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Citation

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Derrida and Zhuangzi on the Power of Institutions

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This paper shows how both Jacques Derrida and Zhuangzi use their respective ways of subverting philosophical systems, by and large through language systems, to arrive at an (implicit or explicit) subversion of political power or political systems or institutions. Political institutions are presented as including more general institutions such as the media, press, and academic and other kinds of institutions that influence the way our societies function, the way we live, work, and think. The paper first highlights the similarities and differences in the application of subversive techniques in Derrida and Zhuangzi as they battle against their respective opponents. After that it shows how their subversion of philosophical systems and language flows over into the subversion of political systems. The hope or goal of subversion or critique is often understood to be not only overthrowing the old system, but replacing it with a better one, even when the change or overthrow comes from within the system itself. But this paper aims to show that both Derrida and Zhuangzi, although in very different contexts, also seem to subvert that hope, and that they may or may not offer some kind of way out of this conundrum.

Key words: subversion; Jacques Derrida; Daoism; Zhuangzi; comparative philosophy; continental philosophy

In this paper I will seek to show how both Jacques Derrida and Zhuangzi use their respective ways of subverting philosophical systems, by and large through language systems, to arrive at an (implicit or explicit) subversion of political power or political systems or institutions. Here I will understand political institutions to include institutions in general such as the media, press, and academic and other kinds of institutions that influence the way our societies function, the way we live, work, and think. I will argue that neither Derrida nor Zhuangzi think of institutions purely descriptively in terms of affecting our thinking. They do see institutions as inevitable to thinking, and their first and immediate efforts are geared towards making their readers aware of how this plays out. But in a second move, both Derrida and Zhuangzi, with the help of their first efforts, aim to reduce our dependence on certain oppressive or dominant institutions or structures that have a tendency to suppress other ways of thought. Hence both Derrida and Zhuangzi believe that it is the case that (certain) institutions do not just affect our ways of thought by necessity, but further seek to convince us of the danger that some structures or institutions tend to be obstacles to thought, or at the very least tend to block out other ways of thinking.

In sections 1 to 4 I will highlight the similarities and differences in the application of subversive techniques in Derrida and Zhuangzi as they battle against their respective opponents. After that, I will show in section 5 how their subversion of philosophical systems and language flows over into the subversion of political systems, before delving deeper into the *Zhuangzi* in section 6. But before this there needs to be one warning: the definition of subversion that follows does not seem to include this, but the hope or goal of subversion or critique is often understood to be not *only* to overthrow the old system, but also to replace it with a better one, even when the change or overthrow comes from within the system itself. However, I hope to show, throughout the paper but especially in section 7, that both Derrida and Zhuangzi,

although in very different contexts, also seem to subvert that hope, and that they may or may not offer some kind of way out of this conundrum.

Before I start on Derrida and Zhuangzi, here is that promised definition of subversion. Combining some sources,[1] we can come to the following working definition: subversion is *the act of trying to destroy or damage an established system or government, often from within that system*. My paper attempts to reflect a certain unease or undecidability inherent in the concept of subversion. This is because I am going to argue that the idea of subversion points to the exceeding or overthrow of systems or structures, and when structures are shown to have limitations and to be unable to cope adequately with novelty, people become uneasy. I am thinking here of course of Jacques Derrida, and the names often used for his kind of work: post-structuralism or de-construction. Similarly, Zhuangzi often leaves us with the unease of not having reached a proper solution or answer. To reflect this unease in or with subversion, my paper will be deliberately less structured.

Of course, the title of this paper, "Subverting Institutions," can be read in two ways: First in the sense that institutions *are* subverting our ways of thinking, which may lead into a discussion about how we are affected by institutions and the influence of social media, or capitalism, or about how we create meaning and systems of language. Institutions can direct our thinking in multiple ways, but this in itself is not a reason to subvert such systems, or to call them subverting. But we can call them subverting if we realize that by directing our thinking in one way, they effectively block out other ways of thinking. Comparative philosophy has of course been at the forefront of the efforts to change this in the discipline of philosophy itself, and it is in this spirit that I offer my arguments here. This is because the second way the title of this article can be read is in the sense that we *are* or *should be* subverting those very institutions, exactly because they represent obstacles to thinking and/or living well. I will argue that Derrida and Zhuangzi both urge us to do what the second reading suggests once we understand that the first reading is really an inherent feature of institutionalization and is thus present in influential ways all around us.

1   Comparisons of Derrida and Zhuangzi and Subversion in Continental Philosophy

There is a growing body of literature comparing Derrida and Zhuangzi. From the early article by Michelle Yeh and the works of Hongchu Fu and Zhang Longxi in the 1980s and early 90s,[2] the last twenty years or so have seen an abundance of new work appear that compares Derrida and Daoism. Some of those works deal specifically with comparing Derrida with Zhuangzi, like Robert Shepherd's "Perpetual Unease of Being at Ease"[3] or Youru Wang's "Philosophy of Change and the Deconstruction of Self in the *Zhuangzi*."[4] Although this may not do justice to the diversity and depth of the works quoted and to other works comparing Derrida and Zhuangzi, it is fair to say that the most common feature of such comparisons lies in the commonalities between their analyses of language and its functions, with regards to ideas of identity and subjectivity/self, and in the deconstructive approaches to ideas of morality and purity, and lastly in their shared opposition to hierarchical thought structures. Some articles make the extra move of claiming that where Derrida does not offer a clear solution to the problems he addresses, Zhuangzi has somehow found a way out. Mark Berkson for example argues this way in his "Language: the Guest of Reality—Zhuangzi and Derrida on Language, Reality, and Skillfulness."[5]Although such commonalities seem to—by definition—deal indirectly with issues related to subversion, none of these comparative works deals with subversion directly. Of course, many articles on Derrida do engage with subversion, and some of them will be quoted in what follows to help us better understand the specific ways in which Derrida "subverts."

My contribution here focuses on comparing Derrida and Zhuangzi specifically on the idea of subversion for two reasons. First, I believe that through understanding the similarities in the use of the idea of subversion in Derrida and Zhuangzi, we can come to a better understanding of their respective works, and as a result, the commonalities mentioned will be focused into what I think is one of their major concerns. Second, through the works of both Derrida and Zhuangzi it seems that we will gain a better understanding of the very idea of subversion itself, and with that, I hope to lessen the negative connotations associated with this concept, and even claim that in a new understanding, subversion may describe the very function of philosophy proper.

