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STOICS AND DAOISTS ON FREEDOM AS DOING NECESSARY THINGS



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Comparisons between early Chinese Daoism and ancient Greco-Roman Stoicism have recently become quite popular with scholars working in Sino-Western comparative philosophy. It has been pointed out that there are fundamental similarities between the two schools in their commitment to the ideal of “following nature” (Yu 2008) or in their views about emotional detachment (Wong 2006; Machek 2015). In this comparative article, I would like to suggest that these similarities are even deeper than has so far been acknowledged, and that the existing differences between the two schools, which we can grasp against this background of robust similarities, are therefore bound to be particularly pertinent with regard to our understanding of larger differences between the two intellectual traditions.

The thematic focus of the comparison will be the notion of freedom. Stoics and Daoists have been credited by a number of modern interpreters with inventing and proposing “freedom” as the ethical and spiritual ideal of human action: only the wise man is free, and he is always free.¹ The emphasis on freedom has been seen as one of the distinctive features that marks them off from other major thinkers in their intellectual traditions. I shall argue that there are fundamental similarities in what these two ancient schools understood by freedom, along with several significant differences. I shall also hold that these differences are relatively less substantive than some fundamental dissimilarities between the Stoic and Daoist notion of freedom on the one hand and the theories of freedom that have dominated modern Western thought on the other.

This article has a main thesis and two sub-theses. The main thesis is that the Stoic and Daoist ideal of freedom can be understood as an ability to do only things that are necessary. To get a preliminary notion of this idea, we can start with the following quotations from the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, both of which characterize the action of the wise man:

The life of the sage is run by Heaven, his death is a transformation of things. . . . When he receives a stimulus, only then he reacts, when he is compelled, only then he acts, when he cannot do otherwise, only then he rises [感而後應，迫而後動，不得已而後起]. (*Zhuangzi* 15.2)²

When one wants to do what is right, one follows what is necessary; to do what is necessary, that is the way of sages [欲當則緣於不得已，不得已之類，聖人之道]. (*Zhuangzi* 23.19)

The crucial phrase here is *budeyi*, meaning “having no other alternative.” It is somewhat surprising that human action at its best should be described not, as one might expect, in terms of freedom from doing necessary things, but as doing those things which *are* necessary.

A similar idea is implied in the famous Stoic simile that draws a parallel between the human condition and a dog tied behind a running cart:

They too [Zeno and Chrysippus] affirmed that everything is fated, with the following model. When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its autonomous acts coincide with necessity (*poiōn kai to autexousion meta tēs anankēs*), but if it does not want to follow it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men, too: even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined. (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.21 = LS 62A)

The idea of freedom as doing necessary things is implied here in the phrase “making its autonomous acts coincide with necessity”: such a person is free who does not just suffer whatever inevitably happens, by being dragged, but who does it as an autonomous agent, by actively following. The Stoic necessity here appears to be somewhat different from the Zhuangzian necessity, in the sense of having a strong dimension of compelling, inescapable force that determines what will happen.³ This deterministic dimension is not as strong in the *Zhuangzi*,⁴ where necessity has more normative connotations of being opposed to things that are superfluous or not worth any response. We shall see that this normative dimension of necessity is strongly affirmed in some Stoic material as well.

With regard to the two most influential modern theories of freedom, the idea that freedom is doing what is necessary is baffling. These two theories roughly coincide with Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction between positive and negative freedom. Positive freedom is that in which one is “moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside” (Berlin 2002, p. 133). In various modifications, this idea, mostly known as free will or freedom of choice, has informed theories of action found in Aquinas, Descartes, or Sartre.⁵ In contrast, negative freedom entails “not being interfered with by others; the wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom” (*ibid.*, p. 170). In this view, one is free not because one has free will or freedom of choice but because one is free from external constraints or impediments. The understanding of freedom along these lines was adopted by Hume and Hobbes: “A Free-Man, is he, that . . . is not hindered to doe what he has a will to” (Hobbes 2001, p. 146).⁶

Both of these broad approaches oppose—rather than identify—freedom with necessity, whether this necessity is identified with a thoughtless and mechanical world of nature that is fundamentally different from the human subjectivity (freedom of will) or simply with adverse circumstances that happen to impede one’s agency (freedom from constraints). From this perspective, it is difficult even to understand how we can ever *do* necessary things: we would rather say that necessary things just happen to us, or that we suffer them, but not that we are agents, in

the proper sense of the word, who are engaged in doing these things—let alone that it is exactly when doing these things that we exert our agency to its fullest degree.

I shall argue that the idea of freedom as doing necessary things becomes intelligible when we understand it in light of philosophical assumptions that were characteristic for ancient thought (across traditions) in general and for the Stoics and Daoists in particular. One is that the criterion of a good action and good life is a normative human being (wise person or sage), rather than an abstract norm or set of rules.⁷ Freedom is the state attributed exclusively to this ideal, normative human being, and therefore is itself an ideal and normative notion. Another assumption is the essential embeddedness of human beings in the universe: this means that the realm of human activities and pursuits is located in a world that is meaningfully structured and ordered, and that human agents can aspire to their flourishing by means of their understanding of this world and by playing their proper role in its framework.⁸ This latter idea was taken to its most developed form by Stoicism and Zhuangzi's Daoism. We shall see that these thinkers understood freedom in terms of a perfect alignment of the individual self with the structure of the universe. This idea presupposed a radical redefinition of the existing views about the self and about the world in which this self can realize itself. To reconstruct these views in both cultural contexts, I will first outline the Stoic and Daoist ideas about the self (part one) and about the universe (part two) with regard to the debates with their respective philosophical opponents. This will prepare the ground for showing (part three) that freedom was envisaged as a fit between this self and this universe, and thus meaningfully understood as doing necessary things.

Now I come to the first sub-thesis, which will be defended in part four. While the first three parts will be exploring the structural similarities (and, to a lesser extent, differences) between the Stoic and Daoist idea of freedom as doing necessary things, the aim of the fourth part is to use this comparison as a basis for an interpretation of the Stoic material that would add to the existing scholarship on Stoicism. In part three, the notion of effortlessness will emerge as the characteristic attribute of Zhuangzi's understanding of the fit between self and the world, and in part four our question will be whether ease and effortlessness also play a role in the Stoic notion of freedom. I shall argue that there is some significant evidence in favor of such a view that has so far been neglected in the Stoic scholarship, but I will also suggest that there are some important limitations on the ease of the wise man's action that are absent from the *Zhuangzi*.

This comparison will lead directly to the second sub-thesis, outlined in part five. I will suggest here that the difference discussed in part four, as well as several other differences between the Stoics and the *Zhuangzi* mentioned in the preceding parts, can be understood as deriving, ultimately, from some specific divergences between the two philosophical traditions at large. In particular, I shall propose that there is a difference between the two fundamental conceptual dichotomies that respectively shaped and motivated the philosophical debates in each tradition.

Before I start, two methodological notes are in order. One is terminological. It should be noted that the ancient Chinese language does not have a single, universally accepted equivalent of the English word freedom, and our intuitions associated with this notion are distributed among different Chinese terms such as “independence” (*wudai* 無待), “rambling” (*you* 遊), or “being-so-of-itself” (*ziran* 自然). On the Greek and Roman side, the equivalent of “freedom” is typically *eleutheria* and *libertas*, both terms originally denoting political freedom or freedom from slavery. Some caution, however, is advisable in discussing the idea of freedom in the Stoic texts. Until recently, it was a commonplace to credit the Stoics with originating the notion of freedom, understood in the sense of free will, in the Western tradition. This view was effectively challenged by Bobzien (1998), who argued that there is no evidence for linking the Stoic freedom with free will and the problem of moral responsibility, and that the idea of freedom does not have a presence in Stoic thought before Epictetus (A.D. 55–135). Our interpretation will further bolster the view that the Stoic freedom has nothing to do with freedom of will.

