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June 17th, 2016

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Dark Virtue: Daoism and the Rejection of Civilization

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> Everything you say I reject.
> —Robber Chih
>
> Whatever is against the Dao will soon be destroyed.
> —Daodejing
>
> Everyone in the world is a human sacrifice.
> —"Webbed toes"

Resistance to civilization has existed as long as civilization itself. There have always been those who reject this way of life. Critiques of technology, urban life, agriculture, domestication, and symbolic culture can be found in cultures all around the world and throughout history. As enemies of civilization searching for ways to understand the nature of the world in the 21st century, I believe we can draw on the work of those critics of the past. There is perhaps no region on earth where civilization has been more entrenched for

so long than China. Likewise I believe that there is no more potent critique of civilization from the ancient world than daoism.

In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate how ancient Chinese daoist philosophy is completely consistent with contemporary anti-civilization and green anarchist critiques in its rejection of technology, domestication, agriculture, humanism, and morality. I will analyze the similarities between daoism and modern critiques of civilization in the two most well known daoist volumes, the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi, as well as number of lesser known works. I will also provide vital historical context for understanding the meaning of daoism as a philosophy.

We can say that the philosophy of daoism has a lot to offer critiques of civilization or techno-industrial society but one first has to clarify what is meant by the term daoism. It has to be acknowledged that daoism exists as a religious practice, an alchemical tradition, and various often conflicting philosophies. Furthermore the dichotomy between the anarchic daoists and the statist confucians has been radically exaggerated in contemporary representations. It is certainly true that daoism came to contain much of the folk beliefs and practices of ancient China while the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BC) were officially made into Imperial law during the Han and Tang dynasties. But in reality the two philosophical strands were often woven together, without a clear demarcation between the two. Then there is the thorny matter of authorship in the case of the two most central daoist texts. The putative authors of both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi probably never existed at all and both texts are unquestionably compiled from an unknown number of sources. In fact it is possible that the authors of the two texts were unknown to each other. In the case of the former it is more or less accepted that the text that exists today is comprised of sayings from various village elders that were first presented together during the Warring States period (403-221 BCE).

Despite these qualifications, it is clear that the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi were enormously influential in ancient Chinese thought

reject this way of life. Though the challenges of our present moment are truly profound, we can draw strength from those who came before and remember that we are not alone in this struggle. The *way* is there for those who seek it.

and that certain trends and themes are present both in these texts and in others that they inspired. The anti-civilization trend, in other words, is there in the text and deserves to be taken seriously even if we concede that not every daoist was an anarchist and not every daoist anarchist was a primitivist.

In his 2012 Daoism and Anarchism John Rapp argues persuasively that anarchism is central to philosophical daoism. He writes "the Wei-Jin Daoist term wujun literally means 'without a prince'… and is nearly identical in meaning to the Greek an-archos." Again it is important to resist presenting philosophical daoism as monolithic. While there may be similarities in how the Daodejing and Zhuangzi conceptualize the nature of the state as one that is primarily motivated by the desire to rule and perpetuate itself, there are major differences between the two in terms of the limits of anarchism.

Generally speaking the Daodejing is significantly more moderate in its critique of the state. Hsiao Kung-chuan writes "non-action in government need not destroy and cast aside the ruler-servitor institution, and return to the total lack of restraints that exists among birds and beasts…in theoretical terms, what Lao Tzu attacked was not government in and of itself, but any kind of governing which did not conform to 'Taoistic' standards." This is to say that in many ways the Daodejing offers advice for how to rule more effectively rather than critique the notion of rulership as such: "Governing the state is like frying a small fish," "When the government is narrow and dull the people are simple and pure; when the government is clear and acute the people are sharp and crafty." We can see that the Daodejing advocates a kind of rulership that is guided by sages and the principles of wuwei (doing-not-doing or doing nothing).

