

Abstract:

## Deeper than Languages Lie Zhuang Zi's Roots

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In his second chapter, the “Treatise on Leveling Creatures,” Zhuang Zi sets forth his understanding of the gnoseological power by which humans and other creatures with awareness create concepts by which they each make a world and by which they understand that world. As this understanding of the world goes against the usual ways of interpretation of mind and thinking, I have provided schematic diagrams to make my verbal formulations somewhat more concrete and easier to understand. In my paper I follow the order of Zhuang Zi’s text, but in this abstract I rearrange parts for convenience in making a coherent summary.



**In the beginning there is a roiling blur.**

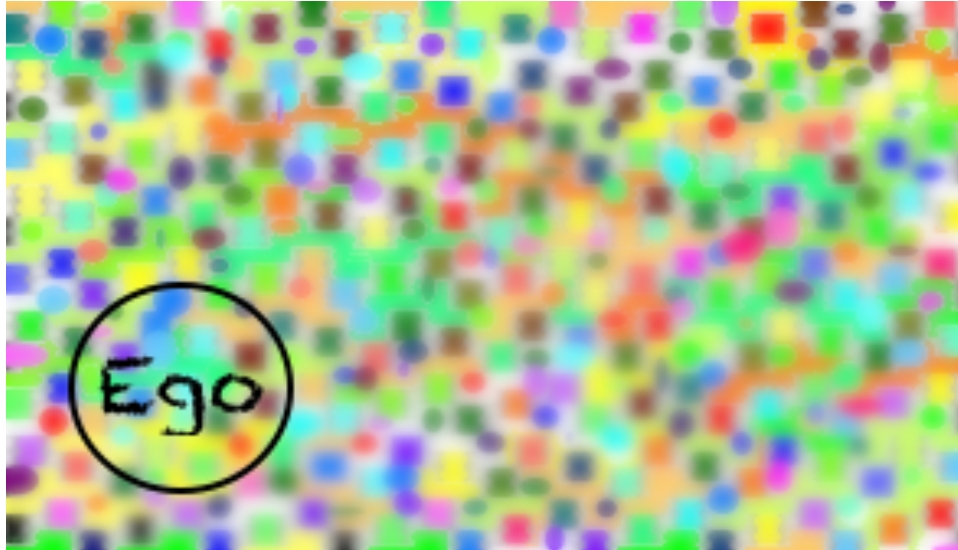
The Dao is real, continually changing in the sense that any volume or region within it will be likely to have different characteristics if observed at two different times. When a human first begins to function mentally, it may be just an awareness.<sup>1</sup> There is no constancy and no boundaries or edges to

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<sup>1</sup> 古之人，其知有所至矣。惡乎至？有以為未始有物者，至矣，盡矣，不可以加矣。

The people of antiquity had a point to which their knowledge reached. Where did it reach? It reached back to a stage at which there had not yet begun to be creatures, and that was the farthest, that was the point at which the subject of inquiry was fully exhausted and nothing could be added to it.

anything that appears in this awareness. That is why the Dao is nameless, and any name, being stable, cannot be an adequate mapping of any feature of the Dao. Following that, there is suddenly an awareness of one bounded region.



**Suddenly a “this” or “ego” emerges and sets itself off from the Universe**

The embryonic consciousness or awareness first notices that there is what Zhuang Zi calls a “This,” i.e., itself, an ego that finds its complement in the rest of this vast region of boundary-free 混沌 hún dùn chaos. Zhuang Zi observes that without the “this,” without the ego, there could be nothing called “the other,” and that without “the other” there would be nothing for the awareness to distinguish from itself.<sup>2</sup> So the two are mutually aspective.

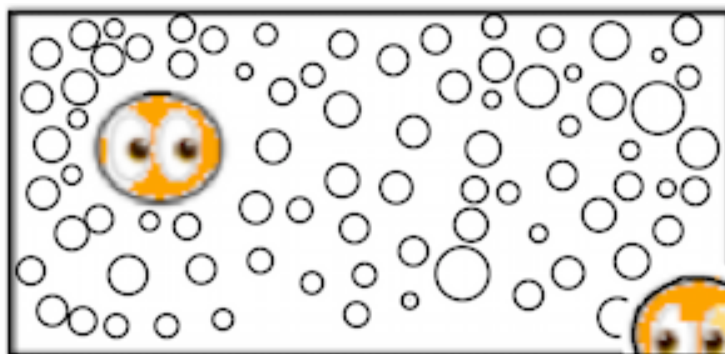


**There can be more than one of these centers of awareness.  
Each sees all others as objects.**

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<sup>2</sup> 非彼無我，非我無所取。

There is no creature that is not a "That" and no creature that is not a "This."<sup>3</sup> The ordinary condition for a human being, and presumably for any other other such possessor of awareness, is to be aware of one's own subjectivity, but to only be able to infer the status of other humans as having awareness. That limitation is true for all of us.