This caveat brings me to the second note, which concerns the scope of the textual material examined here. For the reason noted above, the Stoic material will largely be limited to two major thinkers of later Stoa (Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius), although links to some earlier Stoic material will be pointed out where appropriate. On the Daoist side, I will work exclusively with the anthology of texts known as the *Zhuangzi*, whose earliest strata (often attributed to a person named Zhuang Zhou, or Zhuangzi) presumably date back to the fourth century B.C.E. It is with this text that the Daoist idea of freedom was mostly connected. Along with most modern interpreters writing on the *Zhuangzi*, I shall assume that the anthology, in spite of its diversity, forms a reasonably coherent whole that warrants talk about the Zhuangzian idea of freedom.

I. Circumscribing the Self: Who Are We Really?

In the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, we find the following characterization of the perfect person: she has “no merits (*wugong* 無功), no name (*wuming* 無名), and no self (*wuji* 無己)” (*Zhuangzi* 1.3). This is just one of several passages in the text that try to challenge and redefine the widely accepted notion of who we are as human agents. This reassessment appears to be the prerequisite for the attainment of freedom, for only the perfect person can “wander freely without impediments” (*you wuqiong* 遊無窮).

The circumscription of our genuine self consists in identifying and casting away all those layers of our self that are inauthentic or somehow other to us. “Merits,” “name,” or “reputation,” or, as we would say today, our CV-identity, is perhaps the most external of these layers. Very likely, Zhuangzi is here targeting the Confucian tendency to understand one’s identity as closely connected with one’s reputation. In the *Analects* we can read that “the superior man dislikes the thought of his name not being mentioned after his death” (15.20). One’s reputation, typically, is based on

one's merits or accomplishments, and the Confucian model rulers of antiquity are to be remembered for their everlasting accomplishments.

But there are other superfluous layers besides merits and name. A dialogue between Zhuangzi's Confucius and his disciple Yan Hui, in which Confucius ends up asking Yan Hui to become his follower, gives the following account of the ultimate state of "sitting and forgetting":

I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off body, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything [zuowang 坐忘]. (*Zhuangzi* 6.9)

Thus, not only one's body but also some elements of one's mental life, such as perception and intellect, are let go of. This list is confirmed by two other important passages in the text (*Zhuangzi* 4.1 and 6.4). In one of these, Confucius recommends Yan Hui to "fast his mind":

"Make your will one [*ruo yi zhi* 若一志]! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your energy [*ting zhi yi qi* 聽之以氣]. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but energy is empty and waits on all things [*xu er dai wu zhe ye* 虛而待物者也]. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind."

Yan Hui said, "Before I heard this, I was certain that I was Hui. But now that I have heard it, there is no more Hui. Can this be called emptiness?"

"That's all there is to it." (*Zhuangzi* 4.1)

Yan Hui's understanding exemplifies what it means to have "no self": it means to be free from any sort of structured identity that turns one into a thing among other things. This structured identity, for example to be a Hui, consists of a combination of one's reputation, accomplishments, and body, as well as of what Zhuangzi called "structured mind" (*chengxin* 成心) (*Zhuangzi* 2.4), that is, a set of individual experiences turned into a set of sedimented beliefs in light of which one feels entitled and confident to judge what is right and what is wrong. These recalcitrant psychological structures are increasingly bound to limit our ways of interacting with the world to particular structured activities, or habits, and are in turn reinforced by these habits.⁹

It has been suggested that abandoning one's structured identity "promotes the ideal of ultimate freedom from the confines of personal perspective and individual agency" and urges us to "negate and transcend our selves" and become "utterly dependent on the powers of the cosmos" (Brindley 2010, pp. 56–59). But having no self does not necessarily mean that one has no locus of individual agency.¹⁰ After all, Confucius does not advise Yan Hui to refrain from any individual action, but instructs him on how to succeed in his plan to enlighten a depraved ruler. His self is not supposed to be structured in any definite way but rather to remain empty, that is, unstructured and ready to temporarily re-structure itself in an appropriate way according to the circumstances: "If he wants to be a child, be a child with him. If he wants to follow erratic ways, follow erratic ways with him. If he wants to be reckless, be reckless with him" (*Zhuangzi* 4.2).

And yet this unstructured self is indeed, in some sense, dependent on the powers of the cosmos; even more, it becomes wholly at one with these powers. We learn that the “supreme being is divine (*shen* 神)” (*Zhuangzi* 2.11), that the wise man makes himself a “dwelling place for the spirit (*shen* 神)” (21.3), or that “he enters into the unity with Heaven” (6.7). This divine character of the unstructured self leads us directly to the justification for why the structures that are extrinsic to our genuine self need to be abandoned. It is a distinctive feature of spirit, Heaven, or Dao that they are not structures, or “things” (*wu* 物), for “what makes things be things is itself not a thing” (21.10; cf. also 11.5). Hence, the perfect person, who has no structured self and holds on only to his spiritual core, “is not a thing” (*buwu* 不物) and hence is not entangled in the territory of things in the way that things or other people are. This territory of things is characterized by relationships of mutual dependence and exploitation.¹¹ Those who have their selves structured therefore necessarily participate in this traffic:

With everything they meet they become entangled. Day after day they use their minds in strife, sometimes grandiose, sometimes sly, sometimes petty. Their little fears are mean and trembly; their great fears are stunned and overwhelming. They bound off like an arrow or a crossbow pellet, certain that they are the arbiters of right and wrong. (*Zhuangzi* 2.4)

The predicament of things in general and humans who have turned themselves into things in particular is that they tend to use other things according to a fixed and definite view of what is appropriate and useful. This point is suggestively brought out by two passages at the end of the first chapter. People are worried about the apparent uselessness of a big gourd or crooked tree, but instead of having these unnecessary worries, Zhuangzi holds, they can use the gourd as a raft and “float on it around the rivers and lakes” (*Zhuangzi* 1.5), and use the tree as an opportunity to “relax and do nothing (*wuwei* 無為) by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it” (1.6). These passages illustrate how the structured mind operates. Instead of being able to re-structure itself according to the circumstances, it operates in the confines of its fixed structure of beliefs. The structured mind is inevitably bound to impose on things structures that are derived from its own structures of beliefs. It insists on the idea of using the gourd in one particular way, and thus exhausts itself by forcing on it different strategies within this limited scope.¹²

Besides being exhausted by its strained engagement with things, the structured self is also vulnerable to being used or exploited by others. The Chinese word “use” (*yong* 用) also has a meaning of being employed as an official in the government. By virtue of our reputation and merits, we become attractive for potential employers who can then use our talents. It is in this context that we can understand the famous story about Zhuang Zhou, who justified his decision to decline an offer to become a high official by referring to a case of a sacred tortoise who had been killed in order to be made into a valuable ceremonial tool. He does not want to trade his emotional equanimity, or even life, for the dangers and worries inherent in a position of power; instead, he prefers to “drag his tail in the mud” (*Zhuangzi* 17.11). In a biography of

Zhuang Zhou written by the grand ancient historian Sima Qian, Zhuangzi is portrayed as being committed to “doing what he wants” (*kuai wu zhi* 快吾志), so that no king or duke could ever have used him as a tool (*bu neng qi zhi* 不能器之).¹³ We can also say that Zhuang Zhou identified himself with his genuine self—that is, with the simplicity inherent in his “spirit” (*shen* 神)¹⁴—rather than with the inauthentic, or structured self.

