunzi 9:19)

Put into modern terminology, the *Xunzi* says here that physical entities are material but not biological, plants are biological but not conscious, and animals are conscious but not moral. Only humans are not just material, biological, and conscious, but also moral. The *Xunzi* stipulates that humans can use other creatures for their own purposes and thereby reign supreme "under Heaven" due to their unique ethical quality. "Righteousness" (*yi* 義) not only enables but apparently also entitles humans to dominate a world and to domesticate an animal kingdom lacking morality. Human morality specifically manifests itself in "association". Obviously, "association" (*qun*), here does not simply mean the ability to form groups (bovines and horses also live in groups) but refers to a supposedly exclusively human social formation constituted by ethical relations. The text further explains:

How can humans associate? Because of separation. How can separation function? Because of righteousness. When separations are righteous, there is harmony. When there is harmony, there is unity. When there is unity, there is strength.

人何以能群？曰：分。分何以能行？曰：義。故義以分則和，和則一，一則多力。(Xunzi 9:19)

Another passage in the *Xunzi* makes it clear that the ethical "separations" (*fen* 分) distinguishing human associations from the groupings of all other creatures are certain hierarchically ordered binaries:

What make humans human? They have divisions. .... Birds and beasts also have fathers and sons, but they do not have the familiar bond between them. They have males and females, but they do not have the difference between men and women.

人之所以為人者何已也？曰：以其有辨也。... 夫禽獸有父子，而無父子之親，有牝牡而無男女之別。(Xunzi 5:5)

The idea of human primacy that was formulated only implicitly and contextually in the *Analects* is elaborated in the *Xunzi* into an explicit doctrine of human supremacy. Humans are essentially different from, and importantly, entitled to subjugate everything else in the world due to a singular *moral power: the virtue of social cooperation stemming from the hierarchy of genders and generations*. This moral power—an ultimately political power transcending materiality, biology, and even

consciousness—is at the core of early Confucian humanism (but not of contemporary Confucian humanism).

The *Xunzi* “proves” that human association, or *qun*, is essentially political by means of (pseudo-) linguistic analysis. The text says: “Rulership (*jun* 君)—What is it? The ability to associate (*qun* 群) 君者，何也？曰：能群也。” (*Xunzi* 12:6) The character for “associate” 群 is a composite of the graphic (and probably phonetic) element 君 for “ruler” or “lord”, and 羊 for “sheep”.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, for the *Xunzi*—a text which heavily engages in pseudo-etymological “logic” in a chapter on the “rectification of names” (*zheng ming* 正名)—this combination shows that human “association” adds the notion of hierarchy to a seemingly egalitarian “herd”. Unaware of the essential role of hierarchy in animal life, the *Xunzi* develops a pseudo-rational argument for human exceptionalism grounded on the submission of women to the “rulership” of men and of the younger generation to the “rulership” of the older generation.

The *Mengzi*, which probably predates the *Xunzi*, complements its pseudo-scientific, pseudo-logical, and pseudo-linguistic theory of human superiority with a pseudo-historical genealogy of human moral power. Befitting the often narrative rather than analytic approach of the *Mengzi*, the discourse on human supremacy is both more dynamic and more dramatic here than in the *Xunzi*. In the context of two dialogues in the third chapter of the text, Mengzi attacks rival philosophical and political teachings and defends his own version of Confucianism. In both cases, Mengzi frames his argumentation in a highly antagonistic and almost Manichean storyline. The Confucian tradition, which Mengzi presents himself as being part of, is characterized as a long lineage of founders and defenders of human civilization under constant pressure from the destructive forces of evil. The apparently endless battle between the Confucians and their multiple nemeses is depicted as a perennial conflict between humanity and its non-human or barely human foes. Whereas the *Xunzi* employs the distinction between the human and non-human to formulate a political doctrine of moral power, the *Mengzi* tells great tales of clashes between the human and the non- or subhuman. When reading such passages in the *Mengzi* it seems as if the history of all hitherto existing society has been the history of a struggle for human supremacy.

Somewhat reminiscent of the scenario in the episode in *Analects* 18: 6 discussed above, section 3A: 4 in the *Mengzi* depicts a dispute between two Confucian and “agriculturalist” or proto-Daoist protagonists, namely Mengzi and a certain Chen

2 An anonymous reviewer points out that the entry on *qun* 羣 in the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (11: 6321) suggests that *jun* 君 serves as a phonetic symbol in this character and therefore does not necessarily have any semantic importance.

Xiang 陳相. Mengzi and Chen Xiang act as competing political advisors or “consultants” to the ruler of the state of Teng 滕. Chen Xiang advocates an egalitarian politics requiring rulers to participate in agricultural production and common labour. Moreover, the prices for goods should be fixed, he proposes, to avoid any unjust profiteering in a free-market economy. Such an egalitarian economy, Chen Xiang suggests, would result in a morally pure society without corruption of “falsity” (*wu wei* 無偽)—echoing a lament in chapter 18 of the *Laozi* which associates “great falsity” (*da wei* 大偽) with Confucian (political) values and regimes.

