

Towards a Universal Eudaimonism?

Aristippus and Zhuangzi on Play, Dependence and the Good Life

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Abstract

The article explores similarities between the philosophies of Zhuangzi and Aristippus, focusing in particular on play and eudaimonism. The main thesis is that both authors encourage the cultivation of a playful mindset, defined in the paper as the “ludic self”, which operates as a strategy for leading a flourishing life. By shaping a fluid, unstructured identity, the ludic self promotes negative subtraction from the structuring power of social nexus and proactive adaptation to shifting circumstances. Furthermore, some aspects of these philosophies present an inter-disciplinary convergence with scientific findings from the psycho-biology of play, concerned with the mobilization of catheted energies and the prevention, or resolution, of addictive states. These promising connections with the fields of psychology and biology also represent an original contribution in respect to the existing debates within Zhuangzi studies, and scholarship on the Cyrenaics. From a methodological point of view, the article pursues what Rorty defines as a “rational reconstruction”, which involves a re-interpretation of past philosophies in light of present debates, ideas and vocabularies with the aim of engaging a trans-cultural, trans-historical dialogue. The value of this operation relies upon the universality of human experience, which always allows re-interpretation and re-actualization of past philosophies as a dialogical exercise of questioning otherness within a hermeneutic framework.

Keywords: Play, Aristippus, Zhuangzi, you 遊, eudaimonia, dependence

1. Introduction

As the proverbial guest who is thrown out the door and comes back in through the window, the problem of universals never left the house of philosophy, not even when threatened by Occam's razor or Nietzsche's hammer. Quiet and subtle like dust, it just displaced itself.

If the individuation of universal properties or classes of objects still puzzles scientists and metaphysicians all around the globe, Kant's revolutionary intuition of relocating the universal laws of nature within the tighter space of human intellect

appears a more approachable task. For this reason, this article discusses a universal human experience: play.

The challenge I would like to take on is to show how the cultivation of a playful mindset, which I named “the ludic self”, operates as a universal strategy for psycho-physiological well-being across different epochs and cultures, potentially offering a universal strategy for pursuing a happy, flourishing life (*eudaimonia*). I prefer translating *eudaimonia* as “flourishing life” rather than “happiness”, the two being the most common translations: “The trouble with 'flourishing' is that animals and even plants can flourish [...] The trouble with 'happiness' is that in ordinary conversation it connotes something subjectively determined” (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2003).

Since we are obviously talking about human beings, I feel “flourishing” has no serious counterindications here. Also, “happiness” in common language tends to describe a temporary, transient feeling, while *eudaimonia* denotes a more stable mindset, prolonged in time. Focusing specifically on the figures of Aristippus and Zhuangzi, I illustrate how they fulfil eudaimonism by shaping a fluid, unstructured identity that combines negative subtraction from the structuring power of social nexus, and positive adaptation to shifting circumstances.

Indeed, rather than a purely “historical reconstruction”, what I have in mind is more a “rational reconstruction”, following the distinction proposed by Rorty (1985). A historical reconstruction implies that no historical figure can be associated with debates, ideas and vocabulary that were unfamiliar or unknown to her, based on historical evidence. Instead, a rational reconstruction interprets historical figures in light of present debates, ideas and vocabulary in the attempt of engaging them in a philosophical dialogue. Rorty describes this operation as re-educating the “mighty dead” by interpreting their position within a trans-cultural and trans-historical dialogue.

The value of this second kind of reconstruction relies upon the universality of human experience, which always allows re-interpretation and re-actualization of past philosophies as a dialogical exercise of questioning otherness within an operational framework that is necessarily and irremediably hermeneutic. After all, “the Fregean,

the Kripkean, the Popperian, the Whiteheadian, and the Heideggerian will each re-educate Plato in a different way before starting to argue with him” (Rorty 1985, 54).

With this methodology in mind, I entrust the originality of my contribution to the inter-disciplinary convergence of philosophy and the psycho-biology of play: by appealing to relevant scientific findings, I illustrate how the cross-cultural dialogue between Aristippus and Zhuangzi represents a solid basis for the construction of a universal eudaimonism structured around the cultivation of playfulness, the mobilization of cathected energies and the prevention or the resolution of addictive states. These promising connections with the fields of psychology and biology also represent an original contribution in respect to the existing debates within Zhuangzi studies, and scholarship on the Cyrenaics.

2. *Defining Play and the Ludic Self*

A preliminary definition of play is essential. This is not an easy task. As a concept, play is extremely vague and remarkably broad. The concept of play appears to be not only trans-cultural, since a play element can be found in all societies and cultures across different regions and epochs, but also trans-species, since it is by no means limited to humans. Apparently, 90% of mammals exhibit playful behaviours, which is also common among birds (Fagen 1981), fish, lizards, turtles (Burghardt 2005), octopuses (Kuba et al. 2006), and many others.

The first study to investigate play from a wide-ranging perspective is usually taken to be Huizinga's milestone, *Homo Ludens* (1955). In Huizinga's view, play is free and voluntary, distinct from “ordinary” life, spatiotemporally secluded, presents a progression towards the creation of an order and is played for the sake of itself and not of gaining some profit – it is, in a word, “autotelic”, or intrinsically motivated.

Elements of creativity, freedom, variability, intrinsic motivation, oblivion of ordinary life and detachment from strict survival needs are shared by several play

scholars.¹ These aspects all contribute to shaping play as a “clustered concept” because, in a very “quantic” fashion, the field is always influenced by the observer and play can be observed from the point of view of sociology, ethology, biology, neural studies, philosophy, anthropology, history, psychology, as illustrated by a recent study by Henricks which is structured perspectivally (2015).²

As an example of this inherently perspectival domain, Let us consider two movies. In *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), two prisoners of war (De Niro and Walken) are forced by their captors to play russian roulette. Technically they are playing, but their behaviour does not reflect the characteristics typically associated with play: their playing is not free, is not pleasurable, is not separated from their ordinary life, is not relaxed, is not creative.