We can turn, at this point, to the Stoic material. The idea that the free person cannot be used can be found here as well. It appears in what is probably the most extensive treatment of freedom as the ethical ideal in the Stoic sources, namely the first chapter of the fourth book of Epictetus’ *Discourses*. Epictetus, who was himself a freed slave, contrasts freedom in the sense of having a certain social position with true freedom of the mind. Take the following passage, in which he characterizes the Cynic philosopher Diogenes:

Diogenes was free. How did that come? It was not because he was born of free parents, for he was not, but because he himself was free, because he had cast off all the handles of slavery, and there was no way in which a person could get close and lay hold of him to enslave him. Everything he had was easily loosed, everything was merely tied on. If you had laid hold of his property, he would have let it go rather than followed you for its sake; if you had laid hold of his leg, he would have let his leg go; if of his whole paltry body, his whole paltry body; and so also his kindred, friends, and country. (*Dis.* 4.1.152–153)

There is a striking similarity between Diogenes, who could not have been enslaved, and Zhuangzi, who could not have been “used”: neither of them traded their autonomy for external things. The autonomy and self-sufficiency of the wise man is most explicit in Epictetus’ definition of freedom (*eleutheria*): “He is free who lives as he wills (*ho zēn hōs boulētai*), who is subject neither to compulsion (*anankasai*), nor hindrance (*kōlusai*), nor force (*biasasthai*)” (*Dis.* 4.1.1). The vocabulary of freedom from compulsion and force reminds us of the dog and the cart simile: those who follow are free from compulsion. Similarly to the *Zhuangzi*, one is free when one can follow one’s own inclinations without being pushed around by external forces or impeded by external obstacles.

The crucial prerequisite for becoming free in this sense is, as in the *Zhuangzi*, the appropriate circumscription of the authentic self. Similarly to the *Zhuangzi*, this process is envisaged in terms of abandoning those inauthentic layers that are extrinsic to our true self: property, body, or country. All these things, Epictetus maintains, fall into the category of “what is not up to us” (*ouk eph’ēmin*), because they can be taken away from us against our will, and therefore they are somehow other to us (*Dis.* 1.1). In contrast, “what is up to us” is our true self, and this boils down to our deliberative and decision-making capacities, or what Epictetus calls *prohairesis* or “volition”: “You are not flesh or hair, but *prohairesis*: if you get that beautiful, then you will be beautiful” (*Dis.* 3.1.40).

In the terminology of the Stoic psychology, *prohairesis* is our capacity for giving or withholding “assents” (*sunkatatheseis*) to our “impressions” (*phantasiai*), that is, endorsing or rejecting our ideas—whether those that come from the way external

things appear to us or those that emerge spontaneously from our mind—that we entertain. For instance, an idea may occur to me, to use an example given by Epictetus, that it might be a good idea to have sex with my neighbor’s wife. The occurrence of this idea in our mind is not, strictly considered, in our power; what is in our power is to “use” (*chrēsthai*) it well (e.g., *Dis.* 3.8), which means, in this sense, to reject this idea as incompatible with our rationality. This means that even those ideas that we entertain are outside our innermost self, while this innermost self is our capacity for “reception” of these impressions (Stob. 2.73 = LS 41H).

While *prohairesis* has been translated as “will” or “volition,” which implies a certain act, we should note that in the Stoic view the rational core of our self amounts to a “structure” (*sustēma*) of beliefs or cognitions that, when perfectly consistent, amounts to wisdom or knowledge (*ibid.*). When an impression, understood as a linguistic proposition, fits this structure of propositional cognitions, it is endorsed; when not, it is rejected. To accommodate both these aspects, we could say that the authentic core of our innermost self, or *prohairesis*, is this structure of cognitions when activated as an act of volition with regard to this or that particular impression.

Here emerges one significant difference between the Stoic and Zhuangzian understanding of the genuine self. We know that Zhuangzi’s “fasting of the mind” is the process of abandoning of all sorts of structures, including one’s knowledge and sets of firm beliefs. The Stoics, in contrast, envisaged the genuine self in terms of a solid and firm structure, namely “an unshakable and consistent system of cognitions” (Stob. 2.73.19–4.3 = *SVF* 3:112) that ensures that all assents to impressions will be infallibly true.¹⁵ By conceiving the self in terms of a structure, the Stoics differ significantly from Zhuangzi; we shall address the motivations behind this difference in the last section. Despite this difference, both the Stoics and Zhuangzi agreed that the genuine self is divine.¹⁶ Some Stoic texts were quite explicit in identifying one’s virtue-reason with God (*theos*) and putting the wise man on a par with God:

He lives with the gods who constantly shows them a soul which greets that which has been allotted to it with joy; it does everything that is willed by the *daimōn* which Zeus has given each person as an overseer and a guide, and which is a small parcel of Zeus. It is nothing other than each person’s intellect and reason. (*Med.* 5.27)¹⁷

The idea that the genuine self is identical with the divine power of the cosmos as a whole has an important implication that will turn out to be crucial for the notion of freedom as doing necessary things: whenever we follow our individual nature, defined in the narrow sense, we are also thereby following the nature of the universe; and whenever we act contrary to our individual nature, we get into conflict with the nature of the universe. Thus Zhuang Zhou’s decision to stay clear of a political career is not merely his individual fancy but his own contribution to the universal order of things. At the same time, the Stoic commitment to “what is in our power” is more than a mere defensive strategy against getting involved with things that we cannot control: it is natural for us to act in this rational way, and by acting in accordance with our individual nature we are conforming to the universal norm. To get a fuller

understanding of this relationship between the individual and the universal, we now have to turn from the psychological to the cosmological level.

II. Redefining the World: Where Do We Really Live?

The efforts to define and re-define the genuine self were closely associated with propounding novel views about how the world as a whole is structured. Zhuangzi's assault on the idea of the structured self goes hand in hand with his assault on the idea that the world is hierarchically structured. For hierarchy, or any top-down structure of subordination, creates the space for instrumental and artificial action, which, in turn, reinforces the psychology of the structured self. Let me unpack these claims.

The hierarchical vision of the world was embraced by Zhuangzi's main philosophical opponents: Confucians and Mohists. In the Confucian case, the hierarchy is most apparent on the social level, since the two main paradigmatic relationships—that between father and son and between a ruler and his minister—are essentially hierarchical. But the hierarchy is also affirmed on the psychological level. The Confucian Mengzi, for instance, explicitly distinguishes some parts of our self—specifically mind—as superior to other parts of our self, specifically senses and their desires (6A:15). On the cosmological level, the hierarchical view was exemplarily adopted by the Mohists. At the top of the hierarchy is the “will of Heaven” (*tianzhi* 天志), followed by the ruler, who uses his administration to regulate the common people. The central prerequisite of the well-ordered society is the top-down transmission of power based on the correct understanding of what Heaven wants and a proper artificial implementation of this will in the terrestrial realm.¹⁸

Zhuangzi challenges the hierarchical model on all three fronts. On the social level, he shows his fondness for friendship as the non-hierarchical form of relationship (e.g., in *Zhuangzi* 6.5), and playfully reverses the established model of social hierarchy, so that a wheelwright gives a tutorial to his ruler (13.9), and Confucius becomes a follower of his own disciple (6.9). On the psychological level, Zhuangzi challenges the idea that mind should serve as our teacher, and that it is the leading or supervisory part within our self (2.3). Finally, on the cosmological level he comes up with the idea that Dao is fully immanent in the realm of natural, uncultivated things. Rather than understanding the Dao, or Heaven, as the superordinate norm from which we should derive rules for our conduct, he affirms that “there is no boundary between things and what makes things be things” (23.6) and that “Dao is everywhere” (*dao wu suo bu zai* 道無所不在), even in excrement (*ibid.*).

This picture problematizes the value and rationale of instrumental and artificial action. If all things are perfect as they are, and if all of them are equally valuable, because they are all manifestations of the Dao, then any artificial production cannot be justified in terms of refining unrefined material. Moreover, given the absence of one hierarchically superordinate referential point that would serve as the ultimate source for the criteria of what is right and what is wrong (*shifei* 是非),¹⁹ it is impossible to establish a universally binding norm that would justify and guide the instrumental and artificial activity of the sort that Mohists were promoting.