In his lengthy responses to Chen Xiang, Mengzi focuses primarily on a defence of social and political hierarchy. For him, agriculturalist egalitarianism runs counter to human civilization and flourishing. In line with the *Xunzi*’s proposition that humans are distinct from the non-human realm—and retain sovereignty over it—due to their capacity to cooperate based on gender and generational hierarchy, Mengzi regards the establishment of these hierarchies as the decisive historical step in becoming truly human. He depicts the “invention” of the human relationships (*ren lun* 人倫) that subordinate women to men and the younger to the older by early Confucian sage rulers as the final achievement that truly separated the human from the non-human world. Hierarchical gender and generational relations are portrayed as the culmination of a long and difficult process of purifying humanity. Faintly comparable to the early Greek philosophical trope of the mind’s efforts to free itself from bodily entanglements, the *Mengzi* invents a historical process of human “liberation” from various non-human afflictions.

Prior to civilization, the *Mengzi* says, the world was “flooded” (*fan lan* 汎濫) with water—a state of nature akin to the “chaotic” primal oneness, which in mythological and Daoist texts of the period is symbolically referred to as *hundun* 渾沌 (Girardot 2008). As a first step toward civilization, the flow of water must be ordered. Accordingly, the regulation of rivers initiates the separation of a human habitat from an inundated Earth. The second obstacle to overcome is unrestrained flora, as “grasses and trees” (*cao mu* 草木) grow everywhere. The flora is kept in check by a separation of agricultural land cultivated by and for humans from a wilderness. But still, “beasts and birds encroached upon men” as D. C. Lau translates the *Mengzi*’s phrasing *qin shou bi ren* 禽獸逼人. This, Mengzi remarks, greatly “bothered” (*you* 憂) the early Confucian sage king Yao 堯. Eventually, another sage named Yi 益 is put in charge to take care of this predicament, and he “set the mountains and valleys alight and burnt them, and the birds and beasts went into hiding” (Lau 1970, 102) (烈山澤而焚之, 禽獸逃匿). In this way, wild animals were expelled from the human realm. However, the external purification of the human world from the fauna is not yet sufficient—the “inner animal” has to be purged as well. Mengzi says: “once [humans] have a full belly and warm clothes

on their back they degenerate to the level of animals if they are allowed to live idle lives, without education and discipline” (Lau 1970, 102) (飽食、煖衣、逸居而無教，則近於禽獸). This inner beastliness again “bothers” (*you* 憂) the Confucian “sages” (*sheng ren* 聖人), and they delegate one of their own to complete their humanist project with the invention of ethics: Xie 契, the “Minister of Education” (*si tu* 司徒), eventually imposes the “human relationships” (*ren lun* 人倫) between fathers and sons, rulers and ruled, husbands and wives, older and younger siblings, and friends on society, and only with these social separations is the separation between humans and animals complete.

It is important to note that *Mengzi*’s genealogy of the separation between the human and the non-human parallels the sequence of the *Xunzi*’s analysis of human supremacy: water (matter)-plants (life)-animals (consciousness)-humans (morality). Clearly, the two passages correspond to one another, and, equally clearly, they both highlight the crucial importance of the hierarchical nature of human relationships which, for both early Confucians, distinguish humans from animals. After all, *Mengzi*’s point in presenting his narrative is to argue against Chen Xiang’s egalitarianism. For *Mengzi*, just as for the *Xunzi*, the decisive idea is not that humans live in groups, or that there are age and sex differences among them—animals, too, live in groups, and individual animals differ in age and sex—but the hierarchical order between genders and generations structuring the early Chinese family or clan organization. This hierarchical order is, according to both the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, exclusively human and the foundation of human cooperation and political power. *Mengzi*’s humanist genealogy has the function of justifying his central doctrine of political hierarchy in his arguments against Chen Xiang’s egalitarianism:

There are those who use their minds, and there are those who use their muscles. The former rule, the latter are ruled. Those who rule are supported by those who are ruled. This is a principle accepted by the whole Empire. (Lau 1970, 101)

勞心者治人，勞力者治於人；治於人者食人，治人者食於人：天下之通義也。

Exactly like in the *Xunzi*, for *Mengzi* humans are distinguished from everything else in the world by their *righteous* (*yi* 義) power structure. This righteousness stems from the submission of women and the young. For both *Xunzi* and *Mengzi* this ethical practice constitutes political power relations between the rulers and the ruled, which in turn ground human supremacy in the world.