In another movie, *The House That Jack Built* (Lars von Trier, 2018), Jack, a serial killer, displays a remarkable degree of imagination and creativity in his killings, to the extent of building a house with the frozen corpses of his victims. The whole movie inquires the relationship between cruelty and creation. Technically Jack is not playing, and yet his violence is free, is pleasurable, is separated from his ordinary life, is relaxed, is creative. De Niro's and Walken's behaviour could be classified as playing without showing the typical characteristics of play; Jack's behaviour is not considered playful despite showing several characteristics typically associated with play.

It is also unclear if we can reduce play as a mere “behaviour”. Some, like Huizinga, may be inclined to think that proper play is, more specifically than a behaviour, an activity with social and cultural implications. Some others, like

¹Intrinsic motivation and oblivion of ordinary life: Csikszentmihalyi (1991, 2000) describes a playful mindset typical of such activities as rock climbing, chess, sports and others, that witnesses the merging of action and awareness and a temporal oblivion of self-centred thinking in a deep state of self-rewarding cognitive involvement – the “flow”. Variability, freedom, creativity: see for instance Lieberman (1977), Sutton-Smith (1997; 1999), Gordon (2009) and Brown (2009).

²The original formulation of the concept of “clustered concept”, akin to “family resemblances”, comes from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where he discusses precisely the concept of a “game”: “Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? -- Don't say: There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' -- but look and see whether there is anything in common to all. -- For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.” (I, 66)

Vygotsky, may believe that behavioural play is merely an expression of a state of mind that entails imaginative performances (Vygotsky 1976).

In addition to that, there are different types of play. There are locomotor play, playing with objects, imaginative play, role-play, play as a social interaction, in which the creation and consolidation of affective bonds parallel the exploration of alternative strategies of cooperation and competition towards the attainment of individual or collective goals, and many other forms of play. Wilson, a sociobiologist, wrote that “no behavioral concept has proved more ill-defined, elusive, controversial, and even unfashionable than play” (Wilson 1975, 114).

A definition of play is only possible on a perspectival ground, restricting the scope upon the vastness of the field in a way that is functional to the development of a contingent argument. In fact, if on the one hand play does appear to be a universal trait of all human societies and individuals, on the other hand it cannot be identified with a univocal behaviour, practice, activity, feeling, mindset or firing of neural fibers.

Consequently, I would like to define the present perspective by appealing in the first place to biological findings. Considered as a biological phenomenon, scientific scholarship indicates that play is an “ancient biological structure” that is preconscious and preverbal (Brown 2009). In his comprehensive study on animal play, Burghardt’s delineates five essential criteria for play: first, play has a “limited immediate function”, or in other words, is not directly ascribable to strict survival needs. Second, it possesses an “endogenous component”, which implies a pleasurable, enjoyable, self-rewarding or autotelic dimension. Third, it opens up a “structural or temporal difference” in respect to actual life and its ordinary patterns. Fourth, it consists of a “repeated performance”, possibly allowing room for locomotor and/or conceptual exploration and therefore creativity. Fifth, it happens within a “relaxed field”, meaning that the creature plays within a benign setting characterized by a low level of stress (Burghardt 2005).

Despite being apparently unrelated to survival needs, play actually fulfils an important evolutionary function by involving motor and cognitive skills into a creative exercise of explorative orientation. According to Fagen, play is one among

five “gates of evolution”, patterns of behaviour that foster adaptation and change (Fagen 2005). What play does, is encourage sentient beings to develop behavioural strategies that may help them survive in complex environments.

Playing creatures engage in the voluntary exploration of variable patterns of behaviour and cognition, exposing themselves to the unpredictable reactions of the surrounding environment. Unavoidably, this temporary opening to the unpredictable leads to a progressive transformation of one's ability to cope with the environment, adapt to shifting circumstances and act resourcefully in order to preserve one's power over fate, and indirectly therefore, securing one's psycho-physiological well-being.

It seems therefore that play functions as an evolutionary mechanism of adaptation; and that its functioning relies on the free exploration, variation, transformation of cognitive and behavioural patterns. I would like to enrich this description by highlighting one more aspect of play, and more specifically a psychological nuance: its “diminished consciousness of self” (Brown 2009, 16), regime of “total absorption” (Gordon 2009, 8), loss of reflective self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi 2000), or in Nietzsche's words, “blissful self-forgetfulness” (Spurius 1989). Either seen negatively as a form of resistance or subversion of social bounds, or directed positively towards self-transformation, play entertains with self-identity a relationship of questioning, suspension, deconstruction and erasure.

On the basis of all these findings, I would define “play” as “a circular experience characterized by the selfless expression of psycho-physical variability, which is intrinsically enjoyable and fosters emancipation, autonomy, and ultimately adaptation”. By “circular experience” I mean an experience that does not articulate through linear patterns of causality, but rather as the convergence of multiple factors, psychological, physical, social, biological, and others. By “selfless expression”, I refer to the illustrated aspect of diminished self-consciousness. The remaining elements of the definition are self-explanatory, and all of them are to some extent related to an adaptive dimension. For this reasons, we can make ours Sutton-Smith's definition of play as “adaptive variability”, but re-elaborating it into “selfless adaptive variability”, so temporarily putting in implicit brackets the “intrinsically enjoyable”, “circular

experience” and “emancipation and autonomy” components.³ I also define “the ludic self” as a relatively stable psycho-physiological disposition that exemplifies this state of selfless adaptive variability.

3. *Aristippus and the Ludic Self*

In this section I illustrate how the figure of Aristippus exemplifies the model of the “ludic self”. At first, I discuss the basic tenets of his philosophy, which bases eudaimonia on a form of hedonism, then I argue that his philosophy encourages such qualities as adaptability, variability and a fluid, loose conception of self-identity.