When we turn to the Stoics, we can see that they, too, challenged the hierarchical model inasmuch as they argued that the universal norm, that is, God, Zeus, or Reason (all these terms were used as synonyms), is identical with nature as the realm of all material things: “For he [Chrysippus] says that divine power resides in reason and in the mind and intellect of universal nature. He says that god is the world itself, and the universal pervasiveness of its mind” (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.39 = LS 54B). This cosmological model was unique in the Greek tradition as it closed the gap between the divine and terrestrial realm, and, given the rational character of the divine order, expelled any non-rationality—understood as contingency, chance, or chaos—from the world. Unlike Aristotle, whose physics exerted the greatest influence on the Stoics, Stoics envisaged nature, including human beings, as the supremely intelligent and providential creation of divine reason, and this reason itself as being immanent in, and coextensive with, its own creation. In opting for this cosmological model, they also differed sharply from their direct philosophical rivals, the Epicureans, who explained the world in terms of a non-providential and non-teleological atomism that allows significant room for contingency and chance.

Unlike for the *Zhuangzi*, however, for the Stoics hierarchy is the organizational principle within the realm of nature. That is, the rationality of nature shows exactly in its hierarchical and teleological structure where things were designed so as to mutually benefit and use each other:

As Chrysippus cleverly put it, just as the shield-cover was made for the sake of the shield and the sheath for the sake of the sword, so too with the exception of the world everything else was made for the sake of other things: for example, the crops and fruits which the earth brings forth were made for the sake of the animals, and the animals which it brings forth were made for the sake of men. . . . Man himself has come to be in order to contemplate and imitate the world, being by no means perfect, but a tiny constituent of that which is perfect. (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.37–39 = LS 54H)

Even though human beings are just “tiny constituents” of the whole, they are at the top of this hierarchy, which makes their relationship with God or Reason, as mentioned above, fundamentally equal.

In holding these two views—hierarchy as the structure of nature, and the privileged position of humans within that hierarchy—Stoics, again, seem to differ significantly from the *Zhuangzi*. Even though *Zhuangzi* did suggest that human agents are in a privileged position since they are fundamentally different from things, he was not committed to the idea that other forms of life were created for the sake of humans, and even actively opposed the idea that human beings, by virtue of their human nature, should occupy a higher position in the hierarchy of nature and should therefore be entitled to postulate criteria for judging other forms of existence (see, e.g., *Zhuangzi* 2.11). I shall return to these differences in the final section of this article. At this point, it suffices to say that they do not undermine the underlying similarity between the Stoics and the *Zhuangzi* in terms of freedom as doing necessary things. We shall see this more easily in the following section.

III. Freedom as the Skill of Finding the Fit between the Self and the World

Until recently, many scholars working on Stoicism have read the dog-behind-the-cart simile as the crucial piece of evidence in favor of a Stoic proto-version of the notion of free will: what will happen will happen, and that is beyond our power, but it is up to us whether in our minds we accept willingly what must happen. Our possibility to choose among alternatives is premised on an indetermination of our decisions, which is the privilege of human beings in an otherwise completely determined universe: unlike all other entities we have free will; that is, we “can do otherwise.” Perhaps the most influential proponent of this interpretation was Pierre Hadot: “And although Stoic physics makes it seem as if events are woven inexorably by Fate, the self becomes aware of itself as an island of freedom in the midst of a great sea of necessity” (Hadot 1998, p. 112).²⁰ A similar interpretation was espoused by Isaiah Berlin; unlike Hadot, he assessed Stoicism uncharitably as a sort of escapist strategy.²¹

However, as has been pointed out,²² the problem with this interpretation is that the Stoics believed that nature is inherently rational, and that laws of nature are ultimately continuous with laws of reason itself. They have therefore little grounds for predicating human freedom on an ability to disconnect themselves from the necessity of nature. If the Stoic freedom is indeed “an island in the sea of necessity” then their cosmological theory is essentially indifferent to the possibility of attaining freedom, and nothing would change even if the Stoic sage would find himself in the Epicurean world governed by chance.

In fact, the ideal suggested by this simile seems to be the opposite of what Hadot or Berlin argued, that is, that one should make one’s deliberations and decisions so as to be an integral part of the universal determinism, and to “make one’s spontaneous act coincide with necessity.” One way to understand this phrase is as a willing submission to fate. Since we cannot change what is destined for us, we will be better off when we accept it rather than when we rebel against it. Given the Stoic cosmology, there is a strong justification for this injunction: since the world is rationally and providentially administered, we can think of things as they happen to us as a medicine administered to us by a doctor:

As people say, “Asclepius has prescribed horse-riding for this person, or cold baths, or walking barefoot,” so we might also say, “universal nature has prescribed sickness for this person, or disability, or loss, or something else of the kind”. . . . When we say that these happenings fit us, we are talking like builders when they say that squared blocks fit in walls and pyramids, because they join up with each other in a particular structured arrangement. (*Med.* 5.8)

The *amor fati* resonates strongly in all three major figures of the later Stoicism: Epictetus (e.g., *Ench.* 53; *Dis.* 4.1.131), Seneca,²³ and perhaps most strongly, Marcus: “[The wise man] is content with two things: to accomplish the present action with justice, and to love the fate which has, here and now, been allotted to him” (*Med.* 11.3). The willing acceptance of fate brings freedom in the sense of freedom from

disturbances. Once one knows that all things are fated and one does not see things that happen to him as frustrating obstacles, one is liberated from the many disruptive emotions that arise from one's effort to change or escape things as they are.

The injunction to accept whatever is ordained to us by fate, as well as the link between the acceptance of fate and freedom from emotions, is also prominent in the *Zhuangzi*:

To serve your mind so that sorrow or joy, . . . Understanding that there are things that you can do nothing about and accepting it contentedly as fate—this is the utmost excellence [知其不可奈何而安之若命，德之至也]. (*Zhuangzi* 4.1)

If the wise person finds he has no other choice than to direct and look after the world, then the best course for him is non-action [*wuwei* 無為]. He rests content in the acceptance of his true nature and fate. (*Zhuangzi* 11.1)

The connection between the idea of submission to fate and “non-action,” as well as the dog-behind-the-cart simile, might suggest that Zhuangzi and Stoics promote a passive complacency toward whatever happens. However, the submission to fate in both cases has an active dimension: to submit to fate means that one does one's best with the given material in the given circumstances.

In the Stoic case, this is indicated, for instance, by the idea that fate assigns different roles to different human beings—that of father, king, beggar, or many others, and our task is to play these roles well: “It is your part to act the given role well; to choose your role is somebody else's matter” (*Ench.* 17). It does not matter who we are, in terms of our individual identity, but how we enact the role that was assigned to us. Similarly, it does not matter in what circumstances we find ourselves, but whether we are able to use these circumstances well: “similarly to how the [art of] flute-playing is able to use well all melodies that it is given, the virtue, too, can [make good use] of all situations” (Alexander, *De anima mant.* 20.33–34 = *SVF* 3:204–205). These “situations” are what Stoics called “indifferent things” (*adiaphora*): they can be more or less welcome, or preferred, but they are ultimately indifferent for our happiness, because happiness depends exclusively on how we use them. The ability to use external things well is illustrated in the following passage from Epictetus:

You say, “I don't like leisure, it is solitude;” “I don't like a crowd, it is confusion.” Instead of talking like this, if circumstances bring you to a state of spending time alone or with just a few, call it peace and use the situation in the right way. Talk to yourself, train your impressions, work at your preconceptions. But if you fall in with a crowd, call it games, a festival, a holiday, try to celebrate with people. (*Dis.* 4.4.26)

The two passages from the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* make a very similar point: instead of being worried about the uselessness of the huge gourd or tree, one can use the gourd as a raft or use the tree as shade. Here, as in Epictetus, the goal is to temporarily restructure our identity so that it makes a good fit with the circumstances. This is liberating because the circumstances are no longer impediments that constrain us but rather referential points that guide us along the way.