In the context of its pseudo-historical approach, the *Mengzi* emphasizes more

than the *Xunzi* the precariousness of human supremacy. It has not been easy for the early Confucian sages to differentiate the human realm from its hostile natural environment, he stresses. Human civilization or culture is fragile and must be constantly defended against various non-human challenges. There is not only a dangerous non-human environment “out there”, but also a latent non-human, or sub-human component within humanity. This causes constant concern and “bothers” the Confucian rulers caring for humanity. They are always in a state of worry, it seems from Mengzi’s genealogy, and busy with protecting humans from “animalistic” advances. Two methods are at their disposal: To repel the inner animal, ritual and moral regimes are devised. To repel certain “animalistic” people who do not submit themselves to Confucian rule, more drastic measures are needed. The “barbarians” must be eliminated. Mengzi warns his interlocutor Chen Xiang quite frankly what treatment may await him if he continues to spread his egalitarian teachings:

Now you turn your back on the way of your teacher in order to follow the southern barbarian with the twittering tongue, who condemns the way of the Former Kings ... The *Lu sung* says: “It was the barbarians that he attacked; it was Jing and Shu that he punished”. It is these people the Duke of Zhou was going to punish, and you want to learn from. (Lau 1970, 104, transcription modified)

今也南蠻缺舌之人，非先王之道，子倍子之師而學之，...《魯頌》曰：『戎狄是膺，荊舒是懲。』周公方且膺之，子是之學。」

The “southern barbarians” (*man* 蠻) come from a region historically associated with Daoist ideas or practice (Alberts 2007), and are, for Mengzi, just as dangerous to Confucian humanism as “the barbarians” of the west and the north (*rong di* 戎狄) were to the Confucian model ruler, the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong 周公). Mengzi implies that Chen Xiang deserves the same fate as these tribes if he spreads their anti-humanist egalitarianism, and thus that he ought to be “punished”.

In *Mengzi* (3B: 14), Mengzi presents another version of his humanist genealogy, again in the context of an antagonistic opposition between his version of Confucianism and other competing ideologies. This time, the opponents are “Yangists and Mohists” (Yang Mo 楊墨).<sup>3</sup> Once more, Mengzi outlines how in antiquity great floods had to be channelled to carve out a human agricultural habitat and how “the birds and beasts harmful to men were annihilated”, and “only then were

3 See Lee (2022) on the conflict between Mengzi, and “Yangists and Mohists”.



the people able to level the ground and live on it” (Lau 1970, 113) (鳥獸之害人者消，然後人得平土而居之). Then, Mengzi describes in more detail how the initial cleansings of the human realm were repeatedly spoiled by corrupt rulers and/or barbarian invaders. Again, it took the combination of ethical or ritual regimes and military violence—symbolized respectively by the Confucian model rulers King Wen (Wen Wang 文王), or “King Culture”, and King Wu (Wu Wang 武王), or “King Warfare”—to suppress the evildoers. And again, Mengzi describes the effects of “barbarian” rule as a de-humanization of the human world: “with the multiplication of parks, ponds, and lakes, arrived birds and beasts” (Lau 1970, 113) (沛澤多而禽獸至) so that the Confucian rulers needed to drive “tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants to the distant wilds” (Lau 1970, 113) (驅虎、豹、犀、象而遠之). In parallel to this exorcism of wildlife, the Duke of Zhou exterminated foreign people, as Mengzi proudly declares: “He waged war on Yan for three years and punished its ruler to death. He drove Fei Lian to the edge of the sea and executed him. He extinguished fifty states” (Lau 1970, 113, translation and transcription modified) (伐奄，三年討其君，驅飛廉於海隅而戮之。滅國者五十).

The ancient physical threat to human supremacy by wild animals and barbarians, Mengzi argues, has now been replaced by the ideological danger of “Yangists and Mohists”. These “beastly” thinkers, Mengzi explains, are bound to destroy Confucian culture, and reduce humanity to an animalistic level with their “heretic” (*xie* 邪) egalitarian teachings that question the sociopolitical hierarchies between the rulers and the ruled:

Yang advocates everyone for himself, which amounts to a denial of one’s prince. Mo advocates love without discrimination which amounts to a denial of one’s father. To ignore one’s father on the one hand, and one’s prince on the other, is to be no different from the beasts. ... If the way of Yang and Mo is not silenced, and the way of Confucius is not proclaimed, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked. When the path of morality is blocked, then we show animals the way to devour men, and sooner or later it will come to men devouring men. (Lau 1970, 114, translation modified)

楊氏為我，是無君也；墨氏兼愛，是無父也。無父無君，是禽獸也。... 楊墨之道不息，孔子之道不著，是邪說誣民，充塞仁義也。仁義充塞，則率獸食人，人將相食。

As in his discussion with the agriculturalist Chen Xiang, Mengzi commends the banishment and extermination of the promoters of non-Confucian teachings:

Confucius completed the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and struck terror into the hearts of rebellious subjects and undutiful sons. The *Book of Odes* says: "It was the barbarians that he attacked; it was Jing and Shu that he punished. There was none who dared stand up to me". The Duke of Zhou wanted to punish those who ignored father and prince. I, too, wish to follow in the footsteps of the three sages in rectifying the hearts of men, laying heresies to rest, opposing extreme action, and banishing excessive views. (Lau 1970, 115, transcription modified)