**Each ego typically sets out a myriad of creatures**

Casting awareness around this chaotic-seeming Dao, aware creatures take note of regions of the experiential continuum that seem to hang together. Besides the ones that seem analogous to ego, to self, there are others that may be inanimate, or animate but dissimilar to ego. The mind has the ability to create a complementary mental construct that conforms to the contours and attributes of these subjects of interest, and the same mental construct typically can stretch to fit many other regions of the Dao. Once



**Red and Blue Regions Snap-fit Over Yellow Target**

one has learned the contour construct called "cat," it is easy to recognize that tigers will fit into the same general contour construct. Humans bring language to bear on these mental constructs (which Zhuang Zi calls "fish traps"), and children are extremely adept at learning these constructs and applying them with rapidly growing accuracy even though they would be unable to articulate how they make these discriminations.

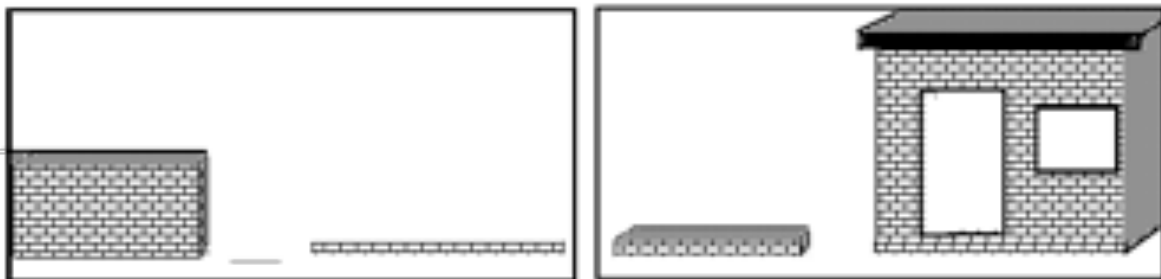
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<sup>3</sup> 物無非彼，物無非是；



**A creature given an identity by somebody named Red  
may be almost the same as a creature  
given an identity by somebody named Blue.**

Note that there are two patterns selected that are nearly the same. Humans form their “fish traps” with the advice and guidance of other people, but the community may not give unanimous guidance, and although two humans may think they are in agreement when they assign the same name to something, they may in fact attribute some different characteristics to it. If the features of the Dao to which they attach concepts and names were immutable there would still be trouble as not all people would outline the same regions as being, e.g., a pony. The mutability of the Dao produces other stumbling blocks for conceptualization.



**A pile of bricks becomes a brick house**

**The Dao does not remain constant while the various  
aware regions make their individuations and  
give 物 wù (creatures) their names**

“At the moment that one thing is produced something else dies.”<sup>4</sup> Zhuang Zi more than likely had such things as the growth and decay of melons in mind, but for illustrative purposes it is easier to depict a house being made from a pile of bricks. None of the bricks disappear from the universe when the pile of bricks disappears. Nothing appears by spontaneous generation in the brickwork of the house. Nothing is gained and nothing is lost, but a pile is destroyed and a house is created.



**Nothing Is Lost From a Lava Lamp**

“The Dao links them all into a single whole. One thing’s division is a completion. Its completion is a destruction.”<sup>5</sup>

