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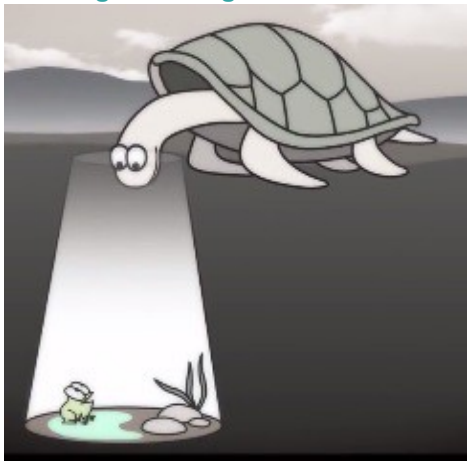
7.11 Politics: Zhuangzi and tolerance

Zhuangzi's attitude towards politics can be summed up in a contemporary slogan: “Politics is a nasty business.” But his reasons for thinking this are rather different from the reasons we might have.

What does Zhuangzi have in mind as politics?

Zhuangzi's target is the conception of politics that we say in Confucius and Mozi: guiding the entire society with **a single social *dào* that assigns everyone a named and structured role in a group project.** It has a positive aspect--we all work together to produce a cooperative symphony. What Zhuangzi objects to is Confucius' implicit (even explicit) **paternalism**. This modern term describes the feature that Zhuangzi objects to. Social engineers take the role of the father—instilling our values in us—telling us what *dào* gives real meaning to our lives. **Zhuangzi is skeptical that anyone is in a position to make that decision for all of us** and he illustrates this with many parables, the most famous that of well-frog and the giant sea-turtle.

The frog and the giant sea-turtle



A **frog** lives in an abandoned well enjoying his wonderful, activity-filled and varied life, climbing on the loose bricks, floating in the water, squeezing mud between his toes, eating bugs and enjoying his damp and cozy environment. He invites a **huge sea-turtle** to come down and check out the joys of his life. The giant sea-turtle tried, but got stuck in the narrow opening. So he tried to explain the features of his life in a sea environment so expansive the frog was dumb with amazement.

Neither could fully appreciate the richness and value of the life and life paths of the other. Both, for different reasons, were conditioned to the environment appropriate for them, and would be not fit in the natural way of life that gave the other meaning. No natural thing could be in a position to tell them both what paths to pursue in life. (See Zhuangzi: Chapter 17: 10.)

What about the perfect person or the sage?

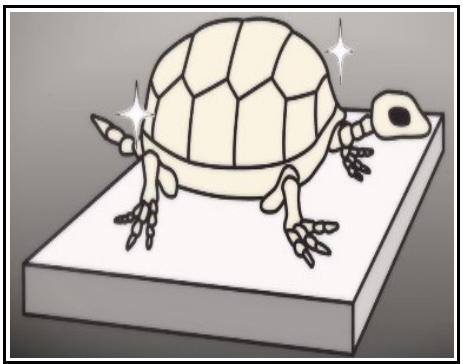
The political monists imagine a point of view of a perfect observer with no limitations—the ultimate human, the Sage King! They ask, “Can't the perfect person tell us all how to live?”

Zhuangzi's responds simply: The perfects of old has no concerns and no need for guidance. “They do not correct the few, or seek heroic achievement, or model themselves on scholars, they don't feel remorse at mistakes or pride in accomplishment, don't fear falling from hiights, drowning in water, burning in fire. This is knowing the attainment of an unreal, false *dào.”* A being with no limitation or physical form walks a path that is irrelevant as a guide to all natural creatures. He neither understands us, nor can we understand him.

(Zhuangzi, here, is rejecting what Western philosophers call an “ideal observer” morality, according to which my moral duty is what a perfectly knowledgeable person (e.g., God) should do. Zhuangzi reflects that **if there were any such perfect beings, they would not know how I should live my natural ordinary life**.)

Zhuangzi's individualism

Zhuangzi's individualism differs from **Western individualism.** It is not a special dignity of each subjective self. His is about the uniqueness of each indexed **perspective** and the guidance natually available in **each local situation, timing, place, actor, commitments and abilities**. Zhuangzi's posture is close to one we think of as political—liberal individualism. Were he to construct an alternative to Confucian and Mohist politics, it would be of a peaceful, non-oppressive society in which people pursue their natural guidance including interference with other natural creatures going on their way. But Zhuangzi avoids politics:



Zhuangzi, fly fishing on the Pu Er river, is approached two royal officers with a writ of royal office in the Chu kingdom.

Zhuangzi, not even looking up, says: “I've heard Chu has a sapient tortoise, dead these 3000 years, entombed in royal silk in the royal ancestral hall. Given his choice, would prefer to be dead and worshipped or alive, here dragging his tail in the mud?”

The officers say, “Well, alive, dragging his tail.” Zhuangzi goes, “be off with you, then. Leave me here to drag my tail in the mud.”