

Value Pluralism and the Challenge of Normativity in the Zhuangzi

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Kim-chong Chong, *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians: Blinded by the Human*, Albany: State University of New York Press, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, 2016, pp. 195 + xiv.

Kim-chong Chong's 2016 book on the Zhuangzi balances the textual and historical approaches with conceptual and contemporary philosophical concerns. The focus on the early Confucian context and the philosophy of value pluralism, as well as the analysis of key concepts and creative interpretation of well-known passages, mark out Chong's Zhuangzi from other accounts. Nevertheless, Chong faces the interpretative and philosophical challenge of reconciling value pluralism with the normative concerns and privileged ideals also present in the Zhuangzi.

Key words: *Zhuangzi*; early Confucianism; value pluralism; non-normative *tian*; normativity

The title of Kim-chong Chong's book *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians* emphasizes the distinctive focus and *parti pris* on the classical Daoist text; the self-proclaimed central aim of the author is to "explain the thought of the *Zhuangzi* by contrasting it specifically with that of Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi as representatives of Confucian thought of the pre-Qin period" (xi). Hence, despite the general category of "Confucians" in the title and elsewhere, as well as subsequent references to "Confucianism" (8, 11, 14, 133), it is clarified early on and reaffirmed later that the *Zhuangzi* is being compared textually and conceptually only to the "three representatives of early Confucian thought" (129), i.e. the "early Confucians" (135). The book's "polemical" tone is also evident from the carefully chosen subtitle "Blinded by the Human," obviously meant—as explained in the Introduction and in the first chapter—to counter-critique the *Xunzi*'s well-known criticism of the *Zhuangzi* as "blinded by Heaven." Chong's subtitle and book in general suggest that even if the *Zhuangzi* does not "prescribe any solution to the disorder of his time" (140) like the politically-engaged Confucian thinkers, it not only can "be said to espouse some knowledge about human beings" (12) as Chong himself puts it, but also its unique sensibility to human psychological complexity (30), the limitedness of all perspectives, and vulnerability to suffering (139) hints at a deeper knowledge of humans than that of the humanist Confucians themselves.

The book is divided into seven chapters (like the *Zhuangzi*'s Inner Chapters), four of which are "extensively revised versions" of previous publications, and in each of which Chong engages in "a close analysis of central concepts" (xiii) and their "critical implications." The *Zhuangzi*'s criticism of ancient Confucian assumptions and views is explained by focusing extensively (yet not exclusively) on one major *Zhuangzi* concept and related passages in each chapter. The core and basis of the "anti-Confucian" reconstruction of the *Zhuangzi*'s thought is the non-normative conception of *tian* (heaven/nature) emphasized in the Introduction and first chapter (8, 11, 12, 14), a view which rejects Confucius' and Mencius' claim of a unique moral continuity between *tian* and humans. This conception, accentuated again later in the book (61,

88, 139), entails that there is no natural, universal and objective grounding for socially constituted norms, morality and practices, including the Confucian ritual order, mourning rituals, and hierarchical distinctions. The *Zhuangzi*'s understanding of all social rules and social systems as arbitrary human constructs leads to value pluralism, accepting "different conceptions of the good and thus different social systems" (13). Chong also argues that it is the rejection of "objective principles" as the basis of social order that separates the *Zhuangzi* from the *Xunzi*, the Confucian text which also espouses a non-normative notion of *tian* (13, 94).

In chapter 2, the *Zhuangzi*'s *cheng xin* (pre-established heart-mind) is juxtaposed to the Confucian belief in a morally autonomous heart-mind, moral agency, and moral certainty. Chong argues that for the *Zhuangzi*, the human heart-mind is psychologically more complex than its conception by the ancient Confucians because there are different motives at work and certain emotional states cannot be effectively controlled by the cognitive function. Moral judgments are limited precisely because they reflect the *cheng xin*. In chapter 3, the philosophies of nature of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi* are compared; the Zhuangzian concept of *hua* (transformation), understood primarily as "transformation of identity," is contrasted to the *Xunzi*'s "transformation of natural process." The explanation of *hua* involves other important *Zhuangzi* concepts like oneness and *Qi*, as well as the issues of contingency and death. In chapter 4, the polysemy of *zhen* (true) is explained by analyzing its associations with other fundamental concepts like *tian*, *de* (virtue), and *xing* (nature). The concept of *zhen* is highlighted because it "further extends criticisms of the Confucian rites and morality" (66) which are deemed unnatural. Its intimate link to *tian* in the Inner Chapters leads to a discussion of the human—nature distinction, described as not absolute and not self-evident in *Zhuangzi* 6, and the spiritual ideal of the *zhen ren* (true person). In chapter 5, *qing* in the *Zhuangzi* is argued to be understood as socially-constituted "facts" rather than the more conventional "emotions"; the key phrase "without the *qing* of humans" is understood in a limited way as a changing of attitudes or disengagement from norms and practices, especially "Confucian mourning rites" which add harmful unnatural grief. In chapter 6 the author attempts to show how *zhi yan* (goblet words), one of "three forms of metaphorical language" in *Zhuangzi* 27, are fundamental in deflecting criticism that the *Zhuangzi*'s own words, like those of the Confucians and Mohists, are the reflection of *cheng xin*. Chong argues that the rich and imaginative uses of metaphor to intimate things can further explain the *Zhuangzi*'s non-attachment to fixed distinctions and positions. Chapter 7 focuses on ideal figures with non-Confucian *de* from *Zhuangzi* 5 and the core values implied by the *Zhuangzi*'s criticism: freedom, equality, diversity, tolerance, and humanity (138–9). There is also an attempt to answer potential Confucian objections to the implicit claim that Confucianism is not pluralistic enough (135–38).