In terms of anarcho-primitivism, however, the Daodejing has more to offer than may at first appear. In his analysis of political Daoism Roger Ames suggests four necessary elements for establishing a "comprehensive anarchism": "a theory emphasizing a natural 'free' condition of human nature, a rejection of all coercive

authority, a notion of some kind of noncoerive, nonauthoritarian society that could replace coercive authority, and some practical method of moving from authoritarian reality to the nonauthoritarian ideal."So while the Daodejing may not reject outright the structure of ruler and ruled, it certainly conforms to the above conditions. Evidence of this first condition (the emphasis on a natural and free state of human nature) can be found in the following passage from the Daodejing:

> When the Great Dao was discarded, only then came ren (virtue) and right. When wisdom and insight emerged, only then came the Great Artifice. When the six kinship classes fell out of harmony, only then came filiality and parental kindness. When the state is darkened with chaos, only then do the loyal ministers appear.

In this passage we can see a belief in the need to return to an original state of nature, which is to say, a state of existence unburdened by the artificiality, compartmentalization, and superficiality of civilized society. Furthermore these passages articulate the position that left to their true nature, humanity will return to a path of true virtue and harmony, rather than the abstract notions of virtue and empty moralizing of society. When things are left to their natural state they function as they should, when human beings try to control and interfere with natural processes, the entire human and non-human world is thrown into chaos:

"Cut off sagehood! Cast out wisdom! The people will benefit a hundredfold. Cut off ren! Cast out right! The people will return to filiality and parental kindness. Cut off cleverness! Cast out profit! Brigands and thieves will nowhere be found."

Wisdom, justice, and virtue are names for the failure of humanity to live according to the dao. Impositions upon the world as it is, symptoms of humanity's delusion that it is superior and exempted from the rest of creation.

ory of our primitive past must still exist within us, submerged under aeons of oppression and domestication. According to Rapp, the poem implies that "this place can exist at any time by anyone who 'returns to the root,' or the state of original simplicity." Tao Qian's poem would be the last daoist primitivist text for 500 years.

In the ninth century a treatise was written by someone calling themselves Wu Nengzi ("the Master of No Qualities"). The *Wu Nengzi* repeats many of the arguments we have seen above but ultimately acquiesces to a Confucian justification of power and the state. Critics have pointed out that the *Wu Nengzi*'s emphasis on living simply and in harmony with ones surrounding was likely heavily influenced by Buddhism, which was spreading through China during that time. In fact the *Wu Nengzi* is the last significant work of classical daoist philosophy.

For critics of civilization today it may be hard to think about ancient China as being comparable to our world. The cruelty and destruction of civilization in the 21st has reached such a degree of intensity that we understandably assume it must have been unimaginable to those before us. The daoists of ancient China, however, faced a world much like our own albeit less dramatic in scale. China during the time of the daoists was a world of constant meaningless warfare, an enormous monolithic state apparatus that dictated much of daily life, new technologies that radically changed the age-old relationships that human beings had had with each other and their environment, massive public works projects that disrupted vast ecosystems, and sprawling megalopolises that dwarfed other cities of the ancient world. To the primitivist and the other thinkers we have examined in this essay, the developments of the last several centuries must have seemed as radical as anything we have experienced. While we face the possibility of short term human extinction, the daoists were also quite justified in seeing signs of a degraded and collapsing human existence around them.

The struggle against civilization will continue as long as civilization itself. There will always be those who utterly condemn and

be escaped. Thus they are natural and we should not seek to avoid them. The horse, however, is not born with a bit and bridle. The ox is not born with a yoke. These things are unnatural and are condemned by Bao.

In the early state of nature humanity experienced a level of connectedness with the world and the creature. Bao writes, "the ravening tiger could be trodden on, the poisonous snake handled. Men could wade through swamps without raising the waterfowl, and enter the woodlands without startling the fox." The bellies of the people were full, there was no ideas of property or wealth, and there was peace between the people. Once knowledge began to fracture and disrupt this unity, war, greed, and oppression followed. To prevent the spread of civilization, in the words of Bao Jingyan, "is like trying to dam a river in full flood with a handful of earth."

