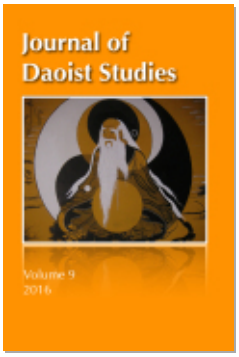
How Not To Be Thinged By Things

Avery Morrow



Journal of Daoist Studies, Volume 9, 2016, pp. 185-193 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/dao.2016.0009*

How Not To Be Thinged By Things

AVERY MORROW

> Now up, now down, taking harmony for your measure, drifting and wandering with the ancestor of the ten thousand things, treating things as things but not letting them treat you as a thing—then how could you get in any trouble? This is the rule, the method of Shennong and the Yellow Emperor. (*Zhuangzi*, Watson 2013, 156-67)

King Ying of Wei had to compare himself to kings reigning on the horns of a snail, but since the mid-20th century we have all been blessed with a practical knowledge of our infinitesimal nature. We can comprehend the shortness of a 100-year lifespan in terms of a 6,000,000,000-year-old planet, and we can see for ourselves the size of the Earth among the stars as seen from Pluto. There has been no better era to live in and recognize the immensity of the universe. So why, in Zhuangzi's words, do we keep "getting thinged by things"?

For Zhuangzi, lack of perspective was one ailment afflicting humanity, but it was combined with more persistent, subtler errors in our worldview. To recognize the nature of his complaint, we must understand the context in which Zhuangzi views "things" negatively. The "getting thinged by things" discussion was prompted by the story of a healthy tree that avoids destruction, and a mute chicken that gets slaughtered. The woodsman describes the tree as "not timber" (*bucai* 不材). The Chinese word *timber* is equivalent with *material*, i.e. material for firewood. Because the tree will make poor firewood, it is not *material* for any purpose meaningful to him. The healthy tree is really not a *thing* for the woodsman at all.

The same term was used to refer to the useless oak in the Inner Chapters, but here Zhuangzi's disciples make a powerful logical leap: they use the same term "not timber" to refer to the slaughtered chicken. This use of the term is found nowhere else in the book. Something new is going on here: it is recognized that the crow of a chicken shares something in common with the timber of a tree. They both provide an end to others; they make a thing *material*. Yet immateriality's link to other Daoist virtues remains hazy to the disciples. Even though the term timber or material has been offered to them in a negative context, they slyly suggest to Zhuangzi that he is missing out on its positive aspects. The timber of a tree is only good material when the tree is destroyed, but the crow of a chicken is only good material while the chicken is alive. Might not there be things that people are good for, which cause their friends to want them to stay alive?

Zhuangzi does not offer a logical objection to this, although perhaps he recognizes that the slaughtered chicken was much more useful to his hosts as raw material for dinner. What his disciples are really talking about is having an external purpose in one's life, but Zhuangzi already knows that losing that purpose after you have it spells disaster for what you thought was the meaning of your life. So he tells them, "Things join only to part, reach completion only to crumble. If sharp edged, they are blunted; if high stationed, they are overthrown" (Watson 2013, 157; hereafter abbreviated "W"). Zhuangzi's disciples are hungry to offer themselves like firewood for some official station, but they do not understand the impermanence of such an arrangement.

"Getting thinged by things" is accordingly linked closely to usefulness and *telos*. The context of this discussion shows that Zhuangzi's objection is not ontological, nor does he anticipate postmodern buzzwords like objectification or intersubjectivity. The true man is still "treating things as things." "That which treats things as things is not limited by things" (W 183). He does not call the existence of objects into question, but things are unimportant to him, because they are not his end goal. Ordinary men, in contrast, "may be used by the world, but they are not worthy to make the world work for them" (W 103). In these parallel statements, Zhuangzi offers his readers two options: you can recognize the unimportance of the things (including ideas and other men) that you put to use, or those things will impose ends onto you.

