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Autonomy, Fate, Divination and the Good Life

Autonomy (or its absence) is a central concern for the good life in both Chinese and Greek texts, but it is very differently treated in the Chinese and Greek traditions, and is an object of active debate within each. These debates include theories of fate, determinism (together and separately), divination and prediction, and their implications for human wellbeing. For example, determinism is central to Aristotle's notion of moral responsibility and to Stoic ethics. Fate and autonomy appear as topics of debate in early Mohist texts, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Wang Chong and others, as well as in excavated texts.¹

I examine two aspects of the huge problem of the relation of autonomy, fate, divination and the good life in ways that depart from prevailing approaches to these questions. In the first and second sections I use Zhuangzi and Solon (rather than Aristotle) to problematise Chinese and Greek views of happiness and the good life, with a particular view toward the problem of autonomy. Zhuangzi and Solon in particular, in different ways and for different reasons, emphasize the tremendous role of chance or fate in determining the course of our lives. In the third section I shift from well-known philosophical debates about fate and divination to a different kind of evidence of the use of the mantic arts as a partial "solution" to the problem of "securing" the good life against risk, chance or fate.

But there is a preliminary question about how we as contemporary observers tend to formulate our approaches to questions of the good life and happiness. First, it should be noted that *eudaimonia* (the good life) is distinct from happiness. In very general terms, the person who lived well (*eudaimōn*) was both materially prosperous (*olbios*) and blessed by divine favor (*makarios*).² Second, two distinct views of the good life have dominated the contemporary study of happiness and well-being both in philosophy and in the emerging discipline of "happiness studies," which is currently enjoying a vogue in several disciplines. In the

1 Pinyin transliteration system is used throughout, including in quoted text, except for personal names of authors who use other romanizations and for terms well known in Latin versions (e.g. Confucius). Unless otherwise indicated, Greek primary texts are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, and abbreviations from the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

2 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 6 and 327–333. Masculine grammatical forms are used for simplicity, since Greek grammar obliges a specification.

history of philosophy, discussion centers on Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* (which may or may not be equivalent to happiness) and Bentham and Mill's utilitarian identification of happiness with pleasure and utility.³

Both traditions have a long history. The hedonic view, which equates well-being with *hēdonē*, personal pleasure or happiness, began with Aristippus of Cyrene (4th century BCE), the father of the so-called Cyrenaic School, whose views were systematized by his grandson, also named Aristippus. Cyrenaic ethics was concerned with the end or goal (*telos*) of action. Aristippus identified that end as pleasure.⁴ We may count Hobbes, DeSade, and Bentham, in various ways, among his intellectual descendents.⁵ The eudaimonic view, held in various forms by many philosophers and visionaries, disparages happiness as the main criterion of well-being. Aristotle in particular considered hedonic happiness a vulgar ideal that enslaved people through their desires. He argued that true happiness rose from the expression of virtue, which alone produces *eudaimonia* or well-being. Eudaimonic theories maintain that the fulfilment of only some desires brings about well-being because some desires produce pleasure but do not benefit people. Many contemporary philosophical debates about *eudaimonia* trace back to Aristotle, who has become the "default" for discussion within the Western tradition

Both *hēdonē* and *eudaimonia* are Greek notions. I suggest that they may be culturally specific, and rest on several other distinctions, including: (1) a perceived distinction between subjective and objective needs and possibly (2) culturally specific notions of the kind of self that experiences *hēdonē* or *eudaimonia*. For example, some theorists have attempted to distinguish Euro-American "internal" from Asian "relational" happiness.⁶ Further, the good life may include atti-

3 See Sissela Bok, "The Pursuits of Happiness" (Lowell Lecture, Harvard University, October 14, 2003); Douglas Den Uyl, and Tibor R. Machan, "Recent Work on the Concept of Happiness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20.2 (Apr. 1983): 115–134; Vivian Jerauld McGill, *The Idea of Happiness*, Institute for Philosophical Research concepts in Western Thought (Praeger, 1967); and Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "On Happiness and Human Potentials: a Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001):141–66.

4 Frag. 55 in Erich Mannebach, *Aristippi et Cyrenaicorum Fragmenta* (Leiden: Brill,1961).

5 See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Mill between Aristotle and Bentham," *Daedalus* 133.2 (Spring, 2004): 60–68; and John Watson, *Hedonistic Theories from Aristippus to Spencer* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1895).