孔子成《春秋》而亂臣賊子懼。《詩》云：『戎狄是膺，荊舒是懲，則莫我敢承。』無父無君，是周公所膺也。我亦欲正人心，息邪說，距詖行，放淫辭，以承三聖者。

According to Mengzi, his philosophical opponents are "those who ignored father and prince" (*wu fu wu jun* 無父無君) and therefore it is not only ethically justified but also politically necessary to treat them as the Duke of Zhou treated the barbarians, i.e., to expel them from the human community by any means. In accordance with Xunzi's logic, Mengzi assumes that human supremacy—human distinction from and rule over everything non-human—depends on the internalization, habitualization, and socio-political practice of the "righteousness" of the domination of men over women, of the older over the younger, and the rulers over the ruled. Whenever this righteousness is challenged, humankind is destined to not only lose its internal humanity but also the "strength" which allows it to separate itself from wilderness and barbarianism. Mengzi cultivates an early Confucian *Angst* of the barbarian in and among humans who needs to be vigorously held in check by "culture" and war lest the human is once more corrupted and reduced to animality. Moreover, this danger is always imminent:

Mencius said, Slight is the difference between man and beast. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. (*Mengzi* 4B: 47; Lau 1970, 131, translation modified)

孟子曰：人之所以異於禽於獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。

Both the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* take the concern with human primacy that is already present in the *Analects* to an extreme. There, in section 2: 7, Confucius expressed the expectation that humans ought to differ from animals (he mentions dogs and horses) by not only nourishing one another, but by also "respecting" (*jing* 敬) their

elders, presumably by emotionally and behaviourally committing themselves to be at their service. This notion of “respect” is, already in the *Analects*, extended to a plea for internalizing gender, generational, and political hierarchies as paradigmatically expressed in the famous “categorical imperative” in *Analects* 12: 11: “Treat the ruler as ruler, and the subordinate as subordinate. Threat the father as father, and the son as son” (君君，臣臣，父父，子子). In the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, however, these hierarchies are not only elevated to *the* defining human characteristic, but to the very means by which humans achieve domination over a non-human nature and their own supposedly animalistic flaws. In different rhetorical ways, the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* formulate an early Confucian philosophy of human supremacy. This human supremacy is precarious, and accordingly early Chinese Confucianism humanism promotes the systematic repression of any internal or external “beasts” who “ignore father and prince”—a repression that at times can go as far as genocide.<sup>4</sup>

## Daoist Critiques of Human Supremacy

As the two dialogues between Mengzi and his non-Confucian interlocuters discussed above show, one important way in which Confucianism differed from competing schools of thought in early China was by the advocacy of a kind of human exceptionalism. Mengzi’s rhetoric suggests that agriculturists, Daoists, Yangists, and Mohists alike threaten to return humankind to “the state of a beast”. Only Confucianism, it seems, is a true humanism that not only values human distinctness, but, more importantly, ensures human supremacy over non- or sub-human

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4 An anonymous reviewer rightly remarked that my readings of the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* emphasize “hierarchy, patriarchy, and human domination of the natural world, while ignoring the passages concerning conservation and sustainability with respect to the environment”. The topic of this essay, however, is human domination of the natural world, and not environmental sustainability. While, from a contemporary perspective, the discourses on human domination and environmental sustainability in agriculture may contradict one another, they were complementary for early Confucians. The same reader suggests that I refer to Graham Parkes’ essay on “The Art of Rulership in the Context of Heaven and Earth” (Parkes 2018) to discuss environmentalism in the *Mengzi*. In this essay, Parkes writes the following about Mengzi’s famous allegory of the Ox Mountain (*Mengzi* 6A: 8): “Mencius goes on to draw an analogy between the Ox Mountain and the human being: just as the mountain loses its nature when deprived of its natural cover of vegetation, so if we humans ‘let go our true heart’ we lose the natural endowment of humanity and become like animals. There’s an implication that it also works the other way round: the same desires that are destroying our natural environment are also eating away at our own nature as humans. If we fail to protect the natural covering of the mountain, we end up no better than the animals that help denude it” (Parkes 2018, 73). For *Mengzi*, their potential concern with environmental sustainability—in the context of an agricultural society—makes humans superior to animals (and justifies human domination of animals).

forces. Philosophically, Mengzi’s point is not completely unfounded. Daoists texts in particular tend to deny a clear distinction between the human and non-human and rarely, if ever, assume human supremacy (Parkes 1989). Instead, they tend to highlight human frailty, and emphasize a continuity between the human and non-human realms. Importantly, as Mengzi correctly stresses, these differences between Confucian humanism and non-Confucian non-humanism correspond to major moral and political disagreements. In other words, just as early Confucian humanism was a philosophical tool to justify specific ethical regimes and power structures, a subversion of the Confucian humanist narrative challenged the legitimacy of those regimes and structures. Early Daoist anti-humanism is a case in point of such a subversion.

The *Laozi* contains numerous sayings and images illustrating the integration of human life, and specifically human society and politics, into the larger functioning of the *dao* 道—or the “course of nature”. The often quoted chapter 25, for instance, programmatically declares: “Humans follow the Earth as a rule. The Earth follows Heaven as a rule. Heaven follows *dao* as a rule. *Dao* follows its self-so as a rule” (人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然). Not only is the human world here depicted as a smaller element of a larger whole or process, but, importantly, it also is somehow subordinated to those other non-human entities that it simply “follows”. Rather than ruling or regulating the Earth (*di* 地)—which connotes water and soil, and fauna and flora—humans adapt themselves to their terrestrial surroundings.

