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7.4 Zhuangzi's axis of daos

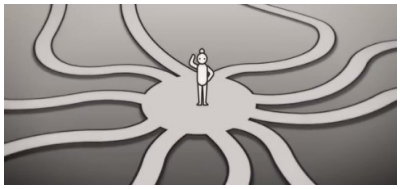
So what is Zhuangzi's own way of approaching the issue of relativism?

One passage in the Zhuangzi seems like hiss own way of putting the absolute position. He calls it:

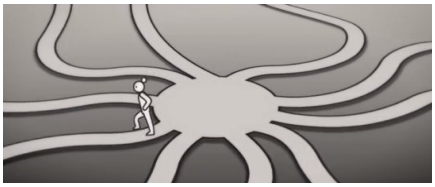
道樞 dào shū (axis of daos)

Zhuangzi speaks of this axis of daos as if it were a pivot or a hinge. What is crucial about this axis is that

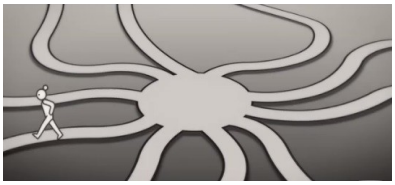
Innumerable paths of judgment are *possible* from here, non yet actually committed.



Here we see a person standing on the axis. He is not committed to any 是非 shì-fēi path but could choose from many. To choose is To step out from the axis.



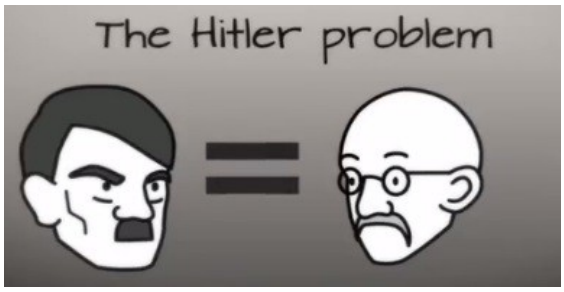
Here we see a person who has just stepped off the axis making a shì-fēi judgment. He now commits to the judgments that follow on that commitment to a path of linked choices.



Here we see someone who has gone down the path of his choice and his steps are determined by the natural structure of that path.

Zhuangzi frequently uses the phrase 以明 **yǐ míng** (with clarity) to sum up his advice, but never explains it. One way to understand it is as a reminder that **we have already moved from the axis**. Human beings choose behaviors already embedded in a web commitments and trajectories along commitment paths. **We should be aware of our own similarity to others in this regard. We are following natural paths of commitment to future choices**.

Does Zhuangzi's relativism give Zhuangzi a "Hitler problem"?

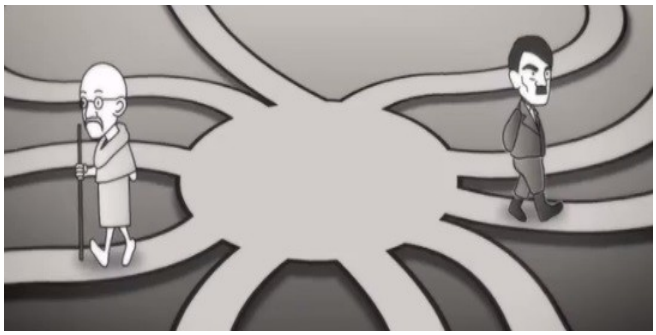


Some interpreters argue that Zhuangzi is caught up in what we might call his "Hitler problem". Thse problem arise when we have a consensus on an obvious moral shì-fēi. Must we judge that since both walk a natural path

Hitler is as natural as Gandi. We can not *shì* one and fēi the other.

These so-called Hitler problems are traps because they start with a conclusion (Hitler = evil) that trivializes a danger in moral thinking. Hitler cases are important because we can easily forget that Nazi's had a structure of moral commitments starting with commitments to e.g., racial purity. Trivializing the danger means not recognizing how we might, out of moral arrogance and confidence, slide into a similar fanatical intolerance of others.

So relativism has a very different role to play—being able to view ourselves as others view us=以明.



Instead, what Zhuangzi could say is this:

"From the point of view of the axis, BothHitler and Gandhi *happened*. Both were committed and had enemies. But Ghandi choose methods (non-violence) that acknowledged the natural humanity of his enemies. Hitler's methods (extermination) denied that of his.

Seeing ourselves as naturally like others even as we disagree is correct lesson.