The poem "Peach Blossom Spring" by Tao Qian (326-397 CE) owes much to Ruan Ji's "Biography of Master Great Man," in its fantastical elements and poetical style. The text presents a powerful utopian vision of the past but unlike many of the other daoist primitivists, "Peace Blossom Spring" explicitly suggests that this lost world can be reattained. The plot of this short poem is simple; a fisherman comes upon a mysterious forest of peach trees and finds within it a passage way to a hidden world inhabited by a small community that had fled from civilization and its troubles several hundred years earlier. The people of this village continue to live as they had in ancient generations past, completely cut off from and uninterested in the outside world. They have no government, no money, and no technology. The fisherman is shocked by how happy and carefree the people are and how simply they live. When the fisherman leaves the villagers ask him not to tell the people of the world about their secret place.

Tao Qian's poem can be read in many different ways. John Rapp argues, and I am inclined to agree with him, that the poem is a metaphor for returning to primitive life in the present, "for a psychological discovery of an internal, forgotten tendency." The mem-

It is also important to note what the Daodejing actually has to say about governing and authority. While it appears, as we have acknowledged above, to allow for some accommodation of the basic structures of ruler and ruled, there are many significant nuances that deserve to be parsed. So if we say that at least in part the Daodejing is a manual for how to govern more effectively, what can we say are the principles at work here? What would a ruler who rules according to the dao look like? The Daodejing calls for a rejection of militarism, a rejection of status and wealth, a rejection of language, a rejection of growth and development. In other words, as John Rapp writes, the image of the more effective ruler presented in the Daodejing "takes virtually the entire content of rule away…in its condemnation of law, morality, education, taxes, and punishment. In effect the received text takes away all meaning of rulership by removing all elements of coercion." Thus the Daodejing critiques the manner of rulership that is produced under the conditions of civilized mass society. This is precisely why Joseph Needham argues that the Daodejing "was trying to change feudal rulers back into leaders of primitive communal tribes, that is, into tribal elders or wise men with no monopoly on the legitimate use of coercion, to employ again Weber's minimalist definition of the state." In this regard the text is highly amenable to a contemporary anti-civilization reading.

Perhaps the section of the Daodejing which is most explicitly hostile to techno-industrial society is chapter 80:

> Let there be a little country without many people. Let them have tools that do the work of ten or a hundred, and never use them. Let them be mindful of death and disinclined to long journeys. They'd have ships and carriages, but no place to go. They'd have armor and weapons, but no parades. Instead of writing, they might go back to using knotted cords…The next little

> country might be so close the people could hear cocks crowing and dogs barking there, but they'd get old and die without ever having been there.

At first this passage seems overwhelmingly to argue against technology. Ursula Le Guin, points out however that the people in this vision do have access to technology, vehicles, weapons, etc they just choose not to use them. Le Guin interprets this as a statement about the impact that tools have on those that seek to make use of them. In other words, that technology is not neutral but influences and corrupts the user. Joseph Needham has a similar argument, that the daoists opposed the use of new technologies not on principle but chiefly because they saw how quickly such developments were put to use in the service of militarism and state oppression.

As we have seen the Daodejing is a sophisticated text that allows for multiple ways of reading. In the context of civilization and primitivism the Zhuangzi is much more straightforward. The authorship of that the latter text is also less mysterious. The author of at least the seven core chapters (known among scholars as the "inner" chapters) seem to have been written by a man named Zhuang Zhou sometime during the fourth century BCE. Scholars debate the identities of the authors of the remaining "outer" chapters but Angus Graham, perhaps the most important scholar of the Zhuangzi in the West, argues they were written by a group of philosophers he terms "the Daoist primitivists." While the outer chapters were probably written significantly later than the inner chapters as well as the Daodejing (Graham places them during the period 209-202 BCE between the fall of the Qin and the rise of the Han dynasty), according to Rapp there is evidence that the explicitly primitivist portions of the Zhuangzi in fact reflect the philosophy of a much older tradition based around the teachings of legendary hermit Yang Zhu, as well as the Shen Nung ("Divine Farmer") tradition of stateless agrarian communities that stretch back well before the Warring

is not particularly unique among the other daoists, his poetry is absolutely breathtaking: "Look at the Sun Crow who roams beyond the dust of the world, and at the wrens who play among the weeds." In addition to functioning as the intellectual leader of the Seven Sages, Ruan Ji would inspire later daoists as we will see below.