6 E.g. Lu Luo and Robin Gilmour, "Culture and Conceptions of Happiness: Individual Oriented and Social Oriented SWB," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 5.3 (2004): 269–91. For a more nuanced study see Anna Wierzbicka, "Emotion and Culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum,"

tudes and practices that resist easy classification as hedonic or eudaimonic, for example: (1) a positive relation both to one's body and to nature (however defined); (2) a positive relation to "non-relation" through the experience of equanimity or detachment, without specific reference to notions of virtue; or (3) a sense of sufficiency or confidence through material well-being, including the continuity of one's family or lineage. The *Zhuangzi* gives many illustrations of the first two. We also see the second in the Stoa and in Buddhist philosophies, as well as in writings attributed to the Aristippus. The third is important to what may be called broadly "Confucian" notions of well-being.

I propose to depart from these approaches in two ways. First, I begin not with Aristotle, but with Zhuangzi, the Chinese philosopher who has the most to say on the subject. I ask whether Zhuangzi's views on the good life and happiness may help address the apparent conflict between hedonistic and eudaimonistic views of happiness in the Western tradition. Second, I engage in a brief comparison, not with Aristotle but with Solon (via Herodotus), who makes the first Western philosophical argument that happiness can only be assessed on the basis of an entire life.

But what terms to use for *eudaimonia* or happiness in an early Chinese context? For Zhuangzi as for most early Chinese thinkers, living well was linked, not to the favor of divine agents, but to living in accord with *dao* 道, and to a lesser extent, to living in a way that realized one's fate or *ming* 命.⁷

But the sense of living well or flourishing was also linked to the emotions of happiness and joy (*xi le* 喜樂). In the *Zhuangzi* – and also in the *Analects* – the term found most commonly to express this state is *le* 樂, joy or pleasure, and it is to this term that I refer by "happiness" in the context of Zhuangzi and other early Chinese texts.⁸ Finally, the *Zhuangzi* and other fourth-century texts refer to a set

Ethos 31.4 (2003): 577–600 and "Happiness' in Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Daedalus* 133.2, On Happiness (Spring, 2004): 34–43.

7 For the diverse semantic field of this term see Lisa Raphals, "Fatalism, Fate and Stratagem in China and Greece," in *Early China, Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons*, eds. Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 207–234; and "Fate, Fortune, Chance, and Luck in Chinese and Greek: A Comparative Semantic History," *Philosophy East & West* 53.4 (Oct. 2003): 537–74.

8 See Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Happiness in Early Chinese Thought," in *Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, eds. Iona Boniwell and Susan David (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 263–78. By contrast, Michael Nylan (p. 75n7) translates *le* as pleasure (implying action), rather than happiness (a state). See Michael Nylan, "On the Politics of Pleasure." *Asia Major* 14.1 (2001): 73–124. *Le* is also prominent in such contemporary expressions as 快樂 *kuaile* and 樂境 *lejing*. For a detailed contemporary study see Ye Zhengdao, "Why Are There Two 'Joy like' 'Basic' Emotions in Chinese? Semantic Theory and Empirical Findings," in *Love, Hatred and Other Passions*:

of six (or seven) *qing* 情, a term sometimes translated as “feelings” or “emotions,” but also as “essential nature” or “the genuine.”⁹ The *Zhuangzi* sometimes refers to four *qing* and sometimes to six, but in all these passages, there is a repeated contrast between happiness and joy (*xi le* 喜樂) and anger and grief (*nu ai* 怒哀)¹⁰ So for present purposes, it is more useful to take the four as part of a semantic field that contrasts these four emotions than to dwell on the differences between *xi* and *le*.

1 The *Zhuangzi* on Autonomy and the Good Life

The *Zhuangzi*'s views on the good life, happiness and pleasure are useful because they help us rethink hedonistic and eudaimonic views of happiness in the Western tradition. The *Zhuangzi* rejects both, and offers a different version of felicity that is closely tied to *dao* and *ming*, but is explicitly differentiated from virtue.