Any attempt at reconstructing the philosophy of the Cyrenaics encounters several problems. The absence of primary sources, the scarcity of secondary sources, the obscurity or incompleteness of all these few sources and, last but not least, the unsystematized, heterogeneous composition of the Cyrenaic “School”, from its founder Aristippus to his daughter Arete, her son Aristippus the Younger, Hegesias the “death-persuader” and others.⁴

Diogenes Laertius reports that the “ultimate goal” (*telos*) according to Aristippus is “the smooth movement giving perception” (DL II, 85).⁵ According to another source, Eusebius, he never spoke openly of the *telos*, but all around him suspected that his ideal *telos* would be to live pleasantly, as *eudaimonia* in his view was based on pleasure (*hedone*) (PE 14.18.31). At the basis of Cyrenaic theory are

³“Play, as a unique form of adaptive variability, instigates an imagined but equilibrical reality within which disequilibrical exigencies can be paradoxically simulated and give rise to the pleasurable effects of excitement and optimism. The genres of such play are humor, skill, pretence, fantasy, risk, contest, and celebrations, all of which are selective simulations of paradoxical variability.” (Sutton-Smith 1999, 253)

⁴The term “school” encompasses both Greek terms *hairesis* (doctrine) and *agoge* (way of life). For a discussion of this point see Zilioli (2012, 40-44). Recent, comprehensive studies on the Cyrenaics that I employed in writing this article are Tsouna (1998) and Lampe (2015).

⁵In Greek philosophy, the *telos* is a specific philosophical term that indicates the “ultimate end”, the most important goal or best course for living a flourishing life. Far from being “subjectively determined”, as our modern conception of “happiness”, *eudaimonia* is always the specification, in ancient philosophy, of a greater *telos*, so in this sense *eudaimonia* “is clearly not a subjective notion.” (Annas 1998, 53) This solves an apparent paradox, reported by Annas (1998, 51): “if I think I am happy at a given time, then I am, and if I find out later that my happiness was based on mistakes of various kinds, then, while I can regret the mistakes, I cannot deny that I was happy. To do so involves an Orwellian rewriting of history.” This appears more a linguistic than a philosophical problem: the paradox only arises if we insist in identifying *eudaimonia* with our modern conception of “happiness”.

“affections” (*pathe*), essentially of two kinds: pain (*ponos*), caused by a rough movement, and pleasure (*hedone*), caused by a smooth movement (DL II, 86). Since smooth movement brings pleasure and smooth movement is the *telos*, we can easily infer that the *telos* is pleasure, as confirmed by Diogenes Laertius and by later Cyrenaics (DL II, 88). In fact the “goal” (*telos*) is not the same as “well-being” or “happiness” (*eudaimonia*), because *telos* is a single allotment of pleasure, whereas *eudaimonia* is a collection (*systema*) composed of singular pleasures (DL II, 87).⁶

In justifying the prioritization of *hedone* over *telos*, a well-known passage by Athenaeus specifies that, according to Aristippus, “pleasant living” (*hedupatheia*) is “unitemporal” (*monokhronos*), or in other words, occupies discrete units of time (DEIP 544a-b). The formulation, as noted by Lampe, is “oxymoronic”, as *hedupatheia* implies a long duration and *monokhronos* single units of time (Lampe 2015, 68). This emphasis on the momentariness of pleasure, also labeled “Aristippean presentism”, has generated much debate.

Some scholars have argued that Aristippean presentism implies a structural rejection of future-concerns, and makes his position incompatible with eudaimonism (Irwin 1991; Annas 1993; O’Keefe 2002). If so, Aristippean presentism “seems like a good strategy for leading an unpleasant life. If I blow all of my money jetting off to Vegas and indulging in drinking bouts, gambling, orgies, and enjoying fish, then I’ll probably end up on the street impoverished, hungry, and ill.” (O’Keefe 2002, 396) Others, without pronouncing themselves on the point of eudaimonism, maintain that Aristippean hedonism is unable to favour great long-term gains over microscopic short-term gains (Feldman 2004).

I believe these interpretations are missing the point, for several reasons. In the first place, they are looking for systematic coherence in a context where philosophies were primarily *agogai*, ways of life, as Pierre Hadot famously argued (Hadot 1995). It seems unfair to reconstruct Aristippus’ philosophy by deducting a theoretical

⁶The Cyrenaics’ unwillingness to recognize *eudaimonia* as the *telos* generated a lively debate in both ancient and contemporary scholarship, but I will come back later on this point.

architecture from a few fragments and judging them through the categories of the contemporary meta-philosophical discourse.

In the second place, textual evidence contradicts Aristippus' supposedly radical recourse to presentism.⁷ In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Aristippus agrees with Socrates that one should not engage in adultery when there are risks, showing future-concerns (MEM II, 1). Besides, Aristippus shows confidence in the value of education as a long-term process capable of structuring and unstructuring habits (DL II, 72).⁸ We may also consider this passage by Diogenes Laertius:

One time on a voyage, when he realized the crew were pirates, he took out his gold and counted it up, then hurled it all overboard as if inadvertently and made a show of bemoaning his loss; some say he added that it was better for the gold to perish because of Aristippus than Aristippus because of the gold.⁹ (DL II, 77)

Why throw gold away, unless you fear being held captive, threatened or killed in the near future?

Therefore, instead of implying that Aristippus' hedonism was associated with an uncompromising self-destructive tendency, it is more apt to interpret it, with Lampe, as a prudential rule of thumb. And this is largely congruent with the image of Aristippus we draw from our few sources, someone who “puts less faith in his ability to control what happens than in his ability to adapt to it.” (Lampe 2015, 72)

In fact, adaptability appears to have been a key quality of Aristippus. Strato (or Plato) described him as the only one who could wear fittingly either gowns or rags

⁷A point that is also raised by O'Keefe, whose argument “does not rely on considerations of what exactly the historical Aristippus believed”, being more “interested in the position of the Cyrenaic school, whose epistemology and ethics were systematized by Aristippus the younger.” (O'Keefe 2002, 406)

⁸“He raised his daughter Arete by the best precepts, training her to share his disregard for excess. When someone asked him what way education was going to make his son better, he said, ‘Even if nothing else, at least he won’t sit in the theater like one stone on another.’ When a man brought him his son to be taught, he asked for 500 drachmas; and when the man said, ‘For that I can buy a slave,’ he replied, ‘Go ahead, and then you’ll have two.’ He said he accepted money from his companions, not to use it himself, but to show them what they should use it for. Once when he was criticized for hiring an orator for a suit he faced, he said, ‘And when I have a dinner, I hire a cook.’” (White 2020, 106-7).

⁹Where not indicated otherwise, translations from Greek and Chinese are mine.