In 265 CE the Sima clan forced the Wei emperor to abdicate and founded the Jin dynasty. They also executed many of the daoist intellectuals who had been brought to court by the Wei rulers and in the following years the neo-daoist revival collapsed. One of the remaining philosophers from this period was Bao Jingyan (ca. 300 CE), who wrote what John Rapp calls "the greatest direct statement of Daoist anarchism." Bao Jingyan utterly rejects the notion of rulership and asserts that the natural state of humanity is in small, self-sufficient communities, living alongside the animals. For Bao Jingyan, this utopia is disrupted by the acquisition of knowledge. Following contemporary anarcho-primitivist arguments concerning the developments of the neolithic revolution, Bao suggests that the search for knowledge led to the establishment of hierarchies, notions of profit and class, and the invention of new destructive technologies. Likewise Bao insists that crime and injustice are byproducts of rulership and denounces the moral hypocrisy of the state.

According to Bao, in the beginning, all creatures lived in the happiness and peace of undifferentiation. Knowledge, says Bao, "has its origin in the use of force that goes against the true nature of things." Following the ideas of the primitivist in "Horses Hooves," Bao writes "when the cinnamon-tree has its bark stripped or the varnish-tree is cut, it is not done at the wish of the tree…to be bitted and bridled is not in accordance with the nature of the horse." The meaning of the dao for Bao is for things to live according to their nature, which is to say, freely and without the imposition of external sources of pain or unhappiness. To experience injury, sickness, and ultimately death, these things are part of live and cannot

staying true to our truest selves rather than being misled by adornments and distractions such as music, duty, and even the overindulgence of our five senses. As the primitivists states, we must "find security in the essentials of our nature." Everything else leads us and the world into disorder.

Several hundred years after Zhuangzi and the primitivist, during the early years of the Wei-Jin Period (220-280 CE), a massive daoist resurgence occurred. The Wei dynasty, founded by the son of the great warlord Cao Cao, filled their court with philosophers from many different schools in their attempt to establish philosophical justification for their rule. During a short period of time from 240-249 CE, in fact, daoism was adopted as the official orthodox philosophy of the Wei state. But while the Wei aristocrats paid lip service to daoist principles, many of the greatest philosophical minds of the time refused to participate with the government. During this period a group of daoist philosophers known as the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" started coming together and engaging in lively, drunken debates (which frequently occurred in the nude) concerning the ideas contained in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. The Seven Sages played an important role in keeping the daoist critique of civilization and the state alive. The most famous of the Seven Sages is Ruan Ji (210-263 CE).

Ruan Ji's greatest work, "Biography of Master Great Man," is a fantastical novelistic poem that describes the life of a mysterious sage. In it Ruan Ji continues the tradition of the the legendary daoists and presents, in the words of Hsiao Kung-chuan, a "merciless attack upon conventionality, and, at the same time, an enthusiastic encomium of anarchist freedom." For Ruan Ji, like Zhuangzi before him, the government is just as bad (if not worse) than the thieves and the ideal society is one that existed in the distant hunter-gatherer past. In Ruan Ji's vision the utopian past was disrupted by the intrusion of artificiality into human communities. Government, mass society, and culture represent the continued evolution of this artificiality. While Ruan Ji's critique

States period. The chapters influenced by Yang Zhu, known as the Yangist chapters, include the story of Robber Chih, which as we will see below, is one of the most important anti-civilization daoist texts.

This is not to say, however, that the inner chapters of the Zhuangzi don't also have much to offer in this context. The second inner chapter indeed is one of the most elegant and profound in the daoist canon. Rapp draws our attention to the following passage:

"The hundred joints, the nine openings, the six organs, all come together and exist here [as my body]. But which part should I feel closest to? I should delight in all parts, you say? But there must be one I ought to favor more. If not, are they all of them mere servants? But if they are all servants, then how can they keep order among themselves? Or do they take turns being lord and servant? It would seem as though there must be some True Lord among them. But whether I succeed in discovering his identity or not, neither adds to nor detracts from his truth."

The author here suggests that in the first case, there is a unity of things, and in the second that there is a principle that establishes that unity, which is lies beyond the things themselves. Or as Rapp puts it "since there is no one body part that rules the others, there is thus a natural or spontaneous order in the universe that exists without human intervention." We should also note here that one of the fundamental distinctions between philosophical daoism and religious/alchemical daoism is the complete absence of deism in the former. There is a force that governs things and keeps them in order; it's called nature or the dao.