1.1 The *Zhuangzi* on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Happiness

Several passages in the *Zhuangzi* reject hedonic happiness and treat the manifestation of emotion as destructive imbalances of *qi* 氣. The *Zhuangzi* is one of several fourth-century texts that describe the transformation of *qi*, and regard the

Questions and Themes on Emotions in Chinese Civilisation, ed. Paolo Santangelo (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

⁹ See A. C. Graham, “The Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986) and Chad Hansen, “Qing 情 in Pre-Buddhist Thought,” in *Emotions in Asian Thought: A Dialogue in Comparative Philosophy*, eds. Joel Marks and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). In addition to the *Zhuangzi*, the *Zuo zhuan* and *Guanzi* also stress the need to regulate one's *qi* (including happiness) to achieve emotional balance. In the *Zuo zhuan* the six are: love and hate, happiness and anger, grief and joy: *hao-e, xi-nu, aile* 好惡喜怒哀樂, all arising from the six *qi* 六氣. See *Zuo zhuan* (Zhao) 25.3, p. 1458 in *Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, ed. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Gaoxiong: Fuwen tushu chubanshe, 1991). Cf. *Guanzi* 管子 X 26:2a (Sibu beiyao edition).

¹⁰ The four are: happiness, anger, grief and joy, *xinu, aile* 喜怒哀樂, *Zhuangzi* 2.51. The six are: hate and desire, happiness and anger, grief and pleasure, *e-yu xi-nu ai-le* 惡欲喜怒哀樂, *Zhuangzi* 23.810, both in *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1961). These differ slightly from the six of the *Zuo zhuan*.

manifestation of emotions as imbalances of *qi*. In these traditions all *qing* are excessive, and emotions are not a necessary or desirable constituent of the self.

Zhuangzi 22 clearly identifies *qi* as the basis of the physical constitution of the body: “Human birth is caused by the gathering together of *qi*.”¹¹ These texts tend to present emotion as excess, and do not portray strong emotion as a necessary or desirable constituent of the self. They take a dim view of happiness, pleasure and the other *qing*. For example, one passage describes the emotions as music rising from emptiness, mushrooms from mists, the alternation of day and night, with no clue as to where they come from.¹² Another criticizes Lao Dan’s disciples’ response to his death: grief and joy do not enter into a timely acquiescence to the rhythms of life and death.¹³ A third recommends harmonizing the six *qi* to nurture life.¹⁴

These passages also address the circumstances that make individual autonomy possible. In the voice of Confucius, *Zhuangzi* observes that to serve a ruler is the peak of loyalty, but true virtue is:

自事其心者，哀樂不易施乎前，知其不可奈何而安之若命，德之至也。

to serve your own mind so that sadness or joy do not change it; to understand what you cannot alter and to be at peace with it as with fate, this is the realization of virtue (*Zhuangzi* 4.155).¹⁵

We find a similar sentiment in *Zhuangzi* 15:

故曰，悲樂者，德之邪；喜怒者，道之過；好惡者，德之失。故心不憂樂，德之至也。

So it is said, grief and happiness are perversions of virtue; happiness and anger are transgressions of *dao*; love and hate are offenses against virtue. When the mind is without care or joy, this is the height of virtue (*Zhuangzi* 15.542).¹⁶

These passages clearly reject hedonic happiness and seem to argue for a version of *eudaimonia* that includes autonomy in circumstances beyond our control. The

11 人之生，氣之聚也。 *Zhuangzi* 22.733.

12 喜怒哀樂，慮嘆變熱，姚佚啟態；樂出虛，蒸成菌。日夜相代乎前，而莫知其所萌。 *Zhuangzi* 2.51.

13 安時而處順，哀樂不能入也。 *Zhuangzi* 3.128.

14 合六氣之精以育戡生。 *Zhuangzi* 11.386. The notion of six *qi* appears only twice in the *Zhuangzi*. The other passage refers to an independent person who uses the six *qi* as a chariot to steer a true course between heaven and earth (*Zhuangzi* 1.17).

15 Translation modified from Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 60.

16 Translation modified from Watson 1968, p. 169.

amalgamation of *qi* that results in our birth to some extent determines who we are, but we can “take charge” of it and transform it. Happiness, however, may be a casualty of that transformation. Many other examples suggest that the *Zhuangzi* consistently rejects hedonic happiness as undesirable emotional imbalance. Instead, the *Zhuangzi* seems to advocate a kind of eudaimonic happiness in which equanimity is “the height of virtue” (*de zhi zhi* 德之至). This point receives extensive discussion in chapter 18, titled “Happiness Realized” (*Zhi le* 至樂)

天下有至樂无有哉？有可以活身者无有哉？今奚為奚據？奚避奚處？奚就奚去？奚樂奚惡？夫天下之所尊者，富貴壽善也；所樂者，身安厚味美服好色音聲也

Is there such a thing as perfect happiness in the world? Is there a way to keep the body alive [*huo shen*]? Now what shall we rely on, avoid, cleave to, follow, forego, take pleasure in, hate? What the world honors is wealth, honor, longevity and reputation. It takes pleasure in ease of the body, fine food and clothing, desirable sights and pleasant sounds (*Zhuangzi* 18.608–609).