Some interpreters, such as Berlin, have criticized the Stoic version of this approach as a kind of sour-grapes strategy: when we cannot have things our way, we brainwash ourselves into believing that the ersatz alternative is in fact the best one. On this reading, our happiness is achieved at the cost of evading or “rationalizing” the real state of affairs.²⁴ This criticism is misguided because the ability of the good use of indifferent things is a supremely realistic ability to interpret things as they really are. When Epictetus advises us to re-describe the crowd as an opportunity for celebration, he advises us to be able to perceive things as they really are, namely as the material that we can use in the most suitable manner that fits our nature; in contrast, when we are bothered by the crowd, it is because we are unable to see it as an indifferent but potentially useful thing, and misinterpret it as a fatal adversity. This interpretation appears to be applicable to the *Zhuangzi* as well: the fact that the text often illustrates this ability with reference to practitioners of ordinary skills and crafts indicates that its authors understood it as the capacity for an acute and realistic assessment of the way things are, rather than as an escapist strategy.

This view presupposes that reality is structured in an intelligible way, and that this structure is accessible to our cognitive abilities. We know that the Stoics and the *Zhuangzi* envisaged our self and the world in a manner that fulfills both these requirements. Reality consists of intelligible patterns, and our self, being itself endowed with divine powers, has direct access to these patterns. And it is by virtue of this direct access that it can find an appropriate fit between the inclination of the individual self and the structure of reality. Perhaps the most suggestive description of this fit is offered by the celebrated story about the effortless butchering of oxen:

Cook Ding was carving an ox for Lord Wenhui. As his hand slapped, shoulder lunged, foot stamped, knee crooked, with a hiss! with a thud! the brandished blade as it sliced never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Jingshou.

“Oh, excellent!” said Lord Wenhui. “That skill can attain such heights!”

“What your servant cares about is the Way [things are] [*dao* 道], I have left skill behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic in me, and do not look with my eye. With the senses I know where to stop, the daemonic I desire to run its course. I rely on Heaven’s structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. A good cook changes his chopper once a year, because he hacks. A common cook changes it once a month, because he smashes. Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At that joint there is an interval, and the chopper’s edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then, what more could you ask, of course there is ample room to move the edge about. That’s why after nineteen years the edge of my chopper is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. However, whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of the

chopper—and at one stroke the tangle has been unravelled, as a clod crumbles to the ground. I stand chopper in hand, look proudly round at everyone, dawdle to enjoy the triumph until I'm quite satisfied, then clean the chopper and put it away." "Excellent," said Lord Wenhui. "Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned from them how to nurture life." (*Zhuangzi* 3.1; with modifications, from Graham 2001, pp. 63–64)

The body of the ox stands for the intelligible patterns of reality, and the butcher's knife stands for the individual self that manages to realize its intentions by correctly assessing the structure of the circumstances with regard to which of these intentions should be realized. Exactly because the self is so narrowly circumscribed, it is "thin" (*buhou* 不厚) enough to find its way smoothly through the patterns of reality. The cognitive transition from superficial sense-perception to the "desire of the spirit" indicates what doing necessary things could actually mean, namely to have the feeling that, being driven by a strong desire, one cannot act in any other way than one is actually driven to by this desire to act. This urge contrasts with the more superficial cognitive guidance provided by the senses: we have to laboriously work out how to proceed, and we are bound to make mistakes.

It is from this perspective, I suggest, that we can understand the injunction expressed in the Stoic dog simile, namely to "make our acts coincide with necessity." The primary idea is not that we should passively accept whatever we cannot change, but that the necessity inherent in the universal order is actually welling up in our minds and safely leads us along so that, whatever we do, it is also in accordance with the Right Reason (*orthos logos*). Rather than a mystical state unattainable through engaging in ordinary activities, this perfection is akin to the feeling that a virtuoso has when practicing her skill. For instance, a virtuoso tennis player can feel that it is necessary to play a particular ball exactly in a specific way, and all other inferior options do not even cross her mind. We are most in control exactly when we feel that we cannot act in any other way, and we most fully exercise our individual agency when we cannot help but do what we do. This connection is well expressed in the Zhuangzian formulation of what it means that one's spontaneous acts coincide with necessity:

For when all your actions are "what you cannot help doing, outside of your control," we call it "Virtuosity." Conversely, when all your actions "come from yourself alone," we call it "being completely in control." These two descriptions are directly opposed, but the facts they describe actually agree [動以不得已之謂德，動無非我之謂治，名相反而實相順也]. (*Zhuangzi* 23.17; Ziporyn 2009)

Doing things that we cannot help doing is thus an achievement, and only those who are able to do these things are at the same time really doing what they want. All others can only live in the realm of hazy potentialities, in which they can neither feel the pull of the divine necessity in things nor have full control over their actions. Following fate, which is beyond our control, is the same thing as following our very own reason or *daimōn*, as the Stoics would have it, and our "desire of spirit" or "Heavenly mechanism" (*tianji* 天機), as with Zhuangzi. While it is true, in some sense, that the Zhuangzian freedom is not "to pursue whatever ends we choose"

(Fraser 2014, p. 553), and that “there is no liberty outside of the recognition of necessity” (Billeter 1993, p. 558), this freedom should not be envisaged as a kind of “balance” between human freedom and Heavenly necessity (Slingerland 2003, p. 208). For whatever goal the wise man chooses to pursue, and however he will pursue it, it will always be in accordance with fate, and he does not have to restrain himself or compromise his choices because they are fully aligned with fate.

It is in light of this idea—that following fate means to follow oneself—that the Stoic dog-behind-the-cart simile should be understood. Long and Sedley suggest that the notion of fate in the dog simile corresponds to a “fairly traditional Greek picture of the human destiny” (LS, p. 392), including our individual dispositions and certain events that were destined for us and that we cannot change. Fate has assigned to us a certain linear chain of events that is a part of the universal chain of events. But the specifically Stoic notion of fate differs from this traditional view inasmuch as fate is not only a linear sequence, or a sum of unchangeable facts, but “a network of interacting causes” (Frede 2003, p. 189), or

the Reason in accordance with which past events have happened, present events happen, and future events will happen; and instead of “Reason” he uses “truth,” “cause,” “nature” and “necessity,” and adds other terms which apply to the same substance from different perspectives. (Stob. *Ecl.* 1.79)

To follow fate, then, does not have to mean just to willingly accept a train of events that inevitably happens to us, but to follow reason as the principle according to which these events happen to us, that is, to act in agreement with the rational structure of reality, which is exactly the same rationality that, according to the Stoics, characterizes the human mind. This is the meaning of the Stoic definition of happiness as “living in agreement with nature . . . which is in accordance with the nature of oneself and that of the whole” so that one is “always doing everything on the basis of the concordance of each man’s guardian spirit with the will of the administrator of the whole” (DL 7.88–89 = LS 63C). All actions that are contrary to the universal order can ultimately be characterized as actions that are unnecessary, superfluous, or excessive. The prime example of superfluous actions would be passions, or pathological emotional responses emerging from excessive attachment to things.²⁵ Zhuangzi characterizes “passions” (*qing* 情) as unnecessary “additions to life” (*yi sheng* 益生),²⁶ and Stoics characterize them as “excessive” (*pleonazousa*).²⁷

In the framework of these common similarities, however, we can also identify significant differences as to how the attributes of this fit were envisaged. The Stoics saw this fit predominantly in terms of consistency and stability. The virtue is knowledge, and knowledge is defined as “a system of expert pieces of knowledge which has intrinsic stability, just as the virtues do” (Stob. 2.73.16–74.3 = LS 41G)—and therefore it becomes wholly continuous with nature or God. The absence of knowledge, thus, amounts to a logical and psychological conflict (e.g., *Dis.* 2.26), and a life without knowledge is a life of latent conflict and inconsistent wavering among different incompatible beliefs that have not been blended harmoniously in one’s soul.