(DL II, 67). Diogenes Laertius writes that “He was able to adapt (*harmosasthai*) to his current place and time and company, and to play his part in whatever way fit the situation. That is why he enjoyed greater favor with Dionysius than the others, because he always responded well (*eu diatithemenoi*) whatever happened” (DL II, 66; White 2020, 105). Aristippus' adaptiveness is based on the ability to “respond” or “place himself” (*diatithemi*) advantageously while facing the unexpected.¹⁰ This view is supported by the famous shipwreck anecdote recounted:

The Socratic philosopher Aristippus was shipwrecked and thrown onto the shore of Rhodes. When he saw geometrical figures drawn there, he reportedly said to his companions, “Cheer up! I see signs of humans,” and right away he hurried to the citadel of Rhodes and went straight to the gymnasium. There he was rewarded with gifts for his philosophical disputations, so that he not only equipped himself, he also provided clothes and food for those who were with him. When his companions wanted to return to their country and asked him what news he wanted to be sent home, he told them to say, “The kind of possessions and traveling provisions free men ought to acquire are those which can swim away from a shipwreck with them.”¹¹ (Lampe 2015, 61)

The sources converge in tracing the profile of a person who excels in wrestling the unexpected and taking advantage of shifting circumstances. An ability that allows him not only to “harmonize” (*harmozomai*) but also to “dispose himself advantageously” (*eu diatithemi*). Rather than merely looking for pleasure in any situation, Aristippus' performances turn every situation into a pleasurable occurrence, whether we happen to be at a tyrant's court or on a pirate ship. It is an “art of adapting” that relies on a space of agency to maximize one's benefit.¹² This

¹⁰The two key words here are “*harmosasthai*” (to harmonize) and “*diatithemi*” (to take position, to place oneself). The related term *diathesis* means “disposition”, and is mentioned in relation to later Cyrenaics, claiming that Annicerian philosophy demands to change inveterate bad habits, improving our “disposition” (DL II, 96). In a perhaps faint, indirect way, it is however a suggestion that the Cyrenaic way of life is a) interested in long-term acquisitions and b) related to an “art of positioning”.

¹¹Taken from Lampe (2015), in its turn from Vitruvius.

¹²The concept of agency is intended, sociologically, as the capacity to act autonomously within a given context.

seems confirmed by Diogenes Laertius' passage reporting that Aristippus "enjoyed the pleasure of the present things, and did not painfully seek after the pleasure of things that were not present" (DL II, 66).

The notion of "performance" is also very significant in this context. In the previous extract from Diogenes Laertius, the verb employed to describe the ability to "play his part" is *hypokrinomai*, meaning "to answer", "to interpret", "to play a role". It is the same verb employed to describe the performance on the stage of an "actor" (*hypokrites*). One last anecdote, once more from Diogenes Laertius, recounts a confrontation between Plato and Aristippus at the court of Dionysius I, tyrant of Siracuse:

Once at a drinking party, when Dionysius told everyone to put on purple robes and dance, Plato refused, saying:

No, I could never don a woman's gown.

But Aristippus put one on, and as he was about to dance, nimbly added:

For even in the bacchic dance,
A modest woman will not be led astray. (DL II, 77; White 2020, 108)

Both philosophers are quoting a line from Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Plato quotes Pentheus, the male protagonist who, until the end, remains true to its purpose of defending the tradition and fighting the Dyonisian cult. Aristippus quotes Tiresias, the transgender prophet who welcomes and worships Dyonisius.

Plato remains true to his gendered role, implying that wearing female clothes would be inappropriate to his identity. Aristippus plays with roles and genders, adapting to the playful context of the challenge by varying his attitude (and his clothes). This anecdote, in addition to the previous ones, illustrates how Aristippus' adaptiveness relies on the ability to vary his persona in response to the varying conditions. He displays, in other words, adaptive variability.

In following Aristippus, we see that identity is inseparable from performance, and each condition from its reversal. In poverty and richness, during a shipwreck or a royal feast, Aristippus carefully avoids identification with his contingent role, displaying a remarkable talent for wrestling with fate and gaining the upper hand. He can, nonetheless, interpret all roles flawlessly: without effort, he enters and exits a performance with the same ease he shows in frequenting brothels: “The problem is not entering, but not being able to leave” (DL II, 69).

To his daughter, Areté (literally “virtue”, “excellence”), he taught the disregard for the “superfluous” (*pleionos*) (DL II, 72). It seems to me that in this “superfluous” we can include any fixed commitment to material goods, material conditions, social markers and definite roles as constituents of identity. Perhaps it is too daring to hypothesize, as some scholars did, that Aristippus did not believe in the permanence of identity over time and that his philosophy was based on a “metaphysics of indeterminacy” (Zilioli 2012, 75-100) - at least, on the basis of textual evidence.¹³

However, he certainly exemplifies a model of “loose self” (Zilioli 2012, 113-120), in the sense of a fluid identity that does not identify with fixed attributions of gender, wealth, role or class. In this sense, the adaptive variability displayed by Aristippus is also “selfless”, in the sense of being devoid of a fixed, definable notion of self-identity. And selfless adaptive variability corresponds to the profile of the “ludic self” that was delineated in the previous section.

Curiously, Aristippus does also mention “play” once. His usage of the term is peculiar and includes a pun. Asked why he left the wise Socrates to join the tyrant Dyonisius, he replied by claiming his need for both *paideia* (education) and *paidia* (play) (DL II, 80). *Paidia* is a term that indicates childplay, in particular. More generally, it means carefree, unconcerned amusement. Aristippus' line happens to be an ironic wordplay, in which the concealed message refers to the implicit fact that education and play may be different, even opposed, but not mutually exclusive.

¹³The controversial view that Cyrenaics do not believe in persistent self-identity is argued in depth by Zilioli.

The philosophical quest consists, like play, in an exciting exploration of boundaries, whose ultimate purpose is finding the adaptive strategy that leads us to a happy (*eudaimon*), pleasurable life (*hedupatheia*).¹⁴ Ancient sources show that Aristippus' strategy for living a good life relied on the selfless adaptive variability exemplified by the ludic self: not an identity that is always necessarily at play, but rather a living subject who skillfully masters the play of identities.