Before I start the comparison, I must briefly delineate the history of the subversive in continental philosophy, because it is in this tradition that Derrida develops his ideas on subversion and its function. Thinking back to the definition of subversion offered above, one could say that the history of continental philosophy from Hegel onwards is one of multiple attempts at overthrowing systems of thought. Starting with Hegel's idea of the dialectic process of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis, and of course cognizant of the fact that Hegel saw his own thinking as system-building rather than system-destroying, his was still an attempt to describe the oppositional structure of thought, and of the ways thinking seeks to overthrow itself to come to a new and improved position. In Nietzsche's *Umwertung aller Werte* we find a clear example of the subversive strategies continental philosophy has employed. Nietzsche actively seeks to invert and subvert the system of morality and metaphysics, but we also find here that part of subversion that is missing in our definition. Nietzsche is not content merely to replace the supersensuous world with the sensuous one. With Nietzsche, the recognition surfaces that such overthrowing of systems remains parasitic to those systems themselves. He is not for nothing the author of "Beyond Good and Evil" and not the author of "Replacing Good with Evil." This is also apparent in the fact that Nietzsche himself conceived of a further step after the inversion. As quoted in Heidegger's *Nietzsche* volume: "Along with the true world we have also abolished the apparent one!" (Nietzsche in Heidegger 1979-1987: 207).[6] This indicates that Nietzsche was aware of the fact that mere reversal was not enough, but unfortunately (at least according to Heidegger), the onslaught of his madness prevented him from actively taking that last step in his works. As Heidegger says of Nietzsche's inversion of Platonism, which seeks to establish the sensuous as the true instead of the supersensuous: "It is not the simple, almost mechanical exchange of one epistemological standpoint for another […] the inversion sanctions the investigation and determination of that which is—it summons the question 'What is being itself?'" (Heidegger 1979-1987: 160). And further, "such inversion […] must be understood in terms of the overcoming of nihilism" (Heidegger 1979-1987: 161). In Heidegger's words, commenting on the inversion, understood purely as the switching places in the hierarchy of the supersensuous and the sensuous: "If we take the inversion strictly in this sense, then the vacant niches of the 'above and below' are preserved […]. But as long as the 'above and below' define the formal structure of Platonism, Platonism in its essence perdures" (Heidegger 1979-1987: 201). Heidegger, through his work on Nietzsche, but also in his work in general, was maybe the first to fully develop this idea that subversion, if understood as mere reversal or inversion, is inadequate and parasitic. It is not enough to invert the hierarchy, it is the hierarchy of the system itself that needs to be challenged. For Heidegger, the act of reversal is only a necessary step in thinking, as he continues the struggle against a dominant metaphysical way of thinking that has defined the history of western philosophy.

But Heidegger realizes another important thing: that no matter how hard one tries to not just reverse the hierarchy of a system, but to escape that system altogether, this is ultimately altogether impossible. Heidegger realizes that time and again, one is dependent on the tools of history, the language of philosophy, in one's efforts to escape philosophy as metaphysics of presence. Thus, in Heidegger the idea of subversion becomes a *continuously* necessary step. One

cannot climb the ladder and throw it away in self-congratulatory fashion, now believing one has successfully scaled the wall. One needs to continually climb all those ladders that keep resurfacing.

From this brief and inevitably incomplete discussion, I wish only to conclude the following: the development of the idea of differential thought in continental philosophy from Hegel to Heidegger shows that their intention is never a mere reversal or an inversion of opposites; it is always something more or different than that. Order is not to be merely replaced by another order, or even by disorder, because this will keep the hierarchical structures intact. It is the hierarchical structures perpetuated in certain ways of thought (metaphysics of presence) that must themselves be challenged, in the awareness that even such challenges will never fully succeed in overcoming or escaping from such systems. It is in this tradition in continental philosophy of understanding subversion that Derrida works.

2   Deconstruction as Subversion, with a Hint to Zhuangzi

My first claim with regards to Derrida is that deconstruction and subversion are to a large extent the same. I do not think this is very controversial. Any opponent of deconstruction would readily subscribe to this interpretation, and proponents happily do the same. Deconstruction, like subversion, is an opening up to destabilization of the status quo and to the undecidable. Deconstruction subverts the stability of the dominant discourse, the dominant narrative, or the "correct" interpretation. In that sense deconstruction is a challenge to the idea that we could accurately know "the" meaning of anything. It is important to understand that deconstruction does not hereby deny meaning, but compromises and complicates the idea that meaning can always be assigned clearly and distinctly. Deconstruction achieves this by showing inconsistencies, by pointing to problematic presuppositions, or just to assumptions that were hidden in the process of generating meaning.

Derrida deconstructs and thereby subverts systems like metaphysics, language, political structures, conceptuality, seemingly clear oppositions, the drawing of sharp boundaries, in short, almost everything philosophy seems to hold dear. In fact, Derrida himself said that the idea of *différance* "instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom […]" (Derrida 1982: 22).[7] Not incidentally, a few lines earlier Derrida mentions that *différance* is meant to solicit "in the sense that *solicitare*, in old Latin, means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety" (Derrida 1982: 21). This, I will argue, is similar to the concerns that Zhuangzi seems to have. The dangers both Derrida and Zhuangzi fight against, in their of course vastly different settings, are those of ossification, reification, the ideals of purity, clarity, and literality, and by extension the fixation of political and moral ideals. Derrida seems to suggest that the real task of philosophy (and of course we know that through deconstruction the notion of "real" is already problematic) should actually be this form of deconstructive thinking whereby "philosophy is always called upon to transgress the border of regions of research or knowledge and to ask itself about its own limits […]. Philosophy is always in the process of displacing its limits" (Derrida 1995: 376).[8] In this sense, philosophy *is* subversion.

Both Derrida and Zhuangzi seem to question, critique, and subvert almost anything. But there are in both of them certain things that are beyond critique; both Derrida and Zhuangzi do indeed recognize certain limits. Zhuangzi for example does not question the filial bonds between parent and child, and more interestingly in the context of this paper, he also does not seem to question the hierarchy between subject and ruler (of which more later). On the other hand, Derrida has claimed that "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not

deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice" (Derrida in Carlson et al. 1992: 14-5).[9]

One question we may legitimately ask is: Why should we not subvert these things? Or alternatively, should we be worried about not deconstructing them? What will future generations think when we do not deconstruct or try to subvert the justness of "democracy" for example? Does Derrida not himself ask: "Does not a democrat have the responsibility to think through the axioms or foundations of democracy?" (Derrida 1992: 95).[10] Here one needs to understand the importance of systems, structures, and institutions. Derrida already hints at the fact that justice is "outside or beyond" the law. One then begins to understand that those things that are outside of systems, institutions, and structures are the ones that are probably non-deconstructible. In the language of Zhuangzi, such moments of non-critique or non-subversions are recognized as being "beyond the guidelines" (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 89).[11] So what is non-deconstructible are such things that could be considered non-artificial structures, and as such not open to subversion or deconstruction. By extension, those who roam on or beyond the guidelines would be the "real" philosophers, questioning and subverting anything that falls within the guidelines or systems that we have invented. In both Zhuangzi and Derrida we find the idea that such systems, since they are in the end man-made, should always be open to questioning and change.

Although they do not subvert everything, what is common to them is that both Derrida and Zhuangzi subvert dreams of authenticity, certainty, purity, and clarity. Especially to their opponents (but I like to think they both enjoy this image), they are indecipherable, muddled, indirect, and deny the possibility of final answers. I do not believe they enjoy this for the sake of being obscure, though; instead, in their writings, and this includes their styles of writing, they urge us to embrace complexity, to abide in the aporias and paradoxes, and to halt the futile search for purity, complete clarity, and transparency. They subvert what most people take for granted, i.e., that there must be clear and univocal answers.