We do not find such emphasis on consistency of normative action in the *Zhuangzi*. What we do find, instead, is valorization of effortlessness, leisure, and ease. The butcher's knife "freely wanders" (*you* 遊) in the empty spaces between the bones, encountering no impediment. All stories about master craftsmen emphasize this effortlessness-cum-efficiency of virtuoso activity, and it becomes the paradigm for characterizing the perfect action of the sage, who practices "non-action" (*wuwei* 無為), "rambling" in all dimensions of reality, and yet achieves everything.²⁸ The main consequence of the perfect fit between one's mind and the structure of reality is that one does not have to "harm" and "exhaust" one's vital and spiritual capacities while being active in the world.

One might be tempted to assess the difference between valorization of consistency and effortlessness as a contrast (consistency often requires effort, rather than the lack of it), and attribute it to a larger contrast between the Stoics and Zhuangzi in terms of their different views on reason and deliberation: while Zhuangzi has sometimes been interpreted as "anti-rationalist,"²⁹ the Stoics have always been seen as the staunchest rationalists of Greek thought. And yet, while ease, leisure, and effortlessness are no doubt not as central or well-attested characteristics of the Stoic freedom as stability and rational consistency, they are not so absent from (or marginal to) the Stoic material as their neglect in the scholarship on Stoicism might suggest. It is my aim in the next section to adduce some evidence that some Stoics, at least, did envisage freedom in these terms. I will also suggest that the ease that is characteristic for the Stoic freedom is, in comparison with the ease of the Zhuangzian sage, limited in two important respects.

IV. Ease and Leisure as Attributes of the Stoic Freedom?

An indirect indication of the importance of effortlessness and ease for the Stoics is provided by an account of the promotion of indifference in the report by Stobaeus. If the happy life lies in consistently choosing things that are "in accordance with nature," and avoiding the contrary, then the wise man's life will be more effortless because "natural things are stimulative of impulse toward [themselves]" (Stob. 102 7c = Inwood and Gerson 1997, p. 102): somebody who is consistently choosing these things acts in accordance with the propensity of things, similar to a boat that sails downstream. The idea of ease is also implied in one of the Stoic definitions of happiness as the *telos* of the human life, namely that it is a "smooth flow of life" (*eurhoia biou*).³⁰

Some more direct evidence can be found in the work of two later Stoics—Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Consider the following passage, in which the agency of the wise man is characterized not only in terms of stability, but also in terms of ease:

[The reason of the wise] will do everything under its own authority and nothing unexpected will befall it, but whatever it does will turn out a good, and that, too, easily and readily (*facile et parate*) and without subterfuge on the part of the doer; for reluctance and hesitation are an indication of conflict and instability. (Seneca, *On the Happy Life* 8.6)

In the essay *On the Shortness of Life*, Seneca repeatedly draws a contrast between those who have leisure (*otium*) and those who are engrossed by numerous occupations (*occupatio*). While having leisure is the mark of the happy (and therefore virtuous) life, of someone who is able to “wander” (*discurrere*) both in the future and past parts of his life, those who are engrossed are stuck in the present: “The mind that is untroubled and tranquil has the power to wander into all parts of life; but the minds of the engrossed, just as if weighted by a yoke, cannot turn and look behind” (*On the Shortness of Life* 10.5). In contrast to the *Zhuangzi*, Seneca envisions rambling in temporal rather than in spatial terms.

It is in Marcus where the idea of freedom as leisure is developed most explicitly. For instance, Marcus remarks that a liar “struggles against the nature of the orderly universe” (*Med.* 9.1): lying is hard work, similarly to the work of the butcher who cuts across the bones, exactly because it is not in agreement with how things are. But disagreement with reality can also be understood as engaging in any activity that is simply superfluous. This is brought out in the following passage, in which leisure is tied in with the idea of freedom as doing necessary things:

“Do little,” he says, “if you want contentment of mind.” Would it not be better to do what is necessary (*tanankaia*), and whatever the reason . . . prescribes? For this will bring not only contentment of mind that comes from acting aright, but also that which comes from doing little; for considering that the majority of our words and actions are anything but necessary, if a person dispenses with them he will have greater leisure and a less troubled mind. You should also remember to ask yourself on every occasion, “Is this something really necessary?” And we should dispense not only with actions that are unnecessary, but also with unnecessary ideas; for in that way the needless actions that follow in their train will no longer ensue. (*Med.* 4.24)

It is here, I think, where the Stoic position most closely approximates the *Zhuangzi*. The imperative to “Do little” (*oliga prêsse*) sounds very much like the imperative of *wuwei*. The similarity with *Zhuangzi* does not imply, however, that Marcus is out of line here with the Stoic philosophy. We could certainly read this passage as a positive reformulation of the idea that is negatively stated in the dog-behind-the-cart parable: if we do only what is necessary, that is, follow knowingly wherever fate or God drags us, we will do little.

And yet the action of the Stoic sage will not be as effortless as the action of the *Zhuangzian* sage. While the Stoic wise man will be free from the entanglements of passions, and won’t squander his energy on goals that he is not likely to be able to achieve, he will still have to deliberate and to “persist by force (*ischein*) against the impressions” (Papyrus Herculaneum, 1020, Col. IVn). While the sage will never yield to false impressions, just like a non-sage he will have impressions which might be true or false, and hence will need to make effort, on every occasion of having an impression, to deliberate on whether that perception is true or false. This limitation of the wise man’s leisure is particularly apparent with regard to one specific kind of impression, which the Stoics called “pre-emotions” (*propatheiai*), such as a

thought that it might be appropriate to take revenge, which is a preliminary to anger as a full-fledged passion, or an uncontrollable pain after having lost one's child or a friend, which is a preliminary to grief. Even though the wise man always "overcomes" (*vincit*) these perceptions,³¹ and does not let them develop into passions, he nevertheless is not immune to them and has to put up a fight against them. This contrasts with Zhuangzi, who seems to extend the wise man's alignment with Dao all the way down to perceptions: the wise man is free from passions and other obstinate evaluative judgments, and his senses are sharp (*congming* 聰明);³² or, according to some other passages, he transcends sense-perception altogether and interacts with the world by means of a supra-sensory perceptual modality, such as "desire of the spirit" (*Zhuangzi* 3.1) or "listening by energy" (4.1), which does not leave any room whatsoever for the falsity of his perceptions.

This difference between the Stoics and Zhuangzi in the scope of ease of normative action brings us back to some fundamental divergences between the Stoic and the Zhuangzian conceptions of the self and the world, as mentioned in parts one and two; these divergences, in turn, reflect the different intellectual terrains in which they were working. In the following and final section of this article, I will venture some more general and somewhat speculative suggestions that would turn these points of divergences into a logical pattern, and tie this pattern in with some fundamental differences between the philosophical agendas of both traditions.

V. The Underlying Differences between the Traditions

Within the overarching framework of understanding freedom as doing necessary things, we have encountered three significant points of difference between the Zhuangzian and Stoic conceptions of normative agency: (1) different conceptions of the genuine self: structured versus unstructured (part one); (2) different visions of the order of the universe and the role of human beings in it: teleological with privileging of humans versus non-teleological without privileging humans; and (3) different attributes of the fit between the self and the world in terms of varying degrees of ease and effortlessness. Is there a common denominator for all these differences, and can they be traced back to the specific contexts and agendas of both philosophical traditions, Chinese and Greek?