The second inner chapter of the Zhuangzi also presents one of daoism's most articulate and powerful critiques of dualistic thinking. The author writes

"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. Are there really It and

Other? Or really no It and Other? Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way. When once the axis is found at the centre of the circle there is no limit to responding with either, on the one hand no limit to what is it, on the other no limit to what is not."

These kinds of dualisms are obviously central to the logic of civilization, the logic of oppression in all its forms. Indeed the exploitation of another human or non-human life depends entirely on the ability of the mind to make these kinds of It-Other distinctions. As we can see above the author does not advocate relativism. It is not enough to say that some people see things one and others see things differently. They are both mistaken in assuming that their perspective is correct. But this does not mean that one is as good as another. In truth if one can perceive beyond dualism they may discern that the boundary between It and Other cannot be found.

The second inner chapter ends with one of the most elegant and subtle moments in the daoist canon:

> Last night Chuang Chou dreamed he was a butterfly, spirits soaring he was a butterfly (is it that in showing what he was he suited his own fancy?), and did not know about Chou. When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Chou with all his wits about him. He does not know whether he is Chou who dreams he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Chou. Between Chou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing; just this is what is meant by the transformation of things.

Aside from the tremendous beauty of this passage, it also presents a radical critique of dualism. Chuang Chou (Zhuangzi), is never fixed as man or butterfly but is endlessly cycling between the two. He glides effortlessly from one to the other, understanding that awake-asleep is yet another dichotomy to be overcome. Who is to say, the author argues, what is reality and what is a dream.

> With the birth of the sages the great robbers arise. Smash the sages, turn the thieves and bandits loose, and the world will be in order…Once the sages are dead the great robbers will not arise, the world will be at peace and there will be no more trouble.

If you do not try to control people, tell them what to do, and punish them, they will behave peacefully and harmoniously. If people are left alone they will learn to come together and resolve their problems and conflicts.

The end of "Rifling Trunks" differs from the Yangist version in tone and content. In the latter, Robber Chih is mostly focused on extolling the lost glory of the golden age before the Yellow Emperor brought civilization and condemning the hypocrisy of the present. In "Rifling Trunks" we are left on a note of despair that sounds remarkably contemporary to 21st century readers:

"So we disturb the brightness of the sun and moon above, dissipate the quintessences in the mountains and rivers below, interrupt the round of the four seasons in between; of the very insects which creep on the ground or flit above it, not one is not losing its nature."

Amazingly, the primitivist is able to perceive not only the harm that civilization does to living things but to the very landscape and celestial bodies themselves (while civilization has not reached a point where its activities harm the sun and moon, we can think of global warming, etc in terms of damaging the earth as a planet or cosmic entity). That the author was able to perceive this harm several thousand years ago speaks to the importance of daoism to the anti-civilization critique.

The final primitivist chapter "Keep it in place and within bounds" continues to develop the same themes as those we have seen above. The author emphasizes again that morality, wisdom, and culture disorder humanity and it's relation to the natural world, thereby weakening what the daoists termed "the powers," or our true nature. For the primitivist, the powers can only be cultivated through

golden age, the primitivist writes, "In the age when power was at its utmost, men lived in sameness with the birds and the animals." We could return to this sameness if we ceased allowing ourselves to be led by the so-called sages, those who decide what is good and what is bad, and how things should be managed. Overwhelmed by the 'knowledge' of the sages, we forget the only things we truly need to know. Like domesticated horses, whose nature has been severed from them:

> As for horses, when they live out on the plains they eat grass and drink the water, when pleased they cross necks and stroke each other, when angry swing round and kick at each other. That is as far as a horse's knowledge goes. If you put yokes on their necks and hold them level with a crossbar, the horses will know how to smash the crossbar, wriggle out of the yokes, butt the carriage hood, spit out the bit and gnaw through the reins.

Living things always know to resist control. After thousands of years of domestication, it is also time for humanity to throw off the yoke and smash our fetters.