4. Zhuangzi's Eudaimonism and the Ludic Self

Text In this section I argue that the same pattern of selfless adaptive variability is displayed in the *Zhuangzi*. Here, the notions of selfhood and virtue (*de* 德) are conceived in an open polemic with Confucian role ethics, which rather relies on the sustained coherence of an embodied role within a given community (Ames 2010). The stinging critique of Confucian role ethics is accompanied by an analogous deconstruction of personal identity. For Zhuangzi, “the perfected person has no self, the divine person has no achievement, the sage person has no reputation” (*zhi ren wu ji, shen ren wu gong, sheng ren wu ming* 至人無己, 神人無功, 聖人無名, ZZ 2/1/21).

The best way to live in an ever-changing world is to tune into the nameless course of change (indicated as “course” or “way”, *dao* 道) dropping all fixed determinations through a process of un-cultivation that in the text is described as “emptying” (*xu* 虛) or “forgetting” (*wang* 忘). The sage becomes a mirror-like person, constantly reflecting all images without identifying with any of them.¹⁵ The images do not last long and do not leave any trace on the clean surface of the mirror.

¹⁴ “The Greek word ‘pleasant living’ (*hedupatheia*) usually denotes habitual behavior, which extends over a long duration. Aristippus may therefore be suggesting, in a deliberately thought-provoking manner, that we think of ‘pleasant living’ as something to be accomplished within each individual unit of time.” (Lampe 2015, 69)

¹⁵ “The *xū* or empty state is characterized as one in which the agent ‘fasts’ or empties out, the heart—again, the organ usually thought to guide action—so that he is committed to no fixed course, has no thought of ambition or gain, relies on no predetermined boundaries or distinctions, and in effect ‘forgets’ himself. This state is thought to yield an unbiased receptivity to things, such that the agent is continually ready to respond to them ‘like a mirror.’ [...] Something approximating such mirror-like action is commonplace in sports, crafts, and performing arts.” (Fraser 2014, 558)

Similarly, daily issues and the emotions that accompany them arise within sage's heart-mind, but do not have the power to alter it. Many tales in the *Zhuangzi* could exemplify this notion of empty selfhood, but I chose the story of Mengsun Cai:

Yan Hui said to Confucius, “When Mengsun Cai’s mother died, he wailed without shedding any tears; he did not grieve in his heart; and he conducted the funeral without any look of sorrow. He fell down on these three counts, and yet he is known all over the state of Lu for the excellent way he managed the funeral. Is it really possible to gain such a reputation when there are no facts to support it? I find it very peculiar indeed!” Confucius said, “Mengsun did all there was to do. He was advanced beyond ordinary understanding, and he would have simplified things even more, but that wasn’t practical. However, there is still a lot that he simplified. Mengsun doesn’t know why he lives and doesn’t know why he dies. He doesn’t know why he should go ahead; he doesn’t know why he should fall behind. In the process of change, he has become a thing, and he is merely waiting for some other change that he doesn’t yet know about. Moreover, when he is changing, how does he know that he really is changing? And when he is not changing, how does he know that he hasn’t already changed?” (Watson 2013, 51)

Since the sage is completely alien to achievements, reputation and selfish drives, she does not “distinguish” (*bian* 辯) changes in terms of moral or immoral, positive or negative, fitting or unfitting, right or wrong. Instead, she remains “constant” (*chang* 常) on the ever-changing “course” (*dao* 道) of things and by doing that, “she has become a thing” and therefore lost the vocation that naturally drives a person towards the structuring of a fixed identity.

Rather, she goes along with the flow, thing among things, without tracing any distinction and causing any friction with the “Heavenly oneness”. Mengsun certainly felt sorrow for his mother, but he did not identify with the feeling of sorrow, nor with the structuring action of the mourning ritual. He remained selfless and fluid, qualities that favoured his adaptation to the occurred change of state.

What's more, we go around telling one another, I do this, I do that—but how do we know that this 'I' we talk about has any 'I' to it? You dream you're a bird and soar up into the sky; you dream you're a fish and dive down in the pool. But now when you tell me about it, I don't know whether you are awake or whether you are dreaming. Running around accusing others is not as good as laughing, and enjoying a good laugh is not as good as going along with things. Be content to go along and forget about change, and then you can enter the mysterious oneness of Heaven. (Watson 2013, 51)

The advice to “enjoy a good laugh” and “go along and forget” just after losing one's mother must have sounded wildly offensive to a Confucian gentleman. Nonetheless, this attitude fits the Zhuangzian project both in relation to the epistemological theme of the play of perspectives and the eudaimonistic implications of *you* 遊, a core value of the Zhuangzian project. The term gives the title to the first chapter, and occurs over ninety times throughout the text, and if we consider its synonymical variant *you* 游 with the “water” radical, more than a hundred. It means “wandering”, “play”, and “originally meant both the unrestrained flow of a banner in the wind and a fish swimming in water in playfulness” (Wu 1990, 85). *You* 遊 has the “connotation of an unhindered, playful movement” that is often contrasted to spatiality and confinement (Li 2018).¹⁶ Mair defines Zhuangzi as the quintessential *homo ludens*, marked by the utmost spirit of adaptability and freedom. (Mair 1983, 86)

Due to the positive, desirable value of *you* as a form of virtuous efficacy (*de* 德) for living a good life, Zhuangzi's philosophy has also been interpreted as a form of eudaimonism. According to Fraser, cognitive appreciation of the vastity of the cosmos and the process of change, including the contingency and mutual dependence of all things, along with the affective equanimity resulting from that comprehension, and the thorough identification with the process of change, contribute to shaping a

¹⁶Citing the story of Cook Ding, Li claims that “*you* within confinements may be understood as playing in a game-like space with strict rules” (2018, 5). However, in the *Zhuangzi*, *you* also occur in limitless spaces.

spontaneous and playful mindset that shapes a form of eudaimonism after the “resilient, intelligent, flexible, and creative exercise of agency in response to changing circumstances.” (Fraser 2014, 556-562)

An original, contrasting position is offered by Levinovitz, who identifies two problems with the dominant interpretation of *you*. A logical one, because recommending *you* as an ideal “vitiates the essence of *you* – it becomes an ethical imperative instead of an activity freely undertaken for its own sake”; and a performative one, because “arguments for playful Zhuangzi as exemplar resemble those of the logicians and philosophers who appear to come in for Zhuangzian criticism” (Levinovitz 2012, 479). The issue is too long to be properly addressed at article-length, but I will try to offer a solution to these two apparent problems in interpretation.