The Stoic view that the wise man will have to make an effort to deliberate about his perceptions is rooted in their conception of the self and also in their view about the world. The Stoics envisaged the genuine self in terms of a solid and firm structure, namely "an unshakable and consistent system of cognitions" (Stob. 2.73.19–4.3) that ensures that all assents to impressions will be infallibly true. This knowledge—and this was the distinctive Stoic thesis advanced against their opponents—is by itself sufficient for happiness. It is this intellectualistic position that motivates the Stoics to postulate the "structured self." Because of the thorough rationality of this self, every contact of this self with the world happens as a process of deliberation that may, of course, be more or less effortless, but inevitably has to take place or, rather, has to

be done. Rather than as a handicap, however, the Stoics understood this deliberative process as a mark of human rationality, which distinguishes—and privileges—human beings among all other living things, and puts them on a par with God. Thus, all of the points 1 to 3 above are linked together by an overarching idea of rationality: rationality of the mind in the sense of its structuredness (1) explains why the effortlessness of the perfect action does not go down to the level of perception (3), and rationality also justifies the special status of humans, and motivates the teleological means-end explanatory model (2).

The Stoic radical rationalism needs to be understood as a move that is instrumental to, or coextensive with, their overall project of espousing a wholly non-dualistic, unitary account of the world and human agency within it. In this respect, the Stoic objectives are similar to the *Zhuangzi*, but the underlying polemical motivation behind this project is different and reflects the specific context of the Greek tradition. The Stoic ideal of the soul, which has in itself assimilated the perfectly coherent and rational ordering of the cosmos as a whole, is an expression of the Stoic departure from the cosmological and psychological dualism found in the works of Plato and Aristotle. In contrast to these philosophers, the Stoics held that the cosmos is unitary: it is altogether material, but this matter is “through and through” pervaded by divine reason. This cosmological holism goes hand in hand with psychological holism: the human mind is not envisaged as consisting of rational and non-rational parts, as Plato and Aristotle argued, but as undivided and wholly rational, consisting ideally of a wholly consistent set of pieces of knowledge.

Hence the fundamental dichotomy that structured the discourse of Greek philosophy was that between reason (*logos*) and the non-rational (*alogon*), where the rational was associated with structure, order, and harmony, and non-rationality was associated with chaos, formlessness, and strife. This dichotomy pervaded all major parts of the philosophical discourse: physics (or metaphysics), psychology, and ethics. Valorization of the rational in most Greek philosophical texts was partly motivated by an effort to provide an alternative to the tragic outlook on the human condition, deeply entrenched in Greek culture. The appeal of rationality was that it made human happiness less dependent on the mercy of the gods, less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of unpredictable fortune, and more based on the capacity of humans to rule over themselves by the exercise of intelligence. Stoic philosophy can be considered a culmination of this project. It made the decisive step of abandoning the duality of rational and non-rational, and thus erased non-rationality from the world. One consequence of this move is universal determinism: the pervasive rationality of the world entails that everything happens in the best possible orderly way, and cannot happen otherwise—hence the idea of fate as a force that compels us to act in a certain way, regardless of whether we follow willingly or are being dragged along. Another consequence is that human agency can be animated exclusively by human rationality, and human rationality, at its best, is equal, indeed identical, with divine rationality. The idea that even the supremely rational mind will be exposed to deficient perceptions could perhaps be understood as a Stoic concession

to the tragic outlook, or a point beyond which even the Stoic optimistic outlook did not go.

When we turn to the Chinese context, we do not find an equivalent dichotomy. What we do find, instead, is the dichotomy between what is natural and what is artificial: the distinctions between “non-interference” (*wuwei* 無為) and “interference” (*wei* 為), or between Heaven (*tian* 天) and man (*ren* 人), are different ramifications of this elementary dichotomy. We should resist the temptation, I think, either to assimilate or to oppose the two sets of dichotomies: the rational is not identical with the artificial, and the natural is not identical with the non-rational.³³ They are simply two incommensurable dichotomies, although this does not mean—as we have just seen—that they cannot frame some fundamental and genuine similarities.

It is with regard to the overarching dichotomy between natural and artificial that we can understand the motivation behind Zhuangzi’s position, and account for the differences with the Stoics. One important implication of the Stoic intellectualistic outlook on wisdom is the view that philosophy or wisdom can be taught (DL 7.91 = LS 61K). This contrasts with Zhuangzi, who explicitly criticizes the idea of the transmissibility of the craft of living. In a dialogue between a wheelwright and his ruler, Zhuangzi challenges the idea, most closely associated with the Confucians, that real understanding can be transmitted by means of language (see esp. *Zhuangzi* 13.9). This goes hand in hand with the view that this skill is not an intellectual excellence in the sense of having a consistent body of knowledge, but rather the “desire of the spirit,” or a kind of spontaneous, intuitive ability to respond to things in an appropriate manner. To criticize the idea that wisdom is a body of transmitted knowledge, Zhuangzi is keen on exemplifying wisdom by reference to virtuoso practitioners of ordinary skills. Unlike the Stoics, who had a carefully designed curriculum for learning philosophy, there is no independent curriculum for learning how to be wise in the *Zhuangzi*; the way to wisdom appears to be a long-term dedication to any structured activity, typically manual, that gradually attunes one to the way things are.

This anti-intellectualism of the *Zhuangzi* was largely driven by an effort to challenge the instrumental thinking and artifice that were embraced—or so the authors of this text argued—by their philosophical opponents. With regard to the dichotomy between natural and artificial, Zhuangzi’s ideal of the unstructured mind was a part of his effort to ground the norms for ideal human action wholly in the naturalness of Heaven, and liberate this action from the artifice and pettiness of the “human” perspective. Against the Confucians, who envisaged the ideal action as a result of artificial self-shaping and self-refinement by means of culture and education, and against the Mohists, who understood moral agency in terms of social and economic engineering, Zhuangzi believed that the liberated human mind should be free both from narrowly instrumental deliberation and from the sediments of cultural refinement. It is this valorization of nature, in contrast to artifice, that also explains why Zhuangzi does not embrace any teleological and hierarchical cosmology, and does not privilege human beings within this hierarchy: both these ideas—the cosmological hierarchy of the Mohists, and the special value of humanity according to the

Confucians—were attributes of the artificialist outlook that Zhuangzi was trying to undermine.

Concluding Thoughts

In spite of the differences discussed in the preceding two parts, there remains a robust affinity between the Stoic and Daoist views about what the ideal action, or freedom, amounts to. These affinities are particularly striking when considered in comparison with the predominant modern conceptions of freedom.

Only the wise man, the Stoics and Zhuangzi maintained, is free, but he is also free in all circumstances. This view hinges on the assumption that there is a deep affinity and compatibility between the universal order of things and the peculiar skill of the wise man; in other words, reality is of such sort that it never frustrates a person who handles it with supreme skill. The wise person is able to align her individual nature with the necessary processes in the universe, and it is for this reason that freedom can be defined as *doing* necessary things, rather than only a skillful dealing with necessary things or accepting necessary things.

This idea of freedom, I would suggest, is fundamentally different from both the freedom of choice and the freedom from impediments, the two modern influential theories of freedom. It is true that the sage is free from all impediments, but her freedom does not depend on whether the actual circumstances in this or that particular situation allow her to do what she wants, as Hume or Hobbes have it. In other words, this negatively defined freedom is based on a positively defined disposition—some sort of skill—that allows the sage to be free from impediments in all circumstances. This positive disposition, however, is different from positive freedom in the sense of freedom of choice: for the sage's freedom is rather freedom *from* choice because she can recognize the best option in the given circumstances.³⁴ We can see, therefore, that freedom as doing necessary things cuts across the modern dichotomy of positive and negative freedom, and, rather than being a hybrid version of the two, it is based on a fundamentally different cosmological and anthropological outlook in which freedom increases, rather than decreases, with the human embeddedness in the structure and processes within the universe that are not in our power.