In "Rifling Trunks," we meet our friend Robber Chih once again. Much like the Yangist version of the story, most of the chapter focuses on a critique of morality, knowledge, and hypocrisy. Chih argues that it is precisely because we have invented a concept of right, that we also have an understanding of wrong. The morality of bandits like himself is condemned while the morality of emperors, princes, and bureaucrats is exalted, despite the fact that the latter cause infinitely more suffering to others. But daoism does not promote moral relativism. What is right and wrong is not merely dependent on one's perspective or position. As Chih says, warlordism and corruption are not inherent to humanity. They only arise following the emergence of rulers and sages, those who tell others how to act.

We will now turn to the 'outer' chapters of the Zhuangzi, the so-called 'primitivist' chapters in particular. As we have seen above, the authors of the primitivist chapters were philosophers who advocated a return to pre-Zhou dynasty life. They saw the age of small-scale, self-sufficient rural communities as a paradise uncorrupted by the oppression of the state and its apparatus, militarism, advanced technology, and symbolic culture. Numerous scholars have attacked the outer chapters for this reason. Rapp writes "critics would suggest that this [primitivist vision] was always an anti-technological ideal that posited a lost utopia for in the past. Furthermore, this was inherently a negative vision of loss that offered little or no hope for grafting the benefits of economic and technological progress onto an anarcho-communist future society." We can see this perspective at play in the following comments by Hsiao Kung-Chuan: "Western anarchism is…a doctrine of hope, whereas Chinese anarchism seems to be a doctrine of despair." An even more pernicious analysis, one which was supported by Mao, presents the daoist position as a nihilistic de facto support of the status quo.

Rapp, following Needham, argues that the daoists and the writers of the outer chapters in particular were not just miserable cranks but actually put forward a vision for the future. Needham suggests that the authors of the outer chapters were remnants of older primitive communities and that they believed that the ideal society could be achieved as soon as people returned to following the dao. Furthermore, as Rapp points out, the daoist concept of ziran ("of itself so," "natural," "spontaneous") suggests a deeply hopeful and optimistic worldview. The message comes through loud and clear across the daoist canon that when we act according to the principle of ziran, things have a way of working themselves out. Moreover, the optimistic nature of daoism as seen in the idea of ziran is further emphasized in the concept of hundun, which Rapp glosses as "positive chaos, primeval unity, or social homogeneity." In social terms hundun suggests "a positive vision of individuals living and working together in a stateless society."

This is the utopian vision of daoism. By removing the artificial distinctions that we have imposed on ourselves and the world, we will rediscover the unity that has always existed among things.

In addition to the Yangist chapter "Robber Chih," we will also examine the so-called 'primitivist' chapters: "Webbed toes," "Horses hooves," "Rifling trunks," and "Keep it in place." The philosophical core of "Robber Chih" is a dialogue between Confucius and the eponymous bandit, in which the latter argues for a return to a lost golden age before the Yellow Emperor Huangdi appeared and brought with him the invention of weapons, the rule of law, mathematics, astronomy, domestication, and agriculture. According to legend Huangdi was the first to centralize the state and compelled the hunters and nomads to settle and become peasants.

We are introduced to robber Chih as a fearsome warlord who terrorizes the country side with his army. He rapes, steals, and murders with impunity. Confucius, who is friends with Chih's older brother, decides that he will go talk to the robber and try to dissuade him from his life of crime. When Confucius comes to Chih's compound, he finds the bandit and his men feasting on human livers. Confucius first attempts to flatter Chih by praising his handsomeness and strength, his wisdom and judgement, and his bravery. He then tries to bribe Chih, suggesting that all the kings and lords would be willing to set aside territory for Chih to become a king himself if he would be willing to renounce his violent ways. Chih's response is proud and fierce: "That he can be restrained by appeals to profit and be moralised to in speeches is never to be said except of the stupid." From the outset Chih rejects utterly the notion of personal gain and the morality of society for neither of these things holds more value for him than to act freely as pleases him.