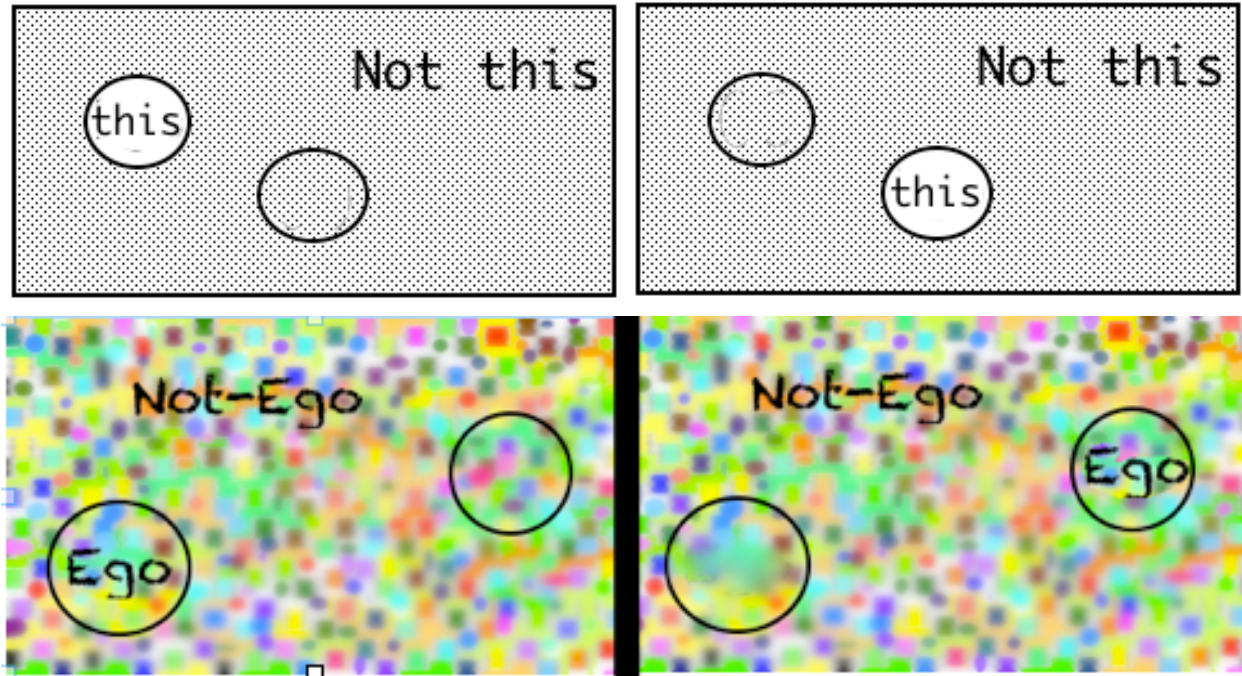
This passage reiterates the earlier one. It speaks from the position of someone who has separated the world into discrete entities and afterwards “returns to the Dao” and in so doing reduces all the seeming divisions to a continuum.

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<sup>4</sup> 方生方死，方死方生；

<sup>5</sup> 道通為一。其分也，成也；其成也，毀也。





**What is not-I or not-this depends on who is talking.**

“A This is also a That, and a That is also a This. A That is also an affirmation and a denial. A This is also an affirmation and a denial.”<sup>6</sup> Zhuang Zi emphasizes that there is no region of the Dao that is privileged over any other. One region may consider itself a “this” or an “ego,” and that is because of the characteristics of its own internal processes. It forms one image of the universe outside itself. But another region of the Dao will consider that first part a member of the set of “things” that are other than itself.

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<sup>6</sup> 是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。



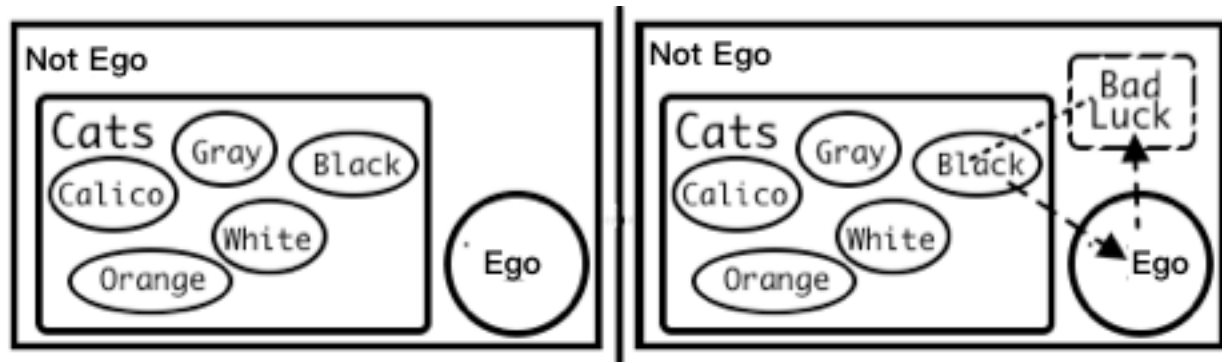
**Two constructions placed on the same woman**

“Creatures are what they are **declared** to be. How is it that things are the way that they are? They are thus because people affirm them to be so. How is it that things are not some way? They are not that way because people deny their being that way.”<sup>7</sup>

Witches are not a part of nature. Values are not part of nature. Values are essentially statements about such opinions as what is good for me, what is good for destroying a building, etc. They all are relative to the speaker. They may involve heavy components of emotional contamination. Two humans looking at the same disheveled woman may put entirely different constructions on her appearance, her muttered imprecations, etc. The human who categorizes her as a witch may be making plans to have her burned at the stake. The human who categorizes her as a paranoid schizophrenic may be making plans to have her admitted to a mental hospital. Obviously, these differences are important for the general community and for all the people involved.