The Daoist emphasis on human adaptation to a natural environment, as it can be inferred from chapter 25 of the *Laozi*, is quite distinct from the historical struggle against non-human attacks depicted in the *Mengzi*. And yet human integration into the non-human is hardly ever idealized or romanticized in the *Laozi*—and thereby differs from any naïve vision of a blissful unity with the cosmos or a paradisaic “return to nature”. Chapter 5 of the *Laozi* suggests that nature does not care about humans—it is not “good” in a moral or divine sense: “Heaven and Earth are not humane. They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs” (天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗). The metaphor “straw dogs” is commonly interpreted as a reference to ritual objects that were burned after usage. Accordingly, the line seems to highlight the temporality human existence shares with all things, and especially the mortality it shares with all living beings. Humans enjoy no special status or preferential treatment in an amoral nature.

Moreover, from the perspective of the *Laozi*, humans do not seem to have any supreme characteristics imbuing them with distinctive powers. Chapter 23 evokes natural disasters like storms or floods to point out that even nature does not

always maintain a steadily productive course, or, in today's language, it is not always "sustainable". The chapter asks: "If even Heaven and Earth often cannot be long-lasting, how should humans be able to?" (天地尚不能久，而況於人乎?) A central concern of Daoist texts is to achieve permanence (*chang* 常 or *jiu* 久) manifesting itself politically in social stability, enduring peace, and durable statehood, and physically in longevity and health. Unlike Confucian texts such as the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, the *Laozi* seems to regard the ethical and political practices associated with Confucianism as often inferior to natural orders. Chapter 23 of the *Laozi* suggests that human society has not achieved the limited level of sustainability of non-human nature.

Far from assuming any "human supremacy", the *Laozi* regards the human realm not as genealogically separated from the non-human realm "under Heaven", but as inevitably embedded in it. It stresses the shared mortality of human beings and nature rather than singling out any distinctly human ethos. And rather than regarding humans as masters of the Earth, or praising human excellence, it tends to view the human world as intrinsically feeble and vulnerable.

The *Zhuangzi* expands the non-humanist philosophy of the *Laozi*. By critically, and often satirically, commenting on or alluding to mainstream Confucian humanist (sociopolitical) philosophy and practices of its time, it can be classified as not merely non-humanist, but as indeed anti-humanist—if this notion is understood as a subversion of the specific narratives of "human supremacy" expressed in such texts as the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*. Because of the impossibility of dating the likely composite text of the *Zhuangzi*, and in the absence of any substantial early manuscripts, this is not to imply that the *Zhuangzi* directly *responds* to the *Mengzi* or *Xunzi* (indeed, parts of the *Zhuangzi* may well precede the *Xunzi* and perhaps the *Mengzi* in time), but that it counters narratives and ideologies of the time conveyed in these texts.

It has been frequently noted that one of the main literary characteristics of the *Zhuangzi* distinguishing it from most other texts of the period is its ample use of non-human protagonists and figures, ranging from animals and plants to mythological or fantastic beings (Parkes 2013). Moreover, the human characters populating the many stories and allegories of the *Zhuangzi* are often at the fringes of "respected" humanity: there are "barbarians" and hermits, criminals and cripples, tricksters and "madmen". Often, these social outcasts challenge or ridicule "regular" members of society and the common social etiquette and hierarchies they represent. The non-human or unconventionally human cast of the *Zhuangzi* illustrates the non-humanist philosophy of the *Laozi* with a plethora of concrete faces and bodies.

Probably the most widely known story of the *Zhuangzi* is the butterfly dream allegory at the end of the second chapter of the text (*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論), which in turn is often regarded as the philosophically most significant section of the whole book. The story is about Zhuang Zhou—the presumed author of the text—falling asleep, dreaming of flying around as a butterfly, and then waking up again. It is highly complex and, like many stories in the *Zhuangzi*, allows for various interpretations. Without venturing into an analysis of its multiple possible readings, I wish to focus here on its rather concise final “conclusion”: “Between Zhou and the butterfly there is, necessarily, a separation. This is called the transformation of things” (周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂物化)。

Interestingly, the *Zhuangzi* also explicitly affirms here—in the same terminology as the *Xunzi*—a “separation” (*fen* 分) between the human and the non-human, represented by a person and a butterfly (in the person’s dream). Unlike in the *Xunzi*, however, this separation is not portrayed as hierarchic and therefore moral (“righteous”), but as a sequential separation in the context of the “transformation of things” (*wu hua* 物化). Clearly, the emphasis is on the *change* from one *thing* to another constituting, in essence, the “way”, or “course” (*dao* 道) of nature. Moreover, it is evident from the context in the chapter that the waking/dream transition is intended to be an analogy to the transition from life to death (Moeller 1999). Additionally, the image of the butterfly also suggests the idea of metamorphosis in nature, i.e., the alteration of different life forms. Whatever the specific reading of the story as a whole may be, it depicts the “separation” between the human and the non-human realms as not just a division but also a continuity where each can dissolve into the other.