Chih goes on to describe life in the the golden age:

> I have heard that of old the birds and the animals were many but the men were few. In those days the people lived with their kin and loved all equally. They knew only what was natural and had no knowledge of righteousness; they practiced a common virtue and had no use for the distinctions of duty. Therefore their conduct was perfect and their power was not lost. In those days the people lived with the hills and streams, and the paths of the mountains were free of traffic. On the water there were no boats or bridges. The ten thousand things grew together and were not separated. Birds and beasts gathered in flocks, and grass and trees grew long and tall. Thus the birds and beasts could be led around, and the trees could be climbed and peered into. For in the age of perfect virtue men lived with birds and beasts and were one with the ten thousand things. How could they distinguish among the gentlemen and the rabble?

grass and drinks the water, lifts the knee high and prances." But civilization allows nothing to be free:

> Then came Po Lo and said, 'I'm good at managing horses.' He singed them, shaved them, clipped them, branded them, tied them with martingale and crupper, cramping them in stable and stall, and the horses which died of it were two or three out of ten. He starved them, parched them, made them trot, made them gallop, in formation or neck to neck, tormented by bit and reins in front and threatened from behind by whip and goad; and the horses that died before he finished were more than half.

In other words, living things can indeed be managed. They can be made to look and behave just the way we want them to. But this can only be accomplished by their suffering. And in the end, the price of this management will be that most of them will die. To manage and control, the logic of civilization, is to destroy. This is true for everything, human or animal, animate or inanimate. To force something to conform to an idea that is not within its nature can only bring about its annihilation. Likewise, to seek to control something is to do violence to it. The primitivist certainly does not believe this only applies to living things:

"The potter says 'I'm good at managing clay; my circles are true to the compass, my squares to the L-square.' The carpenter says, 'I'm good at managing wood; my bends are true to the curve, my straight edges correspond to the line.' Do you suppose that it is in the nature of clay and wood to want to be true to compasses and L-squares and the carpenter's curve and line?"

We are so far from the way, the primitivist argues, that we value the standards that we have invented over the will and nature of things as they are. The more we impose our control on the world, the more we separate ourselves from it. Evoking Robber Chih's

It must be done nevertheless. Whether a person or an action is considered good or evil is as representative of human nature as a useless extra appendage. It's something that occurs from time to time but its occurrence should not be confused with its essential nature.

> The analogy of the webbed toes goes further. Humanity has become utterly trapped by things that are extraneous to our nature. Fine food, music, art, perfumes and fragrances, all the things of culture take us further and further away from our nature:
>
> First, the Five Colours derange the eye and impair its sight. Secondly, the Five Notes derange the ear and impair its hearing. Thirdly, the Five Smells fume in the nostrils and cause congestion between the brows. Fourthly, the Five Tastes dirty the mouth and make it sickly. Fifthly, inclinations and aversions disturb the heart and make one's nature volatile. These five are all harmful to life.

Like a sixth finger, these things draw our nature away in unproductive directions, toward trivialities and superficialities. When we allow ourselves to be governed by these temptations we quickly lose all awareness of our own imprisonment. Our senses dulled, our bodies weak, stuffed into ridiculous costumes we are nothing more than a "condemned man with his chained arms and manacled fingers, or a tiger or a leopard in its cage."

In "Horses Hooves" the author argues powerfully that humanity has lost its nature through the corruptions of civilization and society. In the wild, natural state of things, all is arranged for the best. Each plant and animal has what it needs to survive and live as it chooses. Thus, the horse in the wild "has hooves to tread the frost and snow, and hair to ward off wind and cold, it champs the

> ple all lived in nests to escape them. In the daytime they gathered acorns and chestnuts, and at nightfall perched in the treetops; therefore they were named the Nester clan people. Of old the people did not know how to clothe themselves, in summer they piled up masses of firewood, and in winter burned it; therefore they were named the Life-knower people. In the age of Shen-nung they slept sound, woke fresh, the people knew their mothers, but did not know their fathers, and lived as neighbours with the deer. By ploughing they were fed, by weaving clothed, and there was no mischief in their hearts. This was the culmination of utmost Power.