The modern notions of freedom of choice and freedom from impediment emerged in the wake of the modern "disenchantment from the world," as Max Weber famously put it. Quite likely, it might be that it is because the modern Western mind does not feel itself to be a part of a meaningful whole that it premises its freedom on a disconnection from an external world that it cannot control. Weber's diagnosis of the modern predicament was systematically developed by Charles Taylor, who characterized the modern predicament as a permanent quest of challenging, redefining, or creating "frameworks" that give our lives their meaning, and contrasted it with the pre-modern outlook with its much more stable and assuring frameworks.³⁵ The study of Stoic and Daoist freedom bolsters this view, but also adds a new perspective to it by implying that this observation might have a more universal cross-cultural validity and could be extended to non-Western contexts.

Notes

Abbreviations are used in the Notes as follows:

- Dis.* Epictetus, *The Discourses*. See Epictetus 1995.
- DL Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. See Long and Sedley 1987.
- Ench.* Epictetus, *Encheiridion* (Handbook, Manual).
- LS Long and Sedley 1987.
- Med.* Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*. See Marcus Aurelius 2011 and also Hadot 1998.
- Stob. Stobaeus
- Stob. *Ecl.* Stobaeus, *Eclogae* (Eclogues).
- SVF *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*

- 1 – For instance, one of the most celebrated modern translators of the Daoist text *Zhuangzi* into English, Burton Watson, notes that “The central theme of the *Zhuangzi* may be summed up in a single word: freedom” (Watson 1968, p. 8). Stoics have sometimes been credited with the invention of the notion of free will in the Western tradition (cf. Long 1996, p. 285; Hadot 1998, p. 122 et passim).
- 2 – Unless otherwise stated, the material from the *Zhuangzi* is translated, with occasional modifications, according to Watson 1968. For the rendering of the Stoics, I am using different available translations given in the References below. All translations of Marcus Aurelius follow Hard’s translation (Marcus Aurelius 2011); Epictetus is rendered according to Gill and Hard (Epictetus 1995); all other Stoic sources are translated according to Long and Sedley 1987, unless otherwise noted. The Chinese, Greek, and Latin originals are provided when the passages are terminologically loaded, or when there are significant divergences among the existing translations.
- 3 – According to this idea, the universe is a network of causes that firmly governs and inevitably determines all past, present, and future events. Reason-Nature is identified with Fate, which is defined as “a sequence of causes, that is, an inescapable ordering and interconnexion” (Aetius 1.28.4 = LS 55).
- 4 – Still, according to the *Zhuangzi*, “fate” does impose on us certain unavoidable determinations; cf., e.g., *Zhuangzi* 4.3.
- 5 – “Freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects” (Descartes 1970, p. 228).
- 6 – On a closer analysis, though, there are differences between Berlin (freedom as non-interference) and Hobbes (freedom as non-frustration); cf. Pettit 2011.

- 7 – This point of difference between ancient and modern ethics has been pointed out by scholars of Greco-Roman thought, e.g. Annas 1993 (Introduction) or Cooper 2012 (Introduction).
- 8 – This aspect of ancient thought was discussed in particular by Charles Taylor (1989) in his *Sources of the Self*, chap. 1.
- 9 – The phrase *chengxin* 成心 is mostly translated as “formed mind” or “completed mind.” The translation “structured mind” is motivated by setting up a contrast to the Stoic notion of “structured self” (Gill 2007). It should also bring out that it is typically the seat of a multiplicity of different structures, rather than of a single form. I have tried to develop the notion of “unstructured mind” in Machek 2016.
- 10 – There has been a vigorous debate in the scholarship about the Zhuangzian theory of the self. Perhaps the most widely accepted line of interpretation today is that Zhuangzi’s no-self view implicitly presupposes a distinction between the authentic or genuine core of our self and the inauthentic additions (e.g., Slingerland 2003, p. 187; Yang 2003, p. 115; Wu 1990, p. 184). The interpretation proposed here goes along these lines, but it puts emphasis on the fact that the authentic self is not any sort of structured entity.
- 11 – See in particular the anecdote about Zhuangzi hunting for a magpie, in which he realizes that “things do nothing but make trouble for each other—one creature calling down disaster on another” (*Zhuangzi* 20.8).
- 12 – A similar point is made in a passage that criticizes the so-called “mechanical mind” (*jixin* 機心), i.e., the mind that has been structured in such a way that it operates in terms of benefit and means-ends instrumental deliberation (*Zhuangzi* 12.11).
- 13 – This resonates with his esteem of “big” things (birds and trees) that cannot fall prey to others.
- 14 – For “simplicity” (*chun* 純) as the characteristic attribute of “spirit” cf. *Zhuangzi* 12.11.
- 15 – This structure is nothing else than wisdom or philosophy, which is defined as a triad of closely interrelated excellences in physics, ethics, and logic: “Physics is practised whenever we investigate the world and its contents, ethics is our engagement with human life, and logic our engagement with discourse, which they also call dialectic” (*Aetius* 1, Preface 2 = LS 26A). This knowledge is something that we gradually acquire in the course of our lives by following an appropriate educational curriculum. This knowledge—and this was the distinctive Stoic thesis advanced against their opponents—is by itself sufficient for happiness. It is this intellectualistic position that motivates the Stoic postulate of the structured self.
- 16 – The term “divine” might have some undesirable theistic connotations, implying that the genuine self is to be identified with an otherworldly god. This is cer-

tainly not what either the Stoics or Zhuangzi had in mind. Stoics identified the god with the material “breath” (*pneuma*) that pervades all existing things, which are likewise material. In the Chinese context, divinities referred to the spirits of ancestors. In the *Zhuangzi*, however, the term is used typically for a particularly refined quality or aspect of reality, such as the subtle perfection of a bell-stand (19.4) or the virtuoso skill of sailing (19.4).

- 17 – Cf. also *Dis.* 2.8; *Med.* 2.13, 3.16, 13.2.
- 18 – Cf. Mozi, particularly the chapter “The Will of Heaven” (*Tianzhi* 天志).
- 19 – E.g., *Zhuangzi* 2.2, 2.4, 5.5.
- 20 – For some other cognate versions of this view, cf. Forscher 1995, pp. 113–120; Dragona-Monachou 2007.
- 21 – “I eliminate the obstacles in my path by abandoning the path; I retreat into my own sect, my own planned economy, my own deliberately insulated territory, where no voices from outside need be listened to, and no external forces can have effect” (Berlin 2002, pp. 182–183).
- 22 – E.g., Brennan 2005, Bobzien 1998.
- 23 – “We have been born into a monarchy; freedom is to obey God” (Seneca, *On the Happy Life* 15); “What then, is the part of a good man? To offer himself to Fate. It is a great consolation that it is together with the universe we are swept along” (Seneca, *On Providence* 5.8).
- 24 – E.g., Berlin 2002, Zimmerman 2000.
- 25 – For the underlying similarity between the Stoic and Daoist accounts of emotions, cf. Machek 2015, Olberding 2007, Wong 2006.
- 26 – *Zhuangzi* 5.5.
- 27 – *Stob.* 2.88.8–90.6 = LS 65A.
- 28 – Since ease and effortlessness have generally been acknowledged by scholars as the distinctive feature of Zhuangzi’s ideal of normative action, I need not go into details here. For the most comprehensive treatment of the notion, see Slingerland 2003.
- 29 – Graham 1989, pp. 176–183; Carr and Ivanhoe 2000, pp. 22–23.
- 30 – *DL* 7.88 = LS 63C.
- 31 – E.g., Seneca’s consolations *To Polybium* 4.2, 16.3, or *To Marciam* 14.3.
- 32 – *Zhuangzi* 22.5.
- 33 – This is shown, for instance, in the Stoic case, since the Stoics identified nature wholly with reason.
- 34 – As Susanne Bobzien put it in her interpretation of Stoic freedom, “there is no mention of the wise having more choices or possibilities in their action; they

differ from common people rather in that they always follow up the right choices and are not tempted by the wrong alternatives" (Bobzien 1998, p. 341).
35 – Taylor 1989, chap. 1, part 1.

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