Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 11: Zhuangzi: Skillful Action and Aristotelian Energeia

In his stories of skillful action, Zhuangzi also suggests secrets of nurturing life that have distinct affinities to those we have found in Aristotle, and that have recently been made popular in the classic study of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on what he calls the experience of “flow.” Aristotle pointed out that pleasure is the unimpeded activity of a natural state, that pleasure increases and crowns our activity, like the bloom of flourishing of those in the prime of their lives. He noted that those completely engaged in activity do it better and longer and enjoy it more.

We have seen that Aristotle makes a distinction between what he calls a process (kinesis) and an activity (energeia). That is, processes or ordinary actions (kineseis) are those that are defined by the pursuit of a goal. The pleasure or satisfaction arises when the goal is achieved, and it may be achieved by other means. I may find photocopying articles unpleasant, although I will enjoy being able to hand out texts in a class so that we all may read along. Thus while the immediate task may not be pleasurable, it may contribute to one’s overall purpose and play a part in a meaningful life.

In contrast, in an activity (energeia)—what Gilbert Ryle calls “a performance” and Alasdair MacIntyre “a practice”—each part of the activity is complete in itself; each has its own integrity and fullness. Each stage brings its own fulfillment and pleasure, which can only be experienced by carrying out the activity itself. The pleasure of piano playing cannot be achieved by taking a walk. Moreover, each moment of the piece one is playing is enjoyable in itself; we don’t have to wait to the end of a piece of music to enjoy it. We don’t want to rush to get to the end so that we can enjoy it; we can take leisurely satisfaction in every moment of the music. The pleasure of an energeia is found in the present moment of experience.
As we saw in our discussion of Aristotle, in such activities, the pleasure and the activity are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. How do we separate the pleasure of playing the piano from the playing itself? As Csikszentmihalyi points out in his discussion of the flow state, the pleasure of engagement in an *energeia* has certain distinct features, such as effortless concentration, lack of fatigue, the quick passage of time, lack of interest in doing anything other than what one is doing, and exclusive focus on the activity at hand.

Another distinction between processes (*kineiseis*) and activities (*energeiai*) is that an *energeia* is an end in itself; it is not pursued for external end or reward. Thus we can engage in any pursuit in a process-oriented way or an activity-oriented way.\(^i\) We can write a paper in order to get a good grade, or for the sheer joy of learning. We can also learn to engage in all our processes as if they are activities, ends in themselves. This skill is taught in trainings in mindfulness meditation. We can learn to take pleasure in the process of photocopying, ironing, or washing the dishes, which can lead to an overall more enjoyable life. This may be a key to Zhuangzi’s stories about skillful cooks, wheelwrights, and carvers.\(^i\)

Csikszentmihalyi himself drew a parallel between flow, skill development, and Zhuangzi’s ideal of wandering (*you*). He writes, “Chuang Tzu believed that to *yu* [sic] was the proper way to live—without concern for external rewards, spontaneously, with total commitment—in short, as a total autotelic experience.”\(^iv\) Several scholars have also challenged the parallel between the flow experience described by Csikszentmihalyi and the examples of perfected skill activity described by Zhuangzi.\(^v\) Thus, critics suggest that whereas the flow experience emerges from a conscious attempt to master challenges, the experience of wandering occurs when we give up conscious goals and mastery. Csikszentmihalyi responds that even when skill mastery has been developed, the *you* experience—which Zhuangzi conveys through metaphors of walking without touching the ground, swimming, flying, and flowing—depends on the discovery of new challenges and development of new skills.
Nevertheless, it might be that Csikszentmihalyi has introduced an element of planning and control that are foreign to Zhuangzi. Csikszentmihalyi suggests we should structure our lives around goals and opportunities for flow so that our life can be characterized by “optimal experience.” This sounds much like the approach of Aristotle, who argues that we would be wise to plan our lives like an archer who has a target, a specific telos to fulfill.\textsuperscript{vi} In Chapter 11, we will examine empirical research which confirms that lives of deep fulfillment are often characterized by a valued activity that becomes the focus of intense meaning and purpose—whether raising a family, connecting with community, or creating literature, science, art. In contrast, Zhuangzi’s value of wandering seems to suggest a life that is free-flowing and non-purposive. We learn from Zhuangzi not how to orchestrate a life of flow, but how to trust and allow life to happen. Rather than setting up the fixed goal of a fulfilling life, Zhuangzi’s writing seems to suggest we can allow life to bring what it does and reveal its purpose or lack of purpose; we can meander through life with the ease of a playful child. There is a difference between creating a life of flow experiences and flowing along with life.

However, this does not mean that the ideal life Zhuangzi describes does not have preferred values or an overall sense of purpose. We will see that Zhuangzi’s ideal of wandering includes finding a center point, the pivot of the Dao, from which we are able to see a multiplicity of paths and options with equanimity and clarity (ming). From this center, we can determine which path best accords with the circumstances of the moment. The ideals of openness and meandering illustrate the purpose of what seems to lack purpose, the usefulness of the useless.\textsuperscript{vii} The story of Cook Ding offers a model of virtuosity that is open, flexible, and responsive—like the jazz musician who sometimes follows a long riff and slowly meanders back to the main tune, while at other moments, she stands poised and alert for the next cue from the ensemble.

In our study of Confucius, we have seen that there are various avenues to attentive awareness; one involves observation of experience without judgment, another, full participation in experience, without the sense of an observer. Likewise, the flow experience may come in two forms: a non-purposive
life of free and easy wandering, and creating a life of opportunities for ongoing challenging experiences in which we can fully immerse ourselves. The Zhuangzian texts include both forms of wu-wei activity, perhaps in creative tension.

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i See Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. We will examine this study in depth below, Chapter 11.

ii See Lee Yearley “Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State,” in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, 152-82, at 168-69.

iii He identifies six characteristics of perfected skill activities; perfected skill knowledge is characterized by a mental attentiveness that responds adaptively to changes in the outside world. Skillful actions are in harmony with the rules of an activity, but can also respond in the moment to whatever curve balls are thrown, without having to go through ordinary discursive calculations. Non-skillful players of the game of life cannot respond quickly enough to curve balls and rely more on mental knowledge and rules, which are slower and more clumsy. As Yearley, A.C. Graham and others have noted, skill knowledge is knowing “how,” not knowledge of a fact, knowing “that.” See Yearley, 171-3; A.C. Graham, “Taoist Spontaneity,” 8. Ivanhoe stresss this theme in his reflections on music as both a metaphor for and embodiment of joy in the thought of Confucius. See Ivanhoe, “Happiness in Early Chinese Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, 263-78, at 267-9.

iv *Flow*, 150.


vi *Eudemian Ethics* 1.2, 1214b 11; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2, 1094a 23-24

vii I thank Brian Loh for this formulation. In more recent work, Chris Fraser, too, has acknowledged that wandering and purpose are not antithetical.