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<sup>7</sup> 可乎可，不可乎不可。道行之而成，物謂之而然。惡乎然？然於然，惡乎不然？不然於不然。



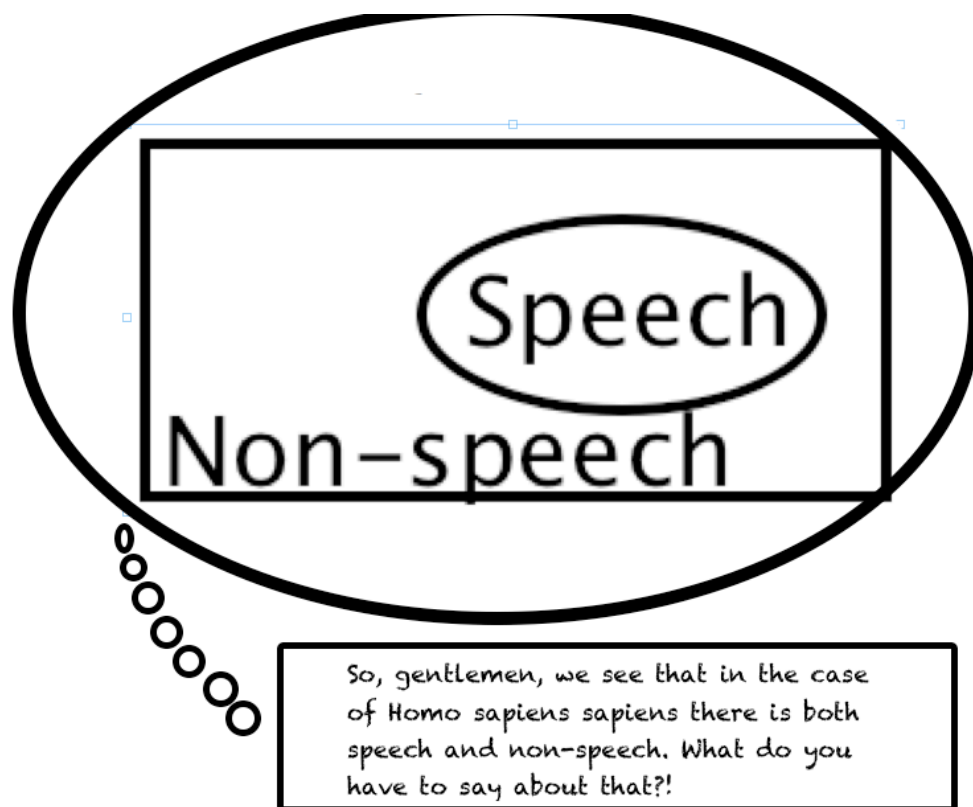
**Values can be added to creatures delineated from the Dao.**

In the part of human thinking that involves only the Dao (or as some have called it, the undifferentiated aesthetic continuum), one ego may subdivide the not-ego region into subregions, one of which is used to form the set of domestic cats. Then that set can be further broken down into cats of various colors.

In principal, it is possible for a human to be able to identify a set of mammals without giving it a name, but in almost all cases humans prefer to assign community-agreed names to such groups. This process is appropriate and sometimes provides humans with a vital form of protection as when people learn from others how to distinguish between coral snakes and similarly colored corn snakes.

Besides names, values can be added to sets of creatures. Some people think black cats are evil, bad luck, etc. It is very common for these values to distort thinking processes at crucial times.





### The Dao + Speech + Speech about Speech + ...

“Since things have already been rejoined in unity, can there really be speech? Since things have been **declared** to be a unity, then how can there fail to be speech? The unity plus speech are two, and there being two (because the original unity has been sundered) as well as the underlying unity, there are now three.”<sup>8</sup>

A further difficulty Zhuang Zi observes regarding conceptualizations is that in order to fully analyze and understand what is going on, one would become involved in an infinite series of conceptualizations.