Because of this, both Derrida and Zhuangzi have been accused of not being "real" philosophers, and this is exactly because they question or subvert the standard rules of engagement of their respective intellectual discourses; they question whether those discourses are complete and exhaustive, or whether they are not rather one-sided and incomplete, and thereby oppressive because of the tendency of those dominant discourses to see themselves as providing *the* answer, of being right. An example of this can be found in the well-documented treatment of Derrida in what has become known as the "Cambridge affair."[12] And Zhuangzi's emphasis on uselessness has of course been used against him to claim he is indeed useless to philosophy. Again, I would venture that both Derrida and Zhuangzi would be (at least to a certain extent) quite happy to be placed outside of what is the standard of philosophy. Most of all, what Derrida seeks to subvert is the dogmatic approach to philosophy that would define what philosophy is once and for all, a narrow technical way of thought properly institutionalized and, as comparative philosophers are all too aware, not very prone to change. But for Derrida, the most important thing is to question and subvert this dominant approach, and this is important, not necessarily because the dominant approach may be wrong, but more because *as* dominant it will tend to shut out other approaches. As such, Derrida's work is a

> re-examination of the fundamental norms and premises of a number of dominant discourses, the principles underlying many of their evaluations, the structures of academic institutions, and the research that goes on within them. What this questioning does is modify the rules of the dominant discourse […] (Derrida 1995: 409-10).[13]

Again, the point is to modify, not to deny such discourses their place.

Deconstruction then is a challenge to and critique of certain structures and institutions and their propensity to impose themselves on our thinking, but at the same time deconstruction

is an affirmation of the necessity of thinking and of exposing these structures. So in what follows, we have to think of institutions in a wider sense here, starting with the institutions of philosophy and language. Both Derrida and Zhuangzi will show, although in different ways, that these are artificial structures arbitrarily narrowed down, but they nevertheless influence how we "ought" to think. As such, all of these institutionalizations need to be questioned, deconstructed, and subverted. And such is the proper task of philosophy.

Yet, as we have just seen, such critical questioning does not, either in Derrida or Zhuangzi, amount to a simple denial of certain concepts, principles, and systems; it is more a question of complicating what is taken for granted, indicating what has been overlooked in establishing identities, and by doing so, pointing to the impossibility of closure or subsumption to fixed standards. Following on from Heidegger, Derrida understands that deconstruction must challenge hierarchy not in order to completely do away with it, but in order to transform our understanding of it:

> What must occur then is not merely a suppression of all hierarchy, for anarchy only consolidates just as surely the established order of a metaphysical hierarchy; nor is it a simple change or reversal in the terms of any given hierarchy. Rather the *Umdrehung* must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself (Derrida 1979: 81, German in original).[14]

Why does this need to be done? Because Derrida at least believes, but I think this would hold for Zhuangzi as well, that the only way systems can be prevented from their deadly tendency to stifle opposition, close themselves off, and fossilize is to relentlessly question them. Only such a continuous interrogation can provide for openness. And that means that even a system that is generally or consensually considered correct, like democracy for example, can only benefit from being questioned and critiqued.

Such questioning, I would venture, is necessary to or should be at least an integral part of our edification, a necessity for improvement. There is really nothing new in this. Any thought system that closes itself off to criticism is bound to lose its openness and vitality. Deconstructions for Derrida provide this opening "by bending [the] rules with respect for the rules themselves in order to allow the other to come or to announce its coming in the opening of this dehiscence" (Derrida 2007: 59-60).[15] It is instructive to pause at this word "dehiscence" for a moment. The Oxford English Dictionary lists "dehiscence" as "gaping, opening by divergence of parts"[16] and states that the term is mostly used in plant life—for example, in the blossoming of and opening of the flower. For Derrida however, the picture is a bit less romantic and a bit more violent. Dehiscence represents not the gentle natural opening of the flower, but more the forceful wedging open of what has closed in on itself, the space revealed by forcefully opening up our rigid thought structures, by deconstructing what is supposedly an identity. Geoffrey Bennington has summed this up well by saying that in Derrida's work "[t]he point […] is not to reintegrate remains into philosophy, but […] to introduce a radical nondialectisable alterity into the heart of the same" (Bennington, and Derrida 1993: 291).[17] The point of critique, of questioning, and indeed of subversion then may not be to come to a synthesis dialectically, not to dialectically move to a better or higher position, but as I will argue, to rest in the knowledge of the impossibility of such a dialectical maneuver, without having that knowledge cripple our thinking. There are really two positions possible here, and I believe something can be said for both positions: the position of having subversion as a necessary stage in getting to something better, and the position of recognizing that this hope or move to something better is always itself frustrated or subverted. I will argue that the second position is closer to Derrida, and although one normally understands Zhuangzi to be advocating the first position, I think he can be seen as actually advocating the second one.

Now it is in this context that Derrida argues that philosophy cannot be separated from its institutions, which are the university, schools, disciplines, media and publishing industries, and most importantly, language.[18] According to Derrida, since there is no neutral or universal language, any natural language in which philosophy is practiced should also be seen as an institution of philosophy. This shows that philosophy cannot be the universal discipline of pure reason it has so often presented itself to be, but that *institutions* of philosophy (including and foremost language) are a major influence on the content, meaning, and practice of philosophies, and not just in their distribution.

While constantly questioning philosophy in these various ways, deconstruction also affirms philosophy and defends it against "anything that might come along to threaten this integrity, dissolve, dissect, or disperse the identity of the philosophical as such" (Derrida 2004: 170).[19] I have added this comment to counter the common conception that Derrida's thinking is just a simple destruction of the metaphysical, logocentric tradition without anything to offer in its place. Instead I will show that his attacks function in multiple ways. Thus in what follows I will speak, in keeping with Derrida's terminology, of a double bind, which I will explain as both a defense of philosophical thinking and at the same time an attack on mainstream philosophy, which can only be done using the language of the dominant discourse while also challenging it.

To reiterate, the main force of Derrida's work is the call to open up philosophy and its education and dissemination to what is usually considered to be outside of it (like the media, press, and universities). As he says: "We stand opposed to whatever would prohibit philosophy from [....] opening itself up to new objects in a way that knows no limit of principle, from recalling that it was already present there where no one wanted to acknowledge it" (Derrida 2004: 170). Such a force of prohibition could take many forms and is not just limited to state power or other legal prohibitions, but ranges from educational aspects such as lack of support for research, to media and publishing industries, to philosophers themselves who oppose any widening of or incursion into the strictly philosophical by something they see as being "outside." In short, such prohibitions arise largely through "institutionalization." I will now discuss what Derrida considers the most important of these institutions, language and the university.

3   Language as the Institution of Philosophy

As briefly mentioned, the first and foremost institution of philosophy is language, which influences how we do philosophy in important ways. According to Derrida, any dominant discourse

> tends to impose a model of language that is supposedly favourable to this communication. Claiming to speak in the name of intelligibility, good sense, common sense, or the democratic ethic, this discourse tends, by means of these very things, and if as naturally, to discredit anything that complicates this model (Derrida 1992: 55).