In the first case, I believe that the contradiction is inherent to the notion itself, not to its interpretation. For instance, we often see play as spontaneous and enjoyable, but if we take a look to professional athletes, both elements may be missing: just consider the case of the tennis player Dominic Thiem, who suffered a major depression after winning his first Slam tournament, perhaps precisely *because* winning it. Professional athletes are often affected by anxiety, depression, and not always perceive their profession to be spontaneous and enjoyable, even though it is certainly, at least from a sociological perspective, a life of “play”; so, is play still play, even when it is not playful? Similarly, the notion of *you*, as a substantial part of Daoist philosophy, embodies and expresses this contradiction: the search for spontaneity, which is a contradiction in logical terms – without resulting in being senseless or unintelligible.

In the second case, Levinovitz uses the Zhuangzian figure of the “reluctant teacher” to show how the *you* ideal is neither openly defined, nor openly praised, in order to re-ambiguate the term, to re-open it to alternative readings. Yet, the Zhuangzian figure of the “reluctant teacher” is not “Zhuangzian” at all, it is also very

much employed in Confucianism. Just consider the famous “one corner pedagogy” (*Analects* 7.8), and also Confucius' reluctance to define *ren* 仁:¹⁷

Sima Niu asked about *ren* 仁.

The Master said, “The humane (*ren* 仁) person is reticent (*ren* 訥).”

“Being *ren* 訥, is that all about being *ren* 仁?”

“When being *ren* 仁 (humane) is so difficult, how can one not be *ren* 訥 (reticent) about it?”

司马牛问仁。子曰：“仁者其言也訥。”曰：“其言也訥，斯谓之仁已乎？”子曰：“为之难，言之得无訥乎？”

(*Analects* 12.3)

Confucius also resorts to a clever pun (a “Zhuangzian” pun?) between *ren* 仁 and *ren* 訥, because defining *ren* 仁 would pervert or compromise a notion that needs to be comprehended performatively, rather than intellectually. All the more can be said about *you*, whose performative aspect eschews stable definitions and undergoes a continuous process of self-erasure. If it is true that the term is not openly praised, as Levinovitz convincingly argues, it is also never openly criticized; as such, it does not appear to need any re-ambiguation or re-opening, because it appears already inherently open and ambiguous. Besides, it is difficult not to notice that there is a positive side of *you* precisely associated to these characteristics of inherent openness and ambiguity. Even Levinovitz seems to agree on this, since he proposes to “fill out” the notion of *you* with Brook Ziporyn's metaphor of the “wild card.” (Ziporyn 2015)

Ziporyn compares Zhuangzian life to a game where the most diverse cards are continuously dealt. Along with numeral values, he imagines “instruction cards”, which report the purpose of the game but happen to be contradictory (es. collecting

¹⁷“If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again.” (Slingerland 2003, 66)

low cards; collecting high cards; discard the red cards; discard the black cards; etc.). These instruction cards are perspectives, and each player decides how to play on the basis of personal beliefs and contingent choices. Within this framework Zhuangzi operates as a “wild card”. Like the Joker, this card has no inherent value but can be adapted to play the best possible game depending upon the context.

Following a similar path, Moeller and D'Ambrosio elaborated an interpretation of Zhuangzi's philosophy as “genuine pretending” (2017). In their description, Zhuangzi does not engage in self-construction but rather acts from a “zero-perspective” that allows him to enact diverse, even contradicting roles and social personae. This ambiguous attitude, which is naturally connected with play, irony and humour, is nonetheless genuine, or rather, “真*zhenuine*”, because the “idea of radical transformation is simultaneously also an idea of radical ontological and existential selflessness” (2017, 131-2). If, on the one hand, role-playing entails pretending and therefore falseness, on the other hand the lack of fixed identity makes it thoroughly authentic and in this sense, 真*zhenuine*.¹⁸ D'Ambrosio and Moeller then compare Zhuangzi to a “skillful player of roles who is capable of performing tasks well and with pleasure while avoiding any identification with them and remaining selfless, or, in our terminology, a genuine pretender.” (2017, 134)

In addition to that, D'Ambrosio calls for a more “playful” reading of the *Zhuangzi*, which implies relinquishing the claim to find within a text a coherent theoretical position, specifically relativist or skeptic; the *Zhuangzi*, D'Ambrosio argues, holds playfulness as both the means and the message, therefore recommends flexibility and unattachment to its own (apparent) theses (D'Ambrosio 2020). On his part, Machek (2016) refutes the previous interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* as the “exact opposite” of Confucian role-ethics offered by D'Ambrosio (2014), in that he sees D'Ambrosio's account involves ascribing to Zhuangzi “a sort of insincere pretense”.

¹⁸“The *Zhuangzi* presents dissonant or incongruent role models who do not identify with their roles. In this sense they are pretenders. However, one has to play roles in society, simply because society is constituted by roles. [...] If there is no self, there cannot be a conflict between a true self and one's social persona. If there is no such conflict, then the playing of one's role is genuine. [...] A role play without falsity is genuine pretending” (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017, 135).

However, he develops his argument in order to prove that “Zhuangzi’s view of role-playing has a significant affinity for Stanislavski’s theory of good acting, and is different from the idea of artificial acting proposed by Diderot and Coquelin” (2016, 6). In my view, this conclusion brings him quite close to the ideal of “genuine/ 真 *zhenuine* pretending” as exposed in D’Ambrosio and Moeller (2017), but the thing to highlight is that, regardless of interpretive disagreements, these accounts among others share the reference to an irreducibly playful component in Zhuangzi’s philosophy.

Even while facing the most dramatic contingencies in life, the Zhuangzian sage preserves an equanimous mindset by keeping her identity “at play”. By practising selflessness, she emancipates from the concerns that accompany identification with social bounds. By tuning into the universal axis of change, she enables a resourceful variation of roles that, exactly as a wild card, grants the best possible outcome in every contextual situation. This strategy works remarkably well for adapting to shifting circumstances and adverse conditions, maintaining serenity and possibly gaining the upper hand whilst enduring psychological pressure and emotional distress.