The iconic butterfly dream story—drawings or animations of Zhuang Zhou tend to show him in the company of a butterfly, as an image search on Google will inevitably show—connects with other well-known narratives in the *Zhuangzi* highlighting the transformation of the human into the non-human in death. When Zhuangzi’s wife dies, he consoles himself by reflecting on how her human life was merely a transitory phase of existence in a cosmic process of change (*bian* 變) which constantly transforms the non-human into the human and vice versa (*Zhuangzi* 18: 2). Similarly, another story tells of four friends joking about how they will be transformed once they die: maybe the left arm will become a rooster, the right arm a crossbow for hunting birds, and the mind may turn into a horse (*Zhuangzi* 6: 5).

In a somewhat light-hearted way, the stories about the “transformation of things” in the *Zhuangzi* address the human fear of death reflecting the existential *Angst* also expressed in the *Mengzi* that the human may be overcome by the non-human.

In connection with the *Laozi's* insight into the integration of human life in non-human nature, however, the *Zhuangzi* tries to alleviate the fear of death by affirming the dissolution of the human body and mind as an integral moment of the course of *dao*. When dealing with the predicament of mortality, the *Zhuangzi* seeks solace in letting go of any pretence of human exceptionalism.

Another iconic story in the *Zhuangzi* (although not quite as well-known as the butterfly dream allegory) is the tale of Hundun's death at the very end of the Inner Chapters (7: 7). Here, the mythological figure of Hundun, representing a yet undivided primal state of complete wholeness at the beginning of time, is depicted as a faceless "Emperor of the Centre" (*zhong yang zhi di* 中央之帝) surrounded by the Emperors of the North and South. These two emperors decide to bore seven holes into Hundun to give him with a human face—meant as a reciprocal favour for Hundun's hospitality. However, their well-intentioned act ends up killing Hundun. In a detailed comparative analysis, Nicholas F. Gier came to the following conclusion:

Most importantly, the original sin in this story is anthropocentrism, a fault that *Zhuangzi* continually attempts to rectify by constant reference to the nonhuman realm and nonhuman values. (Gier 2000, 212)

Gier correctly observes that the story is an allegorical description of an act of anthropocentrism: Hundun is literally the Emperor of the *Centre*, and his fellow emperors decide to make him *human* (*anthropos* in Greek). Since this anthropocentric activism kills Hundun, the story is anti-anthropocentric: it describes anthropocentrism, as well-intentioned as it may be, as violent and destructive. What is more, the story's emphasis on the moral motivation of the emperors associates them with Confucian ethics and ritual expectations of reciprocity in the context of "human relationships". Importantly, they pity Hundun for his lack of a human face. They regard the non-human realm as inferior and non-human characteristics as a decisive shortcoming. Their reasoning, their misplaced feelings of empathy, and their ritualistic behaviour all betray a Confucian humanism akin to the philosophy of human supremacy found in the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*. The story's (partly satirical) critical portrayal of the Emperors of the North and South makes it not just anti-anthropocentric but, more specifically, also an example of early Daoist anti-humanism.

In effect, the allegory of Hundun's death is a "kill story". It illustrates the murderous consequences of the cultural and sociopolitical project of forcefully humanizing the non-human. Upon closer inspection, many similar stories depicting in one way or another the destruction of non-human life by well-meaning agents of early

Chinese humanism can be found. One of the best-known of these kill stories, featuring Zhuangzi himself, is included in the biographical note on Zhuang Zhou in the *Shiji* 史記 (63: 10), the *Records of the Historian* (1st century BCE). A shorter, somewhat less coherent version of the story is also included in the Miscellaneous Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (32: 15). The inclusion of this story in the brief account of Zhuang Zhou's life and work in the *Shiji*, which consists of merely a few sentences, suggests that it was regarded as representative of both Zhuang Zhou's personal character and of his philosophy. It reports that Zhuang Zhou refused the offer of a high government office by pointing to the fate of sacrificial oxen (*xi niu* 犧牛) at a ruler's court. Such oxen were given luxurious treatment: they were well dressed and well fed for a while, and in this way hosted like honoured guests, only to be later slaughtered and eaten.

The reference to court ritual in this paradigmatic story combines multiple critical jabs at the Confucian humanism of the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*: First, it critically, and again somewhat satirically, disrespects monarchic lordship (*jun*). Zhuang Zhou resists supporting such a sovereign—and this makes him politically subversive and, from a Confucian perspective, as “animalistic” as those Yangists and Mohists who are chastised by *Mengzi* for ignoring the prince. Second, and like the allegory of Hundun's death, it satirically debunks Confucian humanist morality as hypocritical. The sacrificial oxen are treated with ostensible politeness and “righteousness”, as if in a “human relationship”. However, the ethical pretence of doing good and of superior human cultivation turns out to be brutal and selfish exploration. The humanist façade breaks down when the oxen are eventually killed and consumed. Third, the story parodically alludes to the early Confucian celebration of the sage ruler's extermination of animals and their expulsion from the human realm. The killing of the sacrificial oxen at the ruler's court ritually re-enacts the ancient cleansing of the human world of wildlife in the course of the establishment of human supremacy.