The most famous instance of this according to Derrida is the preference given in western philosophy to the voice, the spoken word, which is valued for its presence and thereby for its conveying actual meaning, versus the written word, which is seen as inferior since it at best indirectly represents presence, but is more likely to distort meaning. I will not rehearse all the arguments Derrida has to critique this hierarchical oppositional structure; they are readily available even to non-specialists. In short, what Derrida seeks to establish is not an overturning of the hierarchy so that now the written word becomes the carrier of the "real" meaning. A superficial reading of Derrida's *écriture* or "writing" may lead one to believe that this is what Derrida wants. But such an overturning would only invert the hierarchy, and this is not what

deconstruction or subversion is or should be about. Any overturning is doomed to fail, and Derrida himself has warned against such facile interpretations of his work on numerous occasions. Instead, Derrida's point is that the dominant discourse has always taken this hierarchy for granted, and his subversion lies in showing that this hierarchy is indefensible, and only persists because of considerations other than philosophical ones. So Derrida is not merely highlighting the other side, but his emphasis on the "writing" side is strategic and in service of questioning the entire system. But of course he is also aware of the constant need to take a position. Hence the double bind, of which more later. In short, Derrida's treatment of language, which continues throughout his entire work, seeks not so much to discredit one side of the hierarchy, but to complicate the hierarchy and the entire system itself. I would venture to say that this resonates with subversion to a large extent. If we recall the definition of subversion, Derrida is not trying to destroy one side of a binary system in favor of another side (although this is what he has often been accused of, especially by those who fail to see the whole picture); he is trying to overturn the entire system itself from within.

Now how does this apply to comparative philosophy or to Zhuangzi or Daoism? As we are all aware, one of the major problems of comparative philosophy is how to relate different experiences in different languages through translation. The translation problematics show a major danger, but also the possibility of a major contribution of comparative thinking towards a new understanding of philosophy. Translation has been recognized as one of the vital "institutions" of comparative thinking. As such, we could agree with Derrida that this institution is inevitable. It is never something we could escape. The real issue is not *that* we translate, but *how* we translate, and into what sort or kind of language. In the form of onto-theological metaphysics, no matter the language, philosophers have always spoken and written "*in a certain manner*, which is called philosophy, this manner of speaking and writing being of the most singular kind […]" (Derrida 2002a: 29, italics in original). Philosophy has thus come to be identified with a very particular discourse that is highly specialized and specific, and even within this philosophical language there are specializations that do not lend themselves easily to translations between themselves. "Within every language, European or not, what we call 'philosophy' must be linked regularly and differently, according to eras, places, schools, social and socio-institutional circles, to distinct procedures among which it is often difficult to translate" (Derrida 2002a: 29). One has merely to think of the gaping abyss between analytic and continental philosophy. The problem is really that each of those sub-disciplines with their own language considers themselves in many cases to be absolutely right, or at least they consider their own discourse to be the better way of thinking about things. But the realization that they are all just different ways of doing philosophy should warn us that there is not just *one* way of doing philosophy.

A common platitude is that since no translation is innocent, every translation means an interpretation. This interpretation however, says Derrida, "does not *begin* […] with what is commonly called translation. It *begins* as soon as *a certain type of reading* of the 'original' text is *instituted*" (Derrida 2004: 19, italics added). What Derrida is trying to say here is not so much that we have to translate, but that as soon as a certain way of translation, favoring a certain way of thinking, becomes institutionalized, closure instead of opening takes place. And it is exactly this closure that Derrida wants to avoid, and with that I think he has made an important contribution to comparative philosophy. In this context Derrida will claim that "fidelity to the text" is actually displayed exactly by pointing to the text's different emphases and possible readings. That is the only way to keep a text alive. Fidelity makes the text say as much as possible; it does not close it off in order to be possessed by the "real scholars."

In Daoism there similarly are many instances where such openness and provisionality of language are spoken of. One example is chapter 32 of the *Daodejing*, where it is said that "When we start to regulate the world we introduce names." It is acknowledged that this is an inevitability; however, "once names have been assigned, [w]e must also know when to stop. Knowing when

to stop is how to avoid danger" (*Daodejing*, Ames and Hall 2003: 127).[20] Using language is inevitable, and it is inevitably arresting the flow and introducing hierarchies. Being aware of this has to do with knowing when to stop relying on this performative fixation; to remain open, we must use language carefully and under erasure to stop it from becoming dogmatic. Of course, this is corroborated in chapter 1, which tells us that "naming that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming" (*Daodejing*, Ames and Hall 2003: 77). Such hesitance and a general attitude that understands the provisionality of language is prevalent in the *DaoDeJing*, as for example in chapter 56: "those who really understand it do not talk about it" (*Daodejing*, Ames and Hall 2003: 164), or in chapter 78: "appropriate language seems contradictory" (*Daodejing*, Ames and Hall 2003: 198).

In the *Zhuangzi* we find similar concerns. One thinks immediately of two instances in the *Zhuangzi*, the passage of the fish trap (chapter 26) and the passage of the goblet words (chapter 27), both of which do not deny the necessity of using language, but warn against it becoming reified and substantialized. Instead, in both cases the authors of the *Zhuangzi* subvert that fixation without trying to step outside of the system of language per se. The fish trap story ends with the following: "Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with him" (*Zhuangzi*, Watson 2003: 141).[21] It is important that the *Zhuangzi* here does not advocate stepping outside of language completely; that would be the inversion of the opposition, which as mentioned before is exactly *not* what either Derrida or Zhuangzi are about. The passage says that *after* forgetting about words, we may finally speak with each other. Forget fixation, so we can discuss freely and provisionally. Similarly, the Goblet Words in chapter 27 empty themselves continuously to be filled anew, and anew. In this sense, with regards to language, subversion has the function of not closing us off, of not stopping to start beginning again and beginning yet again, to paraphrase another passage of the *Zhuangzi*. In short, Zhuangzi shares Derrida's concerns over language, and also actively seeks to subvert dominant discourses by deconstructing their supposed superiority.

In concluding this section, I believe that both Derrida and Daoism (mainly in the *Zhuangzi* but also in the *DaoDeJing*) share a similar concern: that is, to subvert the claim to absolute correctness, to being right, in this case through their respective interpretations of language and its dangers and possibilities. And of course there are many other places in the *Zhuangzi*, including in the Inner Chapters, where this claim, I think, is confirmed. Whenever someone believes they are right, there is another viewpoint from where this is considered wrong. Something is always both "this" and "that." Both Derrida and Zhuangzi point out, not just on the level of language, that there is always more to the story than meets the eye. One can never claim to be completely right because there is always an evolving context that will prove you wrong on another level. This should not reduce us to relativism, and neither to nihilism. It should make us aware of provisionality, but not incapacitate us. It should lead to intellectual humility, but not to inertia. How this is to be achieved will be discussed later. I now want to talk about that second institution of philosophy, the university.

4   The University as the Institution of Philosophy

The main reason I want to talk about how Derrida sees the university has to do with the foundation of reason. Of course, it would be hard to argue that Zhuangzi had any views on the institution of the university, since there was no such thing in his time as what we today understand as the university. But in its basic argument, I think Zhuangzi would agree with Derrida's evaluation. Derrida understands the modern university as a thoroughly western institution largely based on the nineteenth-century model of the German university, which was itself a restructuring of the pre-enlightenment universities. This modern university has developed

into different departments, faculties, etc., all dealing in their own fashion with their own subjects. As its foundation or *raison d'être*, however, the university has the principle of reason. This overarching unifier, the principle of reason or rationality, is ideally embodied in (the faculty of) philosophy, and so philosophy has a priority status (that is, in the ideal situation, for this position of philosophy is, as we all know, far from being a reality). Yet, as Derrida explains, this principle of reason itself remains unquestioned, and thus arises for Derrida the question of what grounds the foundation. He concludes that "an event of foundation can never be comprehended merely within the logic that it founds […]. The origin of the principle of reason, which is also implicated in the origin of the university, is not rational" (Derrida 2004: 109). In short, we can appeal to the principle of reason, but there is nothing the principle of reason can appeal to. It cannot justify itself unless in circular fashion.