5. *Nurturing Playfulness, Uprooting Dependence*

We have seen that selfless adaptive variability may as well describe Zhuangzi’s and Aristippus’ philosophical attitude. Indeed, cultural incommensurability is at stake whenever we bring into a contemporary dialogical field two thinkers coming from different and unconnected societies, cultures and languages.¹⁹ The Cyrenaics

¹⁹Connolly described in this regard two kinds of incommensurability, linguistic and foundational. Linguistic incommensurability is a self-explanatory concept. Foundational incommensurability is the eventuality that the grounding concepts adopted by distinct cultural traditions “are so different from one another that members of these traditions cannot understand one another.” (2015, 62)

would also most certainly disagree with Zhuangzi on several points.²⁰ Nonetheless, we can also note that both philosophers share a skeptical attitude in regard to the determination of fixed values, identities and truth-claims, even though we cannot draw safely the conclusion that both advocated a metaphysics of indeterminacy.

However, there are some significant similarities. Both promote the model of a “loose self”, a fluid identity that takes advantage of its lack of fixed determinations to optimize its agency in each and every context. Both are reported engaging successfully in a variety of roles and activities, and disengaging effortlessly. Both show a talent in adapting and harmonizing with the circumstances while keeping an equanimous, serene and confident mindset. These aspects of selflessness, variance and adaptability reflect the nature of play, and therefore, of a playful mode of existence, which I called the “ludic self”.

Exactly as play is a universal phenomenon, performing a ludic identity may represent a universal strategy for dealing with selfhood and emotions in a nondisruptive, equanimous and ultimately adaptive fashion. The cultural distance between the two thinkers, contrasted with their proximity from the point of view of the ludic self, constitutes a proof in this sense.

Yet, does the ludic self promote psycho-physiological well-being?

And, how does it do it?

A philosophy promoting psycho-physiological well-being and leading to happy, flourishing life, is often associated with the term “eudaimonism”, from Greek *eudaimonia* that may be translated as “happiness”, “flourishing”, “well-being”, indicating a relatively stable condition that also implies the mastery of one's mature faculties, virtues and skills. In reading contemporary scholarship it seems, almost paradoxically, that there is more reluctance in associating Aristippus than Zhuangzi with eudaimonism.

²⁰For instance the Cyrenaic “theory of affections”, which recognizes in basic sensual affections (*pathe*) the only reliable source of knowledge, for instance when the Cyrenaics claim that all living creatures seek pleasure and avoid pain (DL II, 88). Zhuangzi would presumably reject this claim, because the dichotomy pleasure/pain follows the typical shi/fei pattern that is always dependent upon one or the other perspective. Therefore, what is pain for someone may be pleasure for others, as in the case of BDSM erotic practices.

In interpreting the *Zhuangzi*, Fraser offers a eudaimonistic reading. He cites among the core themes of the text self-forgetfulness, affective equanimity, “the ability to adapt fluidly, creatively, and efficaciously to changing conditions” and “a spirit of ease, playfulness, fun, and zest for life” (2014, 24). Moeller and D'Ambrosio, while opting for a less Western-imbued conceptual apparatus, and a coherent analysis in relation to their philosophy of genuine pretending, agree with Fraser on the fact that the Zhuangzian combination of *you* 遊 and *de* 德 promotes psycho-physiological well-being and “informs the idea of a good life” (2017, 187). In a recent article, Zhang does not use the term *eudaimonia*, but discusses the *Zhuangzi* in respect to happiness and human flourishing, concluding that self-forgetfulness, fluidity and timely adaptation (“fitting”, *shi* 適) are essential to his project (2019).

The Cyrenaics' view on eudaimonism has always been questioned by scholarly debate. Their sharp commitment to the separation of *telos* and *eudaimonia*, identifying the former with a “portion” of pleasure, and the latter with a “collection” of pleasures, is puzzling. In her monumental study on the morality of happiness, Annas claims “the Cyrenaics alone among ancient schools rejected the importance of one's life as a whole for one's ethical perspective” (1993, 230). The majority of scholars seems to follow this direction, mostly because the identification of *telos* with unitemporal (*monochronos*) pleasure is deemed incompatible with the stable pursuit of *eudaimonia* as the moral end.²¹

There are, however, some notable exceptions. Tsouna argues that the relationship between Cyrenaic hedonism and eudaimonism is more complex than is usually assumed, and *eudaimonia* is an important end in the Cyrenaic School (1999, 134), especially in considering its founder Aristippus, whom she considers a straightforward eudaimonist (1994, 377). Lampe discusses several passages in which the Cyrenaics appear to have long-term concerns and act consequently, concluding that “presentism” has to be considered more as a pragmatically oriented “rule of

²¹This “majority” includes, as previously discussed, Irwin (1991), O'Keefe (2002) and Zilioli (2014).

thumb” rather than a dogmatic assumption that demands universal validity (Lampe 2015, 64-72).

On these premises, I feel confident that we can regroup both Zhuangzi and Aristippus under the umbrella-term of eudaimonism, intended as a “lived” philosophy dedicated to psycho-physiological well-being. But how, precisely, does the interpretation of the ludic self promote eudaimonism?

I believe the best answer is, by fighting dependence. In all its different kinds: physical dependence, psychological dependence, emotional dependence, social dependence, material dependence, intellectual dependence to heteronomous models of wealth, morality and agency.²² Contrarily to Diogenes the Cynic, who anticipates the Stoic predilection for abstention and asceticism, Aristippus promotes enjoyment of all kinds of situations and pleasures as long as they do not induce attachment: “The problem is not entering, but not being able to leave”.

Throughout the few sources we dispose of, the theme of freedom and autonomy lies clearly at the core of Aristippean thought. Inquired about the superiority of philosophers, he answered: “If all laws were eliminated, we would live the same way” (DL II, 68). Once, he was provoked by Dyonisius: “Whoever joins a tyrant soon becomes a slave, even when he arrives as a free man”, to whom he replied: “Not a slave, if he is free to leave” (DL II, 82).