The story of the killing of the seabird in the Outer Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (18: 5) corresponds to the anecdote of Zhuang Zhou and the sacrificial oxen in the *Shiji*. Here, the ruler of the state of Lu—Confucius' home state which is typically associated with the political practice of his teachings—finds an exotic bird. He orders the bird to be brought to his court where he hosts it for days in accordance with the rituals for special guests or diplomatic missions. Long musical performances are presented to entertain the bird and it is offered exquisite meat to eat. The text highlights that all this is intended to make the bird “happy” (*le* 樂) and to do “good” (*shan* 善). However, not despite but precisely because of this preferred treatment the bird dies after a few days.



The story has been interpreted in a contemporary Confucian humanist manner as a variation of the golden rule expressing a “patient moral relativism” (Huang 2005; 2018). In this way it is understood as a universal normative demand to put “the patient at the central stage of both our moral actions and our moral assessment of these actions” (Huang 2018, 892). Such an interpretation, while correct on an ahistorical, abstract level, ignores the specifics of the narrative. It clearly connects with the main theme of other kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* including the story of Hundun’s death and the anecdote of the sacrificial oxen: namely the killing of animals by Confucian ritual. In its concrete historical context, the story expresses a parodic critique of Confucian humanism: a Confucian ruler unintentionally—and thus stupidly—kills an animal by humanizing it. The story’s political force, and its bitter humour, lies in its subversion of the early Confucian narrative of “human supremacy”. Yes, humans may indeed rule over animals but rather than being an expression of righteousness this rule is exposed as foolish vanity at best and as callous murderousness at worst.

Other kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* critically subvert the Confucian humanist ideal of the domestication of animals and their submission to human use celebrated in the passage from *Xunzi* 9: 19 quoted earlier: “(Humans) are not as strong as bulls and not as fast as horses, but they make use of bulls and horses”. Chapter 9 of the *Zhuangzi*, titled “Horse Hooves” (*Ma Ti* 馬蹄) discusses in detail how humans “make use of horses” by describing how Bo Le 伯樂, a legendary horse trainer whose name is just as widely known in China today as it was in early China, treated the animals under his command. Typically, Bo Le is praised as an exemplary and skilful person who could immediately sense a horse’s suitability for human purposes. The *Xunzi*, too, mentions him briefly in the chapter on “The Way of the Ruler” (*Jun Dao* 君道) comparing him with regents who control their subjects so well that cannot be deceived by them (12: 9). In the *Zhuangzi*, however, Bo Le is not a positive character, as the text accuses him of slowly killing most of the animals in his “care”.

The “Horse Hooves” chapter contrasts the carefree life of wild horses with those unfortunate enough to have been captured and put under Bo Le’s command: “He starves them, parches them, trots them, gallops them, lines them up neck to neck or nose to tail, tormenting them with bit and rein in front and whip and spur behind. By then over *half* of the horses have dropped dead” (飢之渴之，馳之驟之，整之齊之，前有櫛飾之患，而後有鞭策之威，而馬之死者已過半矣) (Ziporyn 2020, 81). The chapter concludes with paralleling the effect of Bo Le’s training of horses to the Confucian “civilization” of humans. In ancient times, the chapter suggests, people lived a simple and happy life, not much different from wild animals, but: “Then along came the sage, bending and twisting over

ritual and music to reform the bodies of the world, dangling benevolence and responsible conduct overhead to comfort' the hearts of everyone in the world" (及至聖人，屈折禮樂以匡天下之形，縣跂仁義以慰天下之心) (Ziporyn 2020, 83). Contrary to the celebration of the domestication of non-human life as moral improvement, the *Zhuangzi* debunks this humanist narrative as a not so noble lie. The rhetoric of the *Xunzi* and *Mengzi* that makes Bo Le a humanist role model is reversed in the *Zhuangzi*. He, and with him the Confucian supposed sage rulers who domesticated people rather than horses are, from an anti-humanist Daoist perspective, symbols of humanist terror.

The Daoist reversal of the genealogy of human supremacy presented in the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* reaches a climax in chapter 29 of the *Zhuangzi*. Here, a lengthy story features Confucius meeting the notorious Gangster Zhi (Dao Zhi 盜跖), the leader of a large criminal gang, with the intention of convincing him to join the ranks of the regular feudal lords. The obviously hypocritical Confucius is contrasted with the grotesque, vile and yet "brutally honest" outlaw. Gangster Zhi represents the hardly human "barbarians" threatening the Confucian "humanist" civilization: in satirical exaggeration, the gangster is introduced as a cannibal snacking on a human liver. Symbolically embodying such drastic anti-humanism, Gangster Zhi eventually not only reveals Confucius as thoroughly corrupt and chases him away, but, in the course of an extended diatribe, turns the Confucian narrative of the glorious history of humanization on its head. He says:

In the age of Shen Nong, people slept where they happened to be and woke up cheerfully. They knew their mothers, but they didn't know their fathers. They lived side by side with deer. ... This was when utmost vitality was abundant. But then came the Yellow Emperor ... He slaughtered the native tribes out in the wild, and their blood ran for a hundred miles. Yao and Shun arose ... and since then, the strong have always oppressed the weak. Since Tang and Wu everyone brought disorder to humankind.