Derrida questions the structure of the university in the same fashion as that of language. Language is indispensable, but it is not neutral and is easily corrupted; it easily (and maybe even necessarily) becomes an instrument of *a certain way* of thinking instead of thinking in general. Language does not fulfill its promise of serving as a pure medium. It is, as the Chinese thinkers recognized long ago, a social construct rather than a pure reflection of reality. In the same way, Derrida argues that the university does not provide "unmediated" teaching or pure rationality. So many (philosophical and non-philosophical) influences increase the chances of the university not being able or willing to provide teaching of the widest possible range of philosophical thinking, because more often than not philosophy in the university limits itself to what mainstream western philosophers have considered it should be. And they have defended that position always by appealing to reason, without considering ways of thought that may be more interesting than their narrow definition of reason would allow.

This conclusion should lead us to the awareness that the university should acknowledge its position as an *institution* of knowledge. As we all know, institution means both a form of organization, as well as an established law or practice, as in "the institution of marriage." This double meaning relates exactly to the tendency of an organization or structure to establish itself as correct and close itself off to novelty. Again, the debates around "marriage" and what it is supposed to be or not be form a good example here. In the context of the university, Derrida takes this to mean that *as* an institution it influences what work can be carried out in its name, and that means a certain responsibility of which I will say more shortly. This conclusion, at the same time, on a more practical level, means that the particular form of knowledge and Reason that has exemplified and identified western philosophy and thus western universities in general has institutionalized itself all over the world. The danger in this lies in the university closing itself off from different ways of knowing.

The university that *recognizes* its own non-rational foundational element would be less prone to shut itself off from the responsibility to open up its own rigid structures. Such a university would be a place where responsibility means responsiveness to different situations and to different times. That means a transformation of the teachings of philosophy (and other disciplines) in reaction to new objects of study and new or different ideas that come from outside the original university circle. In the proposals that Derrida wrote for the formation of such a new institution of thinking, the *College International de Philosophie*, we read that one of the major focuses of this new kind of thinking should be comparative. I quote at length:

> Most of all, this international openness must allow, in a more traditionally philosophical field, for the multiplication of original initiatives whose historical necessity is more obvious than ever today. We know that the "philosophical world," assuming it still has a unity, is not only divided into "schools" and "doctrines" but also, beyond and independently of philosophical contents and positions, divided according to linguistico-national borders that are more difficult to cross than political borders. These traditional

differences in "style," "rhetoric," "method," and so on are sometimes more serious than differences in doctrine. Although they cannot be reduced to national languages and traditions, they nonetheless remain part of these. These philosophical areas between which passages are rare, whether in the form of critique or polemics, are a historical—*and philosophical*—challenge to philosophy (Derrida 2004: 215, italics added).

Interestingly, in this quote, Derrida considers such differences and other ways of thinking mostly in terms of critique and polemics and challenge, although I think in the back of his head, as some of the other quotes in this paper show, he is really talking about complementarity. The double bind rests in criticizing certain hierarchical systems while remaining aware of the necessity to use such systems and transform them from within. The double bind also consists in the recognition that this is an ongoing process, and not a dialectical synthesis with a definable end product.

All of this entails that Derrida is acutely aware of the need to incorporate such thinking into the teaching of philosophy: "[d]econstruction […] has therefore in principle always concerned the apparatus and function of teaching in general, the apparatus and function of philosophy in particular and par excellence" (Derrida 2002a: 73). So what Derrida does is in principle and of necessity work on what philosophy has always considered secondary and of no real importance to the content and meaning of itself, that is, signifying structures in general and those influencing philosophical work in particular. Thus we can say that language, teaching, and institutions of knowledge (and therefore of power), such as the university, are exactly such signifying structures, and Derrida's intention is in every case to show how they influence and to a great extent even determine what philosophy is.

Besides language and the university, Derrida has similarly questioned the institution of the press and the media in general, whose powers he also incessantly interrogates and holds to task. All the more imperative today, the powers of the press need both vigorous defending as well as relentless attacking—a defense of its task of rendering account and reason, an attack on its simplifications and abuses of power. Again, the idea of the double bind surfaces.

And the same goes for the almost unquestionable institution of the capitalist free market idea, which has become so dominant and ingrained that it is almost impossible to question. Again, Derrida questions these institutions not so much to deny them, or to deny them a place, but to deny them the dominance that they tend to display when power or too much power is congregated in them.

All this means that the double bind also consists in the realization that, for language and the university to open itself, for institutions to open themselves, for philosophy to be *able* and *allowed* to do so meaningfully, it must be recognized institutionally and given institutionalized space, at the same time as it tries to subvert such institutionalizations.

5   Subverting Political Systems

So how does all this relate to political systems and institutions? For Derrida, political systems are no different from the systems of language and philosophy; in fact they rest heavily on both these institutions. As such, as any institution, political systems must also be questioned and critiqued lest any of those systems becomes inflexible and pretends to be the only correct one. Derrida most frequently questions political systems by looking at their foundations. His aim is always to show how the foundations of any political system cannot be justified, in the same way he questioned the foundation of the origin of the university in the principle of reason, or the origin of meaning in language in the spoken word as opposed to the written sign. The origin is always without justification.

> Since the origin of authority, the founding or grounding [*la fondation ou le fondement*], the positing of the law [*loi*] cannot by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground [*sans fondement*] [...]. They are neither illegal nor legal in their founding moment (Derrida 2002b: 242).[22]

The realization of this undecidable moment in the foundation of law or a state (or by extension, any institution) should make us understand the subversive element in it: "The foundation of all states occurs in a situation that one can thus call revolutionary. It inaugurates a new law; it always does so in violence." (Derrida 2002b: 269). Not just states that go through an actual revolution, but all states suffer from this inescapable fact. There is always an element of revolution and subversion in foundational movements. Only after some time is there an attempt to retrospectively and retroactively justify the foundation:

> A 'successful' revolution, the 'successful' foundation of a state [...] will produce after the fact [*apres coup*] what it was destined *in advance* to produce, namely, proper interpretative models to read in return, to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretative model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimisation (Derrida 2002b: 270).

In his own idiomatic way, these quotes and those from the previous sections show that what Derrida's work amounts to is really the realization that one cannot claim to be completely right in any situation; the end station of justification is always absent or deferred. In fact, one could say that the end station is literally that, where justification ends. The overturning of a system is never merely to replace it with an opposing system. As we have seen in the language section, such overturning really remains parasitic to what it seeks to overturn. The justification for such new systems will always be either lacking or retrospective. Nevertheless, and here is where the double bind surfaces again, we do need political institutions, but as with the university, such institutions should be based on the realization of the provisionality and ultimate unjustifiability or undecidability of their own foundations. And this is where Derrida talks about un-decidability as the inability to purely follow a program, about the ultimately indefensible decision for justice, and about justice as non-deconstructible. For Derrida, this is how he seeks to avoid relativism. There are many competing theories out there, but none of them should be considered absolutely right. This does not lead to relativism, but it does lead to an intellectual humility where any decision is considered to be always provisional and open to question, relative to as many considerations as possible, without being systematically reducible to those considerations. One must decide based on an openness and not based on any system or established discourse. In the words of Saul Newman, Derrida's "is a strategy of continually interrogating the self-proclaimed *closure* of this discourse. It does this by forcing it to account for the excess which always escapes, and thus jeopardizes this closure" (Newman 2001: 11, italics in original).[23]

6   Zhuangzi

We have encountered certain ideas found in the *Zhuangzi* throughout this paper, especially concerning language and in wider terms concerning the deconstruction of artificial and dominant structures. But actually, strangely enough, while Zhuangzi is best known for critiquing and subverting any artificial structure in view of promoting his particular form of acceptance of the way things are, for him such relentless questioning seems not to extend too far into the political realm. This may have various reasons. It may be because he thinks the Daoist sage should be above such worldly affairs, or it may be that he truly considers the political situation something

that is just the way it is. Either way, he accepts without question the position of the ruler versus the subjects, and is not really interested in revolution or political change. Any change in the external world should come from within, from an awareness of and aptitude in dealing with realities. If there is political critique in the *Zhuangzi*, it is not about *any particular* political situation or injustice; it is about the system of political rule per se. But even there Zhuangzi seems remarkably docile. The system is accepted as being there; it is how one deals with it, or alternatively escapes from it, that subsequently becomes important.