The passage continues that people who cannot attain these things become worried and afraid. But people who do attain them mistreat their bodies in the process:

烈士為天下見善矣，未足以活身。

Paragons of ardor [*lie shi*] are regarded as good by the world but they are unable to preserve their persons. (*Zhuangzi* 18.609).

So the passage advises: if loyal advice is overlooked, give way and do not contend. It concludes by questioning the happiness of ordinary people:

皆曰樂者，吾未之樂也，亦未之不樂也。果有樂无有哉？吾以无為誠樂矣，又俗之所大苦也。故曰，「至樂无樂」

They all say that they are happy; I am neither happy nor unhappy with it; in the end is there really happiness or not? I consider *wu wei* to be true happiness, but ordinary people consider it bitter. Therefore they say: perfect happiness is without happiness (*Zhuangzi* 18.611).¹⁷

This passage clearly rejects pleasure as a source of happiness, and seems to advocate a eudaimonic detachment as the height of virtue, and the best expression of the good life. However, several problems arise. First, the passage never identifies true happiness with virtue. Second, it recommends preserving one’s per-

17 Translations from this chapter modified from Watson 1968, pp. 190–191.

son. Third, what it does recommend is the efficacious action of “acting without acting” (*wu wei* 無為). As the source of “true happiness”, *wu wei* offers autonomy, defined by the minimum of physical well-being and self-preservation.

But the *Zhuangzi* ultimately rejects the emphasis on virtue that characterizes eudaimonic happiness. Chapter 23 urges us to reject four things:

徹志之勃，解心之謬，去德之累，達道之塞。貴富顯嚴名利六者，勃志也。容動色理氣意六者，（繆）〔謬〕心也。惡欲喜怒哀樂六者，累德也。去就取與知能六者，塞道也。此四六者不盪跲中則正，正則靜，靜則明，明則虛，虛則無為而無不為也。

Wipe out the delusions of the will, undo the snares of the heartmind, rid yourself of the entanglements to virtue [*de zhi lei*]; and open up the roadblocks to *dao* [*dao zhi sai*]. Eminence, wealth, recognition, authority, fame and profit are the six delusions of the will. Appearances and carriage, complexion and features, temperament and attitude are the six snares of the heartmind. Hate, desire, joy, anger, grief and happiness are the six entanglements of virtue. Rejecting, accepting, taking, giving, knowledge and ability are the six roadblocks to *dao*. When these four sextads do not seethe in your breast, you will become upright [*zheng*]; when you are upright, you will become still [*jing*]; once you are still, you will be enlightened [*ming*]. Once you are enlightened, you will become empty [*xu*]. Empty, there will be action without action [*wu wei*] and nothing will not be done [*wu bu wei ye*]. (*Zhuangzi* 23.810)

But here we have a difficulty. The delusions of the will – eminence, wealth, recognition, authority, fame and profit – are at least partially identifiable with conventional descriptions of eudaimonic happiness. And the six *qing* are identified, not as the snares of the heartmind, but as the entanglements of virtue. And virtue is identified, not with human excellence, but with *dao*:

道者，德之欽也；生者，德之光也；性者，生之質也。性之動，謂之為；為之偽，謂之失。知者，接也；知者，謨也；知者之所不知，猶睨也。動以不得已之謂德，動无非我之謂治，名相反而實相順也。

Dao holds sovereign command over virtue; life is the light of virtue; inborn nature is the substance of life. Inborn nature in motion is called action; action made artificial is called loss. Knowledge is reaching; knowledge is making plans. Knowledge of what cannot be known is like a sidelong look. Motion without autonomy [where there is no alternative] is called virtue; motion where there is no non-self is called order. The names oppose each other but the realities are in accord (*Zhuangzi* 23.810).¹⁸

This passage is explicit that virtue is an entanglement, not a means to *dao*. Without impediments, the result will be illumination, emptiness and a *wu wei* that will take care of everything. In summary, the *Zhuangzi* seems to reject hedonic

18 Translations from this chapter modified from Watson 1968, p. 259.