We can see in this utopian vision many elements that resonate with contemporary critiques of civilization. That humanity should not be the dominant species. That human beings can live simply and by doing so find peace. And most importantly, that this is the highest form of virtue humanity can aspire to. Of course, this was the life of all humanity before the Yellow Emperor and his brethren, the so-called culture heroes of world mythology. Following the innovations of the Yellow Emperor, Chih angrily recounts, war broke out among the peoples of the world and men were made ministers and blood ran like rivers. Exposing the hypocrisy of Confucius' alleged virtue Chih points out that by advising kings and lords, Confucius himself has blood on his hands just like him.

"Now you cultivate the Way of King Wen and King Wu, and with all the eloquence in the world at your disposal you teach it to a later generation. In your spreading robe and narrow belt you bend words and falsify deeds, to delude and lead astray the princes of the empire, hoping to get riches and honors from them. There's no robber worse than you. Why doesn't the world call you Robber Confucius instead of calling me Robber Chih?"

The moralist, in other words, is just as bad as the murderer. The state employees men like Confucius to lecture about morality while the state is the greatest criminal of them all. Man kills but one man is considered just for killing and the other is considered wicked. The 'humane rule' advocated by Confucius is an illusion. Trying to end crime by imposing order is worse than crime itself.

Chih rejects everything Confucius has to say and ruthlessly attacks the notion of wisdom itself, describing how every sage in history was ultimately undone. Before Confucius is allowed to escape with his life, Chih repeats the idea that its better to be a murderer than a liar, for the path of virtue is inevitably the path of deception.

> Whoever cannot gratify his fancies…is not the man who has fathomed the Way [dao].

The character of Robber Chih makes an appearance in several of the primitivist chapters as well. But as A.C. Graham and others have noted, the primitivist chapters are written in a very different style from the rest of the Zhuangzi, including the Yangist chapters. The author or authors of the primitivist chapters have a lot in common with the authors of the Yangist chapters, most importantly the belief that humanity existed in a "primal utopia" until the Yellow Emperor, but they vary tremendously in style. The Yangist chapters, including "Robber Chih," are calm, collected, and somewhat consistent with the inner chapters, or those thought to be written by the real Zhuangzi (if he existed). The primitivist chapters by contrast can really only be said to be daoist in content. The style is aggressive and combative. In the words of A.C. Graham, " The Primitivist is an extremist who despises the whole of the moral and aesthetic culture. He wants to revert to the simplest mode of life, undisturbed by the temptations of luxury and sophistication, intellectual abstraction, above all by Confucian and Mohist moralism." The latter portion of the above quote refers to the period in which the primitivist is thought to have been writing.

In 221 BC Shih Huang ti (Qin Shi Huang) unified China through conquest for the first time. Immediately after his death however the entire region became embroiled in civil war. During this period a number of influential philosophical movements were revitalized, including Confucianism and Mohism, which had previously been repressed under the reign of the Qin emperor. The primitivist, writing perhaps around 205 BC, sees the moral philosophy of the Confucians and others as utterly absurd in a hopeless world of endless civil war. He believes that "mankind has disrupted the spontaneous [ziran] harmony, not only of his own society but of the cosmos itself, so that now even the seasons come irregularly and the animals live distorted lives." Angus Graham suggests that we read the primitivist chapters like pamphlets designed to shock the status quo. It is clear that the author is no tranquil daoist sage but rather one who observes the events around him with anger, even rage.

Much of the primitivist's invective is directed against the so-called sages or moral philosophers. The chapter "Webbed Toes" begins by pointing out that physical anomalies such as webbed feet or extra fingers are organic in the sense that they arise from the body but are not essential to that body. Thus human society develops along a vast variety of lines or "offshoots" of equal superfluousness. Moral philosophy is one such superfluous offshoot of human nature much like a useless extra finger: "chiselling phrases and hammering sentences to make the heart stray among questions about 'the hard and the white', 'the same and the different', and fatuously admire useless propositions." The primitivist argues that to stay on the correct path or way (dao), means to never lose sight of what we really are and that all the things that we have surrounded ourselves with take us further and further away from our true nature.

But the primitivist is not a pacifist like Laozi and Zhuangzi and keeping true to our nature comes at a price. What does one do with webbed toes? Rip them apart. What does one do with an extra finger? Bite it off. The fact that something is extraneous does not mean it will not hurt when you remove it, the primitivist warns.