So on the one hand one can read in the *Zhuangzi* a definite duty to subvert man-made rules, since they are artificial attempts aimed at halting spontaneity. Examples abound of that: for instance, where Confucius is made to realize his limitations as one who "is the sort who roams within the guidelines" (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 89). Firmly kept within the guidelines of artificial structures, Confucius is unable to realize his full potential in spontaneity. Yet in practice we do not read a lot of subversion against the powers that be in the *Zhuangzi*. Instead, subversion seems either to be from within the person or to involve attempts to step outside of the system altogether. This is also attested to in the last of the Inner Chapters, in which the business of ruling is definitely looked down upon as unworthy of the Sage's attention in most of the stories. And if ruling cannot be avoided, it should be done according to the Daoist precept of not ruling with assertive measures, but ruling by *ziran* 自然 and *wuwei* 無為, where the ruler attunes him- or herself to *dao*, which would then have the outward results flow naturally. So we see in the Daoist ruler according to Zhuangzi an example of the subversion of the standard traditional Confucian ideas of ideal rulers. The morality based on man-made rules, distinctions, and assertions is inferior to that inspired by *tian* 天 or nature, the former being considered a "bullying sort of power" (*Zhuangzi,* Graham 2001: 95). Yet again, seeing how the actual situation does not conform to the ideal, it seems that either the imperfect rulers should be obeyed, or one should retreat.

In chapter 4, Zhuangzi even advises against trying to persuade bad rulers, let alone revolting directly against them; so pragmatically he would be against demanding the right to question or subvert the dominant powers that be. He also insists quite strangely on the "duty" or "loyalty" to serve the ruler and obey (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 70). But at the same time there seems to be a "Daoist" way of trying to rectify the ruler in question. This Daoist way can take two forms: either escape duties altogether, and the *Zhuangzi* is replete with such behavior, or try to bend the system from within, and even in that case extreme care has to be taken not to upset the ruler. But it is in this "roaming free inside [the ruler's] cage" (*Zhuangzi,* Graham 2001:69) that Zhuangzi's ideas of subversion may be seen: changing the system from within, but in a Daoist way, and only when the audience, in this case the ruler, is receptive.

There may be another related reason why Zhuangzi seems reluctant to challenge authority. In a Daoist world, living out one's life span and fulfilling one's potencies are things sought after. Now it is not the case that Derrida may not have been concerned with such issues, but it is definitely not the thrust of his deconstructive work. Derrida struggles against a dominant metaphysical system and is in search of a way of thinking that may liberate (as far as possible) philosophy from this dominant system. Zhuangzi's priorities lie elsewhere. In a philosophy that seeks to "mirror" nature and its processes, going against the ruler in uncertain times without recourse to laws and protection was of course dangerous. Hence practically Zhuangzi would only advocate such a thing if the ruler was actually receptive of the Daoist ideas.

On a more philosophical level, Zhuangzi in my opinion has a similar strategy to Derrida: while wanting to subvert the idea that "if you're not with us, then you're against us" through his relentless attacks on the narrow-mindedness of those who are stuck in any kind of oppositional viewpoint, he himself is weary of providing a new third viewpoint after subverting the possibility of sticking to "this" or "that." In this, he is similar to Derrida. While there is never a really clear yes or no, at the very least we must defend the option of saying either yes or no, for if we do not

do that, we risk losing out to one-sidedness. So what makes Zhuangzi close to Derrida is that he is also acutely aware of the double bind involved in what he is trying to do. This is what *Zhuangzi* passages such as the following mean to me, as subversion of what knowledge is supposed to be: "to claim that there are such things as 'right' and 'wrong' *before* they come to be fully formed in someone's mind in this way—that is like saying you left for Yue today and arrived there yesterday" (*Zhuangzi*, Ziporyn 2009: 11).[24] One cannot claim to be unconditionally right without allowing at least that claim to be questioned from another viewpoint. This openness, which I discussed as a key feature in Derrida, is also found in Zhuangzi:

> You and I have been made to argue over alternatives, if it is you not I that wins, is it really you who are on to it, I who am not? If it is I not you that wins, is it really I who am on to it, you who are not? Is one of us on to it and the other of us not? Or are both of us on to it and both of us not? (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 60)

Although Zhuangzi says we have been made to argue, and this is not the correct way to go about, at the very least this quote shows that he is open to questioning his own and other viewpoints. And here is a last quote to substantiate this: "What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It. There they say 'That's it, that's not' from one point of view, here we say 'That's it, that's not' from another point of view. Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way" (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 53). From the perspective of Zhuangzi in this case, both viewpoints may be wrong, but the possibility of subverting one of them by pointing out its opposite in a complementary fashion is vital to understanding the provisionality of all viewpoints, because without such subversion, one viewpoint may start to consider itself as absolutely right; it will become preferred without question, institutionalized. What Derrida shares with Zhuangzi is the realization that subversion or the right to critique and question is thus only to be seen as a stage to be overcome, but it is nonetheless continuously a very necessary stage without which such overcoming would be impossible. It is in fact "letting both alternatives proceed" (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 54). And if one thinks of it in this way, the "overcoming" may never actually happen. Subversion may always be needed again and again. Subversion may "be" the overcoming in practice. Without the recognition of different standpoints, and without the option of questioning one standpoint from another standpoint, we may never move beyond standpoints altogether. And indeed there is an interpretation of Zhuangzi that argues that exactly this is his point: that whatever he may provide as another viewpoint, or even the attempt to escape viewpoints altogether, will by necessity have to be continuously subverted. It is the realization of this impossibility that is hinted at in his saying that "This is what is called 'Letting both alternatives proceed'" (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 54). An openness to the other standpoint is crucial, whether one considers that standpoint to be right or wrong. It is important to remember that such openness does not mean we have to agree with a standpoint, and we have political equivalents in the western history of philosophy in the Voltairean principle of "I despise what you say, but will defend with my life your right to say it"[25] and John Stuart Mill's defense of liberty. Openness is necessary since the tendency of distinction making, of thinking in strict categories, is to claim completeness and/or hierarchy. In the *Zhuangzi* this is worded in the following way: "What goes on being hateful in dividing is that it makes the divisions into a completed set. The reason why the completion goes on being hateful is that it makes everything there is into a completed set" (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 103). This makes Zhuangzi close to Derrida's continuous efforts to subvert *closure*. Completed sets by necessity close themselves off, and invariably create hierarchy.