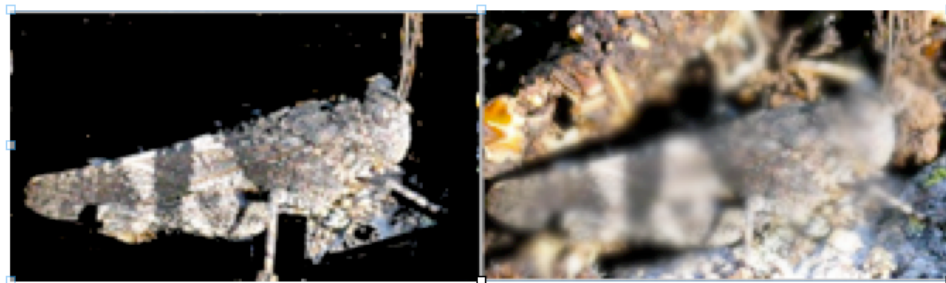
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<sup>8</sup> 既已為一矣，且得有言乎？既已謂之一矣，且得無言乎？一與言為二，二與一為三。



**What Remains If the Ego is Removed?**

The methodology for repair of an inappropriate conceptualization of one's world is to put one's ego into abeyance. ("Just now, I lost my self.") When that is done, the Dao as it is without the screen of conceptualizations and added axiological components disappears and the raw data of experience are clearly seen.



**Undrawing the lines that divide us**

"Only those who have attained [the final goal] know how to relink everything into a single whole."<sup>9</sup>

Our conceptual scheme indicates that grasshoppers are discrete individuals. It abstracts, among other things, from the fact that there is a continuous stream of matter and energy entering and exiting that region of the Dao, that the beginning of this particular grasshopper was a single fertilized cell (and before that the

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<sup>9</sup> 惟達者知通為一

histories of the parents and so forth), and that the end of this process for all practical human purposes will be a dead grasshopper decaying in a field or being digested by some predator. But actually the components of the grasshopper disperse but continue to exist.

In the early twentieth century, humans began to put aside entirely reasonable ideas and take up the fantastical ideas of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. There are many other seemingly reasonable ideas that humans would need to put aside to make it possible to reconceptualize the Dao and come closer to an adequate understanding of our Universe. When humans fail to let go of the conceptualizations that the Dao resists, they may merely frustrate themselves, or they may involve themselves in activities that bring injury to themselves and/or to others.

In *Physics and Philosophy*, Heisenberg summarizes, I suspect with great deal of understatement, the experience of minds bouncing off walls of impossibility over and over again until so much of the old had been abandoned that the little flashes of insight could line up and yield to Heisenberg's attempts to assemble them into a satisfactory solution.

During the months following these discussions [in Copenhagen with Bohr and his circle] an intensive study of all questions concerning the interpretation of quantum theory in Copenhagen finally led to a complete and, as many physicists believe, satisfactory clarification of the situation. But it was not a solution which one could easily accept. I remember discussions with Bohr which went through many hours till very late at night and ended almost in despair; and when at the end of the discussion I went alone for a walk in the neighboring park I repeated to

myself again and again the question: Can nature possibly be as absurd as it seemed to us in these atomic experiments?<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes abandoning one idea and putting another in its place causes little stir because the change affects few if any other ideas. Such changes are easy to make. At first one sees some black plastic shipping cord lying abandoned on one's lawn, but when one reaches for it, the black object reveals that it can move by itself and is in fact an immature black rat snake. One fish trap is quickly dissolved from around the black object, and a more fitting one is put in its place. Except for wondering whether the snake would have bitten one's hand if one had succeeded in grabbing it, and a small flash of relief, nothing much has changed in one's life.

Changing a core idea, and an idea for which there is plenty of experiential support, will make a major impact on one's life because changing it will force changing a whole sector of other ideas that involve and depend on it.

Facility in surrendering conceptualizations that turn out to be counterproductive is something that can be learned. One of the concomitant experiences may be losing one's self for the duration of concept abandonment and reconceptualization. This period during which one's self is put in abeyance has special utility during periods of rapid and possibly life-changing events. Probably for this reason, when Buddhism came to China it merged with Daoism to form Chan Buddhism, when Chan Buddhism was carried to Japan it became known as Zen, and Zen became an important element in the training of the Japanese swordsmen.

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<sup>10</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, p. 42