Since several interpretative and philosophical reflections cannot be commented at length here, some noteworthy scholarly features which distinguish Chong's text can at least be singled out: the discussion of the *Zhuangzi* within the historical context of the pre-Qin cross-current of ideas whilst not neglecting contemporary issues of Western philosophy such as moral autonomy and value pluralism; ample quotations from the primary text (also in Chinese) and careful textual analysis of many passages of the *Zhuangzi*; the concern to "delineate strands of thought both within specific chapters and between different chapters" (66); references to a wide and varied array of secondary sources on the *Zhuangzi*, both classic and very recent, in English as well as in Chinese; use of the theories of contemporary Western philosophers like Isaiah Berlin, Donald Davidson, Martha Nussbaum, and John Searle to explain better the *Zhuangzi*'s key concepts; the special attention given to the "central similarities and differences" between *Zhuangzi* and *Xunzi*, especially in chapters 1, 3, and 5, given the latter's uniqueness in early Confucianism and closeness to the *Zhuangzi* on certain concepts like *tian* and *hua*; a conclusion or recapitulation section which conveniently summarizes the discussion and main claims of each chapter; and, the lack of typographical mistakes in general.

On a more critical note, the main argument that the *Zhuangzi* promotes value pluralism (18, 64, 135, 140) is interesting and relevant; however, it should be noted that it has already been basically proposed by other scholars like Chad Hansen and David Wong. The proximity of Wong's position to Chong's interpretation is explicitly acknowledged in the text (136). Most importantly, Chong arguably does not persuasively reconcile his liberal and pluralist interpretation, textually based mostly on *Zhuangzi* 2 and theoretically on the non-normative notion of *tian*, with the "normative concerns" (xiv, 65) expressed in the *Zhuangzi*'s descriptions of the ideal life and the ideally paradigmatic individuals. The *zhen ren* and *shen ren* ideals, certain moral qualities like "equanimity" and "calmness", healthy "caring for one's life" (7), minimizing of desires ("few desires" [70]; "minimal desires" [76]), specific self-cultivation methods (81, 140), the rejection of political power, wealth, and fame, just to name a few examples mentioned in Chong's own discussion, show a peculiar normative bias. In other words, neutrality and openness regarding the good life, values which are usually associated with modern liberal pluralism, differ from the *Zhuangzi*'s clear endorsement of and preference for—at least in several well-known passages including the Inner Chapters—a particular form of ideal life. For instance, the *Zhuangzi*'s *zhen ren* implies the disapproval of a lifestyle of "deep desires" or the pursuit of personal gain and reputation which a modern liberal would not object to as long as others are not harmed. The principal claim that the *Zhuangzi* defends plural conceptions of "the good life" is compromised by the *Zhuangzi*'s aforementioned normative preferences and promotion of specific ideals of the good life. It is very difficult for Chong and other defenders of a pluralist reading of the *Zhuangzi* to square its supposed endorsement of value diversity with the text's regular, consistent and unambiguous commitment to a certain privileged set of values or norms. It may be relevant to note that Hansen diminishes the importance of key passages of the Inner Chapters not in *Zhuangzi* 2 in order to counter precisely this objection, a stance which, however, is not adopted by Chong.

To conclude, *Zhuangzi's Critique of the Confucians* is certainly worth reading mostly because its comparative approach encourages one to think more deeply about the uniqueness of the *Zhuangzi* within its immediate intellectual context and the broader Chinese philosophical tradition largely influenced by these early Confucian classics. Chong's theoretical effort is perhaps best appreciated in the context of what he describes as the general "tendency to conflate the Chinese tradition with Confucianism" (136). Its specific focus is valuable because although the critical distance between the *Zhuangzi* and early Confucian texts has always been noted, it has not often been the exclusive object of a thorough and sustained investigation which is at once textual and philosophical. Kim-chong Chong's book has the indisputable merit of trying to articulate more clearly and precisely the conceptual divide separating the *Zhuangzi* and the "early Confucians."

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