For now, we may leave open the question of whether Zhuangzi's end goal is a realization of the necessity of multiple standpoints, or an overcoming of them. There are arguments to be given for both of these goals, as there are with the idea of subversion in Derrida, but maybe that

is beside the point here. If anything, I have tried to show that their message really is that any such overcoming will most likely need to be overcome itself in a continuous process, but one that does not see itself as dialectical. But if this is indeed an important similarity between them, then we must also point to an important difference: Zhuangzi ultimately wants the Daoist adept to be naturally reflective (think of the mirror images often used in Daoism) without deliberating too much about alternatives, and this is where there is a difference with Derrida. For although Derrida's "decision" is to a certain extent unprogrammed, he nevertheless insists that a lot of deliberation needs to be done before such a decision is made. The decision should, however, never be reducible to such deliberation. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, seems to want to get rid of the step of deliberation altogether, and jump to the conclusion straightaway, intuitively. But even then, as the story of cook Ding in the Inner Chapters and many others in the outer chapters show, such a jump can never be made completely without deliberation and without training in such matters as the decision would be about. The woodworker Qing in chapter 19 can make the bell-stand he makes only because he is trained. He is not a novice who just decides on a whim to go and make a bell-stand. He is a trained professional who nevertheless cannot be reduced to this training and the following of a program. The same obviously goes for cook Ding in chapter 3. Although the actions of these Daoist exemplars seem to flow effortlessly, such actions are actually the result of years of practice and training. But in the end, neither cook Ding nor woodworker Qing can be confined to this training; rather, they have perfected their arts to go beyond deliberation and training. This means that this particular difference between Derrida and Zhuangzi may in hindsight not be as great as initially perceived.

There is another important practical difference that has been mentioned before. What we have in Zhuangzi is a double injunction: on the one hand, Zhuangzi never ceases to criticize and try to subvert the moral institutions and institutionalization of morality; on the other, and unlike Derrida, he does not actually question the institution of the state itself.[26] But perhaps Zhuangzi can help us realize something important here: subversion or critique need not do such a thing anyway. It need not be anarchist. It only needs to disagree with how the state is currently organized. However, one cannot escape a sense of paradox here in Zhuangzi. On the one hand, one must serve the ruler with utmost loyalty, but one must do so while being non-engaged mentally or even physically. I think this is what is meant with the aforementioned phrase, "roaming free in the cage." On the other hand, Zhuangzi advocates staying away from the whole business of politics as far as possible. Stay away if you can, and if not, play the game without actual involvement.

If this is a paradox, then we must also remember that Zhuangzi is not really one to be bothered by paradoxes anyway. And much of the paradox evaporates if we consider two important things. First, Zhuangzi is aware that he cannot have his cake and eat it. So he is really talking about two different situations, the ideal one and the actual one. In the ideal state, a Daoist ruler would not actually be doing anything assertive anyway, and the kind of non-commitment that he is talking about would fit right in. Think about the notions of *ziran* 自然 and *wuwei* 無為 again. In chapter 7 of the *Zhuangzi*, it is said that to rule with regulations, standards, judgements, and measures derived from exemplarity is "sham Virtuosity. To rule the world in this way is like trying to carve a river out of the ocean, or asking a mosquito to carry a mountain on its back" (*Zhuangzi*, Ziporyn 2009: 50). Ruling in any assertive way is discredited, and nothing is really put in to replace it in any practical way. The Daoist ruler does not really rule, or rather rules by not assertively ruling. Anyone who has to actively participate in government is already doing something artificial, which in the ideal situation would not be needed in the first place.[27]

Second, there is the actual situation. Here Zhuangzi is aware of its shortcomings and pessimistic of change, so he advises to not get drawn in. Stay useless. But we may ask if this emphasis on uselessness in chapter 4 might not rather be seen as a passive form of subversion or critique—a principled refusal to be drawn into unjust governments when the prospect of actual

change is seen as impossible to achieve? A refusal to be useful for such governments? The refusal to take office indicates scorn *both* for the possibility of a good assertive government and for the actual government in place at the time. But in the end, are not Zhuangzi's true or genuine persons "the sort that roam beyond the guidelines"? (*Zhuangzi*, Graham 2001: 89). Do they not perceive themselves as those to whom the (Confucian dominant) rules do not seem to apply at all?

Can we not say then that critique and subversion are things that are normally engaged in on the level of disputation, of knowledge, of right and wrong, and Zhuangzi does indeed engage in it somewhat on this level, but that on a deeper level the real Daoist would subvert the entire system exactly by standing above or outside of these concerns? Is this not what the notions of *ziran* and *wuwei* seek to convey? Here indeed lies a big practical difference with Derrida. Because Derrida denies such deeper levels, he would most likely consider Zhuangzi a reactionary figure for not getting involved. We certainly know that Derrida felt the need to be drawn in, and he actively participated in public life, constantly subverting and complicating certain views within the public sphere, in the good left-wing French intellectual tradition (while also being critical of some elements of that tradition itself). Examples abound of larger and smaller public issues where Derrida actively took a stand, and he was also instrumental in a political sense in education policies.[28] We may of course point to the vast differences in time, culture, and political circumstances to explain this, but it nevertheless seems that Zhuangzi is saying one should stay true to *dao* 道, or to one's *de* 德 and *xin* 心, and not be persuaded to play along or critique directly on a practical level. Of course, the notions of *ziran* and *wuwei* can be understood in this fashion, as staying away from artificiality in all its forms and living a life of direct responsiveness and natural morality. This would be the alternative, where we understand Zhuangzi as advocating a "deeper" level of subversion by stepping away from it all, even in a kind of mystical-retreat fashion, as also exemplified in the *Autumn Floods* chapter.

But then again Zhuangzi would not be Zhuangzi if he did not complicate this "final" retreat itself, as there is also a different understanding of notions such as *ziran* and *wuwei*. I contend that Zhuangzi thinks of those who have stepped away from it all as missing one final step, for lack of a better phrase: the return to society in a different mindset. In the Inner Chapters Zhuangzi often seems to start endorsing a dichotomy, such as the one between what is of man and what is of *tian*, but then invariably complicates that dichotomy and especially the hierarchy involved in it. In chapter 1 for example, Zhuangzi seems to endorse a definite hierarchy between the "little" and "great" understanding. The bird Peng is better than the little ones, Song Rongzi and Liezi are better than normal men, but yet they still need to "depend" on something else, so they are still making distinctions. This whole distinction-making and the ensuing hierarchy is then questioned in chapter 2 as being still based on one-sidedness and oppositional thought. In our context, to claim that it is "right" to retreat and not get involved would still be parasitic on the dichotomy of right and wrong, and it is exactly that dichotomy that Zhuangzi tries to subvert in his final move in chapter 2:

> Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven […]. A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly (*Zhuangzi,* Watson 2003: 35).

Chapter 6 also exemplifies this complication and argues that the "true or genuine persons of old" had not rested content with being *tian*-like only, but knew how to strike a balance between what is man-made and what is of *tian*. And although Derrida of course has no dichotomy between *tian* and man to deal with, we could say that there are striking similarities

between both their realizations: both recognize that one cannot step outside of the system altogether, and that one should continuously be involved in subverting it from the inside.