神農之世，臥則居居，起則于于，民知其母，不知其父，與麋鹿共處，... 此至德之隆也。然而黃帝 ... 與蚩尤戰於涿鹿之野，流血百里。堯、舜作，... 以強陵弱 ...。湯、武以來，皆亂人之徒也。

Gangster Zhi, the bizarre anti-hero, presents a strange anti-version of the genealogy of humanist supremacy. The time when humans "lived side by side with deer"—when there was no significant difference between human and animals—is depicted as a golden age. Importantly, this golden age is quite literally described as a time of "ignoring fathers": children "did not know their fathers"—a complete scandal from Mengzi's and Xunzi's point of view. For the gangster, however, the

true scandal is the separation of the human from the non-human, the genocide of native people, and the establishment of human hierarchies between the “strong” and the “weak”. In short, the scandal is Confucian “human supremacy”.

## A Brief Conclusion

The intention of this paper was, first, to show how early Confucian texts such as the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* developed theories and narratives of human supremacy based on a rather strict distinction between the human and non-human realms. Second, the intention was to show how the *Zhuangzi* counters this version of a humanism with a specifically Daoist anti-humanism. I believe it is crucial to recognize this antagonistic historical relation and not to reduce philosophical Daoism to a benign complement of Confucian thought, as has often been the case under the influence of the idea that “the three teachings unite into one” (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一)—which tends to imply that this supposed unity is formed under a comprehensive Confucian roof<sup>5</sup> (Gentz 2013). At the same time, however, it is equally important to acknowledge that the *Zhuangzi* cannot be reduced to such a specific form of critical anti-humanism. To conclude the preceding synopsis of the genesis of a Daoist anti-humanism, I wish to briefly point to the wider philosophical significance of the reference to animals and other non-human beings in the *Zhuangzi*.

As outlined above, I regard the anti-humanism in the *Zhuangzi* as essentially a socio-political critique of early Confucianism. This is by no means to say, however, that I take this anti-humanism to be a straightforward plea for a Daoist “primitivism” (as A.C. Graham has argued with regard to some strands of the text; see Graham 2001) or a demand for an ecologist unity with nature, social escapism, or a sort of pre-historical communism. Instead, I believe that anti-humanist protagonists in the *Zhuangzi*, with Gangster Zhi as a prime example, are typically satirical exaggerations who cannot be taken literally. In short, while it seems evident to me that the *Zhuangzi* presents a thorough critique of the political practice, the historical narratives, and the moral regimes of early Chinese Confucianism, it does not aim at advocating a specific ideological or ethical alternative but is non-ideological and amoral. The *Zhuangzi* is less interested in revolution, and more in existential well-being. Not completely unlike early Greek Stoicism, it

5 As an anonymous referee rightly remarked, the notion of “the three teachings uniting into one” is a later version of the idea that Daoism and Confucianism are mutually complementary (*ru dao hu bu* 儒道互補). The reviewer mentions the popular account attributed to Wei-Jin intellectuals that Daoism offered the political elites some therapeutic relief when they failed to live up to Confucian ideals.

has a therapeutic inclination and promotes social and individual sanity, or, more specifically, “ease”, or *you* 遊.

In my view, many of the non-human protagonists and images in the *Zhuangzi* represent such a state of ease that tends to be elusive for humans. After all, the notion of *you* is related to the movement of swimming—an activity that humans often are incapable of or find it hard to excel at, as opposed to, for instance, fish. Other movements exclusive to animals or non-human beings, such as flying, equally symbolize such a state of ease. Paradigmatically the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* is titled *Xiaovao You* 逍遙遊, or “rambling at ease”. It famously starts with a story about two fictional animals, a giant fish and a giant bird (Kun 鯤 and Peng 鵬) transforming into one another. From the very start these non-human (but not anti-humanist) beings introduce the larger theme of *you* which is at the very centre of the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*. The famous butterfly allegory also connects with the imagery of flying and represents, even if not explicitly, a state of *you* as well.

In connection with the *Laozi*'s idea that humans are inevitably embedded in a non-human environment and reflecting the *Zhuangzi*'s theme of the “transformation of things” which binds the human and the non-human together in a sequence of continuous change, many “positive” stories in the *Zhuangzi* point to the possibility of humans to somehow realize an “animalistic” state of *you*. Conversely, Confucian and other philosophical, political, and moral teachings and practices of the time are portrayed as obstacles to *you* that make it difficult to achieve ease in society. The anti-humanist “negative” stories discussed in this essay illustrate such obstacles to *you*.

One prime example of the positive *you* stories is the famous dialogue about the “happiness of fish” between Zhuang Zhou and his friend and philosophical opponent Huizi 惠子 (*Zhuangzi* 17: 13). Here, Zhuang Zhou defends his claim that he can know that fish are happy, implying that the human and the non-human realms are not strictly separate. More importantly, though, the dialogue parallels the carefree movement of fish, which is explicitly described as *you*, with the joyful philosophical exchange between the two friends. Its point is, in my reading, to provide an example of human ease. In line with this story, I regard the anti-humanism of the *Zhuangzi* as a philosophical preparation for engaging in the pursuit of human *you*. It is a therapeutic rather than an ideological anti-humanism (see Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017).

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