The theme of dependence is also one of the core themes of the *Zhuangzi*. The key term in this regard is *dai 待*, which means “attachment”, “to depend on”, “to wait for”, “to treat/entertain/host a guest”. For Zhuangzi, dependence (*dai 待*) appears as the natural condition of things, but also as a limiting, undesirable state.²³

²²Some examples. Physical dependence: alcohol. Psychological: parents' expectations. Emotional: a partner. Social: occupational prestige. Material: money. Intellectual: a religion.

²³Birds and wind, penumbra and shadow, right and wrong, life and death, night and day depend on each other. But also, consider this passage among others: “Liezi could ride the wind and go soaring around with cool and breezy skill, but after fifteen days he came back to earth. As far as the search for good fortune went, he didn't fret and worry. He escaped the trouble of walking, but he still had to depend on something to get around. If he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths, and thus wandered through the boundless, then what would he have had to depend on?” (Watson 2013, 3)

His recipe for happiness does not consist in isolating or separating from things as an ascetic would do, but in

a) minimizing self-related concerns such as selfhood (*ji* 己), reputation (*ming* 名), achievements (*gong* 功) and

b) maximizing transparency and responsiveness, like a mirror

in order to follow along the transformation of things and transform accordingly, in a regime of selfless adaptive variability. By not depending on one thing or the other, the sage depends on the whole universe, and therefore she does not depend on anything. By accepting the necessity of change, the sage becomes supremely free and is left untouched by the reversals of fortune.

From this perspective, the Daoist ideal of *you* 遊 is not far from the Aristippan complementarity of *paidia* and *paideia*: the happy life shares some characteristics of playfulness (*paidia*), but it also demands a specific “training” or “education” (*paideia*). The levity of the empty selfhood must be counter-balanced by the gravity of a philosophical training that demands the permanent mobilization of all kinds of emotional investments.

6. *The Mighty Dead and the Playful Selves*

With the purpose of concluding this “rational reconstruction” in a genuinely Rortean fashion, hence urging the “mighty dead” to engage contemporary issues, I would like to open further the dialogue with a brief excursion into the domains of psychology and play studies.

In his writings, Freud uses the term *Besetzung*, translated in English as “cathexis”, to indicate the “charge” or “allocation” of emotional investment.²⁴ The

²⁴The original term retains the military sense of “occupation”. First occurrence in “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1895) and “Studies on Hysteria” (1895d). He compares the subject with an amoeba, which extends its pseudopodia to reach after external objects and incorporate them (1914). He also refers to psychological investment in terms of “viscosity”, because the energy emanated from the subject to capture the object glues both together and thus ends up in capturing the subject (1917a). He theorizes that pain originates from the cathexis for a lost object, which “empties the ego” creating

theory of cathexis states that the human mind is predisposed to invest in objects “quantic” amounts of psychological energy that, despite being impossible to measure, operates in quantitative terms: increase, reduction, charge, discharge, displacement. All feelings invested in a cathected object are comparable to the fiches of a gambler: in principle they are nothing more than plastic tokens, but as soon as they pass the betting line of the poker table they become invested with the hopes and wishes of the player, drawing the subject itself into play along with its whole emotional apparatus.

The “object” could be anything in a psychological sense: a person, a feeling, an idea, a condition, a status, a material object, a symbol. In this way everything can be regarded, in economic terms, as an investment: love is investment in a person, faith is an investment in a religious doctrine. Securing a symbolic status, such as academic professorship, is a substantial investment in terms of money, time and effort.²⁵ The mechanism, however, is the same: the bigger the investment in terms of “emotional fiches”, the stronger the “viscosity” of the cathectic fluid, and greater the suffering in case of loss.

The theory also claims that failure to mobilize or sublimate cathected energies results in symptoms and potentially serious pathologies. Solomon and Gupta report the case of an eighty-year-old woman who spent three decades pretending that her deceased son was alive (2014). Analogous patterns can be found sometimes in the crime news, or in psychological thriller such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). These cases can be interpreted as failures in withdrawing cathected energies invested in the deceased person, resulting in the absence of elaboration of bereavement and psychotic dissociation from reality.

In this regard, the ludic identity performed by Aristippus and Zhuangzi is an invitation to mobilize cathected energies in a dynamic variance of association and

a feeling of loss and incompleteness that “creates the same economic conditions as are created by the cathexis of pain which is concentrated on the injured part of the body” (1926d, 4323).

²⁵Freud had a specific propensity for economic metaphors and economy-derived terminology, and was the first author to interpret the psyche in economic terms. On this, please see Ainslie (1989) and Kornbluh (2020).

dissociation.²⁶ By association, I refer to the merging of action and awareness in the totalizing scope of the moment. By dissociation, I refer to the proactive detachment from one's own self-image and self-centred perspective, learning to subsume one's needs and desires in a wider frame and thus, in Zhuangzi's words, “becoming a thing”. The advantage of the ludic self is the unbounded mastery in associating and dissociating on command, reaching a mindset in which victory is not accompanied by exaltation and loss is not followed by despair.

A regime of selfless adaptive variability lies at the core of the experience of playing and is therefore, as such, a universal aspect of the human mind. Zhuangzi and Aristippus take advantage of this common human experience to promote a eudaimonistic model characterized by responsive equanimity, with the therapeutic goal of eradicating another universal human experience: dependence, taken in all its diverse nuances.

A popular treatise on the psychology of poker written by two professionals describes poker as a game of high variance where both skill and luck are involved (Hilger and Taylor 2007). Among the recommendations, we learn that a good player must desensitize to money, leave the ego at the door and remove all emotion from the decision-making process, until reaching a state where the player has become indifferent to the game – a state that coincides with the point of utmost efficacy. By remaining selfless, the player adapts effortlessly to the endless variations of the game. A game of high variance where both skill and luck are involved, may as well work as a good definition of human existence.

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²⁶I interpret the concept of “association” and “dissociation” in a hybrid perspective informed by the domains of psychoanalysis, psychology of sport, play studies and neurolinguistic programming (NLP).

DEIP. Athenaeus. *Deipnosophistae*

MEM. Xenophon. *Memorabilia*

PE. Eusebius. *Praeparatio Evangelica*

ZZ. Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Harvard-Yenching)

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