So the perceived differences between Derrida and Zhuangzi seem largely practical, and less so when considered philosophically. On a philosophical level, both Derrida and Zhuangzi have been accused of being amoral. But that indictment would only hold force from within the systems they are indirectly trying to step outside of. They indeed do not try to give us new sets of rules. If that is considered amoral, then the accusation is right. Yet surely the whole point of attempting to step outside the system of conventions, of pointing to the conventionality of the rules, of subverting the entire political and moral narrative seems indeed to be aimed at changing things from the inside nonetheless. Although their strategy is not to propose an alternative narrative but to subvert the possibility of such alternatives, we may legitimately ask what comes after such a subversion of the possibility of alternatives for both Zhuangzi and Derrida? What are their answers?

7   Solutions?

Two solutions may be offered based on my assessment. Neither of them solves anything. My paper in that sense also reflects an undecidability. The first solution, and one can find this in both Derrida and Zhuangzi, argues that we should not seek to provide a new narrative that overcomes all other narratives, but that we should rest in the subversion or be aware of the necessity to subvert any attempt at a new narrative. This solution thus argues that there is no solution, that this is human reality and should be embraced exactly in its impossibility and paradoxicality. This is what Derrida calls the double bind. Subversion is not meant to do away with narratives, but to complicate them and thereby to keep in check the tendency of (dominant) narratives to close off other ways of thought. Subversion then, although it may itself be extreme, in *yin yang* fashion is meant to stop us from drifting to extremes. It provides constant checks and balances that should cause us to act with a certain intellectual humility.

The other solution would argue that this process is somehow going to bring us beyond the level of such narratives. Again, in both Derrida and Zhuangzi one can find elements of this way of thought. The Daoist sage would seem to embody this solution, and in Derrida this takes the form of the non-deconstructible or the undecidable, which means an ultimately unjustifiable decision to take a stand in full awareness of its unjustifiable status, for justification would remain on the level of that which can be deconstructed. This solution thus lies in *realizing* the impossibility of final answers, but also and nonetheless in *deciding for now* in favor of one answer in awareness of its provisionality.

Can both solutions be correct? Is neither correct? Is there a third party that can adjudicate? Somewhere Derrida says: "A foundation is a promise" (Derrida 2002b: 272). Subversion entails the promise of a new foundation. Without that promise, it has no justification and no legitimacy. But the foundation itself is exactly without justification, as Derrida has shown. This is the aporia that I believe neither Derrida nor Zhuangzi try to solve. Both are happy to stay with the ultimate violence, indefensibility, and "decision" character (meaning non-programmable) of their so-called "solutions." "Justice is an experience of the impossible" (Derrida 2002b: 244), Derrida says. In Zhuangzi's words: "The torch of chaos and doubt, this is what the sage steers by" (*Zhuangzi*, Watson 2003: 38).

In the words of Hans-Georg Moeller, Daoism seeks to go back to "a premoral state in which people act harmoniously self-so (*ziran*) without a need for ethical instructions and prescriptions" (Moeller 2007: 48).[29] But is that the real goal? Neither the *DaoDeJing* nor the *Zhuangzi* are able to give a rational defense of this premoral state other than claiming that non-distinction-making leads to a naturally good society. Ultimately this foundation is just as much without justification as it is in Derrida, and Zhuangzi is of course aware that such an ideal world

is unrealistic. Zhuangzi's "true or genuine persons of old" supposedly were premoral in the sense that they lived in a mythical age before distinctions were introduced, yet they are also said to be those "in whom neither Heaven nor man is victor over the other" (Graham 2001: 85). And it is exactly this ability to practice *wuwei* and *ziran* in this imperfect world that makes them "true or genuine." So Zhuangzi wavers between a pure premoral state (recognizing this to be impossible to attain) and the ability to be *ziran* and *wuwei* in this world, which he believes one could attain.

Philosophy then, in the world of Derrida and Zhuangzi, is indeed a *Pharmakon*, both cure and poison. It should poison and corrupt the youth, at least if that means that they are constantly exposed to critique and different viewpoints, curing them of believing a single narrative, or at least of seeing their own narrative as infallible.

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[1]   Some of the sources used are: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subversion, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subversion, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/subversion.

[2]   See Michelle Yeh, "The Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tzu," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10, no. 2, (1983): 95-126; Hongchu Fu, "Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparisons Reconsidered," *Comparative Literature Studies* 29, no. 3, (1992): 296-321; Longxi Zhang, "The Tao and the Logos: Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism, *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 3, (1985): 385-398; and Longxi Zhang, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

[3]   Robert J. Shepherd, "Perpetual Unease or Being at Ease?—Derrida, Daoism, and the 'Metaphysics of Presence,'" *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 2, (2007): 227-243.

[4]   See Youru Wang, "Philosophy of Change and the Deconstruction of Self in the Zhuangzi," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 3, (2000): 345-360.

[5]   See Mark Berkson, "Language: The Guest of Reality—Zhuangzi and Derrida on Language, Reality, and Skillfulness," in ed. Paul Kjellberg and P. Ivanhoe, *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism & Ethics in the Zhuangzi* (New York, SUNY Press, 1996), especially pp. 116-22.

[6]   Martin Heidegger (1979-1987); Nietzsche (vol. 1 and 2), ed. and transl. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco: Harper & Row.

[7]   Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[8]   Jacques Derrida, *Points…, Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[9]   David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell, and Michel Rosenfeld, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992).

[10]   Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe,* trans. P. Brault and M. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

11   Angus C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001).

12   The "Cambridge affair" arose in 1992 when Derrida was nominated for an honorary degree at Cambridge University, and a number of scholars wrote a letter opposing this.

13   Also see Derrida (1995: 411), where he makes the same point.

14   Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

15   Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I,* ed. Peggy Kamuf, and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

16   Oxford English Dictionary online: http://oed.com (last accessed on April 13, 2019).

17   Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, transl. G. Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

18   Although Derrida acknowledges the fact that philosophy is not to be limited to its institutions, and always has to have the freedom to question these institutions (see Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University; Right to Philosophy II*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 170-71), it is nevertheless practically, historically (especially since the eighteenth century of Kant), and to a large extent philosophically bound by institutions which regulate its dissemination, such as the university, media, and publishing industries, etc. And *as language or writing,* philosophy is institutional as such since the necessary recourse to language disappoints all efforts to do philosophy unmediated (see Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002a, 28).

19   Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University; Right to Philosophy II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

20   trans. Roger T. Ames, and David L. Hall, *Daodejing, Making This Life Significant* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).

21   Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

22   Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion,* ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002b).

23   Saul Newman, "Derrida's Deconstruction of Authority," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 3, (2001): 1-20.

24   Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009).

25   The quote is often attributed to Voltaire himself but is apparently a quote from a biography of Voltaire by Evelyn Beatrice Hall.

26   Although we can say that Daoism is a definite counter movement in some ways, this does not lead Zhuangzi to question the positions of ruler and ministers and subject, or the structure of the system itself. Zhuangzi at one point does compare the state to a rotting mouse (chapter 17), so there is some critique going on, but overall, direct critique and subversion of the system are by and large absent from the *Zhuangzi*.

27   See for example *Zhuangzi*, Ziporyn (2009: 58).

28   See Derrida (2002a, 2004) for examples of this.

29   Hans-Georg Moeller, *DaoDeJing (Laozi): a Complete Translation and Commentary* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2007).