Zhuangzi provides ample illustrations of both halves of this dichotomy. While some of his most famous personages are craftsmen, when he is speaking of putting things to use, he uses the example of an "enlightened king." A king, at the top of the human hierarchy, is a good example of someone who can eliminate the control of things over him. Some might expect Zhuangzi to approve of whimsical or unproductive behavior in a king, but in fact, in the Inner Chapters there is a clear sense of rule involved. A Daoist king has the duty of "making absolutely certain that things can do what they are supposed to do" (W 55), not attempting to make things different from what they are, but adapting his rule to the preexisting abilities of things. "Following along with things the way they are, he makes no room for personal views" (W 56). Here, as everywhere for Zhuangzi, likes and dislikes are to be avoided. The *res publica* should not be manipulated or taxed to fit the king's desires, since it has a natural function that is best unimpeded.

Because an enlightened king has no personal views that he desires to impose onto the country, "the people do not depend on him" (W 57). They do not place their hopes in him, and in fact he fades into the background, invisible and unimportant to daily life. But paradoxically, the king's "transforming influence touches the ten thousand things." Although this seems like a contradiction, it is easy enough to imagine: if a king removes his tastes from the picture, he will choose and dismiss his ministers based solely on ability, which will cause others to cultivate their abilities and set an example for their inferiors. *The enlightened king changes things without any desire to change.* "Being empty, you will do nothing, and yet there will be nothing that is not done" (W 197).

Yet the enlightened king, having eliminated his likes and dislikes, is no longer emotionally involved in his own success or failure. Adept at using things, the king is becoming less of a thing himself. In fact, he is well on his way to liberation: "Now the possessor of a state . . . who clearly understands that in treating other things as mere things, he himself is no longer a mere thing—how could he be content to govern the hundred clans of the world and do nothing more?" (W 82). Such a man will become a wanderer and perhaps a sage.

The enlightened king does not attempt to change things, since he is content to use their preexisting functions. There is no gain for him to do this, except to get closer to the Way. In contrast, his subjects are hungry

to make themselves into useful firewood for some cause or another. "The wise man is not happy without the modulations of idea and thought; the rhetorician is not happy without the progression of argument and rebuttal; the examiner is not happy without the tasks of interrogation and intimidation. All are penned in by these things" (W 202). A list of more common ambitions follows this quotation—it is notable that the king himself is missing from the list—but these three should suffice. If any of these men were to realize that concepts like "the progression of argument and rebuttal" are *mere things*, they would no longer be bound by them, and in fact, by analogy with the king becoming a sage above, they would no longer desire them.

But unlike the king, who possesses the nation and does not need anything more, virtually all of the subjects see visible gains in their lives from mastering trades and fulfilling their desires. They believe themselves to be taking advantage of circumstances, but in fact the circumstances are taking advantage of them. "*Servants to circumstance and things,* they delight in change, and if the moment comes when they can put their talents to use, then they cannot keep from acting. In this way, they follow along with the turning years, *letting themselves be changed by things*" (W 204). The ambitions of the subjects are fulfilled by becoming useful, timely, and responsive to change, so they are willing to submit to anything that seems promising for this purpose. If they were allowed to vote for a king, they would vote for the one who promised change.

Zhuangzi's portrait of the needy subjects is not terribly negative, but this final word about "being changed by things" shows that he sees some insufficiency in their way of life. The honest way to live is not attained by a servant of things. By that rule, neither is it admirable to "delight in change" or to hunger for the right moment for action. Hanfeizi relates that Zhuangzi once admonished a king trying to take advantage of an opportunity for war, since he failed to see the realities of his own kingdom (Liao 1939, 226). This is in accord with the King Ying of Wei story, where the ruler is so anguished over whether to make war that he has become totally subdued and enslaved by these "things." An enlightened king would not fall into either of these traps, since he would not be hungry to gain territory, and the decision to make war would be one of "mere things."

For the common people already in the snares of desire, Zhuangzi's program is not so clear. Where a king might find it relatively easy to become a user of things, we might find it relatively hard to distinguish the things we use from what uses us. Do we all have to quit our jobs and live in the mountains, or can we become like his butcher and wheelmaker? He offers sympathy: "Now that we've already become things, if we want to return again to the Root, I'm afraid we'll have a hard time of it! The Great Man—he's the only one who might find it easy" (W 177). Without delving too deep into how to become a Great Man, what does it mean to "treat things as (mere) things" in the way Zhuangzi recommends?

It is incorrect to believe that we can seize control over things through the force of our will. The examples of the intellectual subjects above show that all sorts of desire, even the subtler, intellectual desires, amount to enslavement by things. Zhuangzi asks us to abandon our attachments to all things, even our ideals. For the sage, "the ten thousand things are insufficient to distract his mind" (W 98). Being undistracted by things, the sage is the only one able to really use them. However, Zhuangzi posits a world where the sage freed of desire will still go "wandering" in the world, wherever the Way takes him. The Way does not come as a message from without, but is part of one's "inner nature." How do we tell the difference between distractions, or desires, and inner nature?

One lengthy passage in the Outer Chapters deals with this question. First, Zhuangzi disposes of our ordinary ideas of causality: "When you say that 'nothing does it' or that 'something does it', you have not yet escaped from the realm of things, and so you *fall into error*" (W 225). Here, Zhuangzi's famous liberality goes out the window, and he warns us that there is a *conceptual error* in our most basic assumptions about how the world works. When we assume, for example, that a footless man has been punished by the government, we are incorrectly assigning cause to a thing; if we assume he was born that way, we are incorrectly assigning cause to nothing. We have always assumed that we can observe agents causing things to happen (e.g. cutting off a foot indicates a punishment), and that we can imitate their behavior and use things in the same way. Now, without questioning the mere existence of things, we must question what acts on them, like the commander who explains that his feet were removed by Heaven (W 20).

Zhuangzi insists, contrary to our common sense, that it is not humans which use things but the Way, which is described akin to the Buddhist conception of emptiness by denying both its existence and nonexistence in the category of things, viz.: "The Way cannot be thought of as being, nor can it be thought of as nonbeing. In calling it the Way, we are only adopting a temporary expedient," because it is not a *thing* at all. "'Nothing does it', 'something makes it like this'—these occupy a mere corner of the *realm of things*," which is insufficient to explain the world, because to attribute an action to a *thing* is to attribute it to something *material*. A sophisticated point is being made here which goes back to the "useless tree" discussion. The tree, being useless for the sake of making firewood, was "immaterial" to the woodcutter. Conversely, something material is useful to an end—but it is not the material that determines what its own end will be. Zhuangzi's disciples, hoping to offer themselves as material for an official post, believe that they are the ones taking the job, so they will be determining what they do. In fact, by making themselves useful, material things they are surrendering some of their ability to act in the Way.

When Zhuangzi denies our ordinary conception of causality, he is reminding us of something similar to the mistake Zhuangzi's disciples make. We believe that we are the actors kicking the ball down the street, but in fact we are the material being used by whatever force is actually responsible for that action. That is to say, we are the timber being used to light a fire, yet we believe ourselves to be responsible for burning things. We must surrender our common ideas of causality and agency in order to really accept the highest duty of expressing the Way.

Another issue with causality is the impossibility of determining the full depths of a cause or an effect. "I look back for the roots of the past, but they extend back and back without end. I search for the termination of the future, but it never stops coming at me" (W 225-26). Even if we accept that the ball was kicked because it came into contact with my foot, there are additional causes of the ball being sewn together by someone, my being born, the ball somehow coming into proximity with me, and so forth—how can a really operative cause be determined? And after the ball rolls down the street, where does it go next? Will it cause me to run after it and get some exercise, and will I make a car to swerve and crash? What is the total extent of the effect of one action? If we extend cause and

effect into the vastness of the past and future, we perform a *reductio ad absurdum* on our foolish idea that we have the ability to use things.

Zhuangzi concludes that for "the perfection of the Way and things—neither words nor silence is worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent—this is the highest form of debate" (W 226). This is because both talk and silence are behaviors you attribute to yourself, not to the Way. The Way is what acts on things, regardless of the behavior of the material being who foolishly believes that he can cause things to happen.

In modern times, it seems almost impossible to abandon the idea of things being caused by other things, because it is a key part of how we think. We offer up proofs that our problems originate in this or that *material* cause, and might be resolved by this or that order of things, an analysis which Zhuangzi rejects with similar disgust: "Let me try describing this analysis of yours. It takes life as its basis and knowledge as its teacher and from there proceeds to assign 'right' and 'wrong'. So in the end, we have 'names' and 'realities' and accordingly each man considers himself to be their arbiter" (W 196) The men of ancient times, more familiar with the Way, understood the shortcomings of this type of questioning (W 102). In the past, names and realities were *mere things* and of the least importance, but now they represent the most "solid" thing to people who have lost the Way, and they have been integrated into an irrational "analysis" that attempts to derive "right" and "wrong" from ill-founded knowledge.

Why, for those who hope to return to the Way, must our hard-won ideals be abandoned? It is precisely because "*each man considers himself to be their arbiter*." This implies a multiplicity of Ways, which is contrary to the concept of the Way. The "right" and "wrong" founded on "life and knowledge", that is, one's personal opinions, necessarily fall short of the Way. The "shifting voices" (W 17) of the Inner Chapters cannot determine right and wrong no matter how many of them get involved in the argument, and this is because we have fallen under the delusion that we can figure it all out for ourselves. We have become convinced by the nonsensical idea that we might penetrate the Ultimate by analysis of materials alone. To lose this confidence in one's own abilities is to gain the Great Unity.

This is the origin of many of Zhuangzi's more oblique expressions such as "to lose everything and yet possess everything" (W 120), "discard little wisdom, and great wisdom will become clear" (W 231), or recalling good men like the enlightened king above, "they do what is right, but they do not know that this is righteousness" (W 94) The paradoxical truth of the world is that we can only do the right thing when it is not *our* right thing. When our possession is attacked, we must defend it; when someone else seizes it, we must wrestle it back. The Way, on the other hand, is a liberating truth that can be given freely without changing its nature.

To show how the Way is different from any artificial mode of life, Zhuangzi uses the metaphor of a river: "Even if we asked the wind and sun to remain constantly over the river, the river would not regard this as the beginning of any real trouble for itself—it relies on the springs that feed it and goes on its way" (W 213). Because the river has a Source, it will not fall into danger of drying up. Our mortal analysis, based only in our possessions of "life and knowledge", lacks that fundamental security.

Like the river, the True Man of ancient times "didn't forget where he began [in the Source]; he didn't try to find out where he would end [by the movements of wind and sun]. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven." (W 43). Inventing a teaching like benevolence or righteousness to replace the Way, and trying to possess and defend that "thing" using the mind as a tool, only replaces the Way with a personal view, so Zhuangzi describes it as "using the mind to repel the Way." The injustice that we see in the world is our own perception; it is not our place to "help out Heaven" by trying to set it right.

One of Zhuangzi's very first assertions runs, "the Perfect Man has no self" (W 3). A "self" is the sort of thing that would impose rights, wrongs, forms, realities, and worst of all, analyses onto the world. All of these things cloud our clear vision of the Way. This does not contradict Zhuangzi's rejection of the "universal love and nonpartisanship" (W 104) advocated by the Mohists. They simply propose a different kind of teaching, like benevolence and righteousness, and they are therefore "using the mind to repel the Way." The correct way to go is the "fasting of the mind" (W 25), bypassing likes, dislikes, and conceptions and relying on

pure emptiness. This should eliminate the self and the mind that forms it, as it does for Yan Hui.

The Great Man who can accomplish this feat is no longer "getting thinged by things." "His face and form blend with the Great Unity, the Great Unity that is selfless. Being selfless, how can he look on possession as possession?" (W 82). A selfless man has no way to possess anything, and likewise, things cannot possess him. But he can still *use* things, in a very different way, not desirous for change himself and not invested in their changes, and thereby paradoxically directing those changes, like how a stream shapes itself around a big rock. Zhuangzi insists that, in fact, a Great Man is the only one who can do this: "Only what is still can still the stillness of other things" (W 35). *Yin*, the immensely heavy and still Great Man, employs the Pivot of the Dao and balances out the *yang*, the "things" that are light and desirous of change. Hence Hanfeizi says:

> If the ruler has the reins of government in his grip, he is said to be "heavy." If the ruler does not depart from his seat, he is said to be "resting." If heavy, he can control the light. If resting, he can subdue the moving. (Liao 1939:210)

References

Liao, W. K. 1939. *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*. London: Arthur Probsthain.

Watson, Burton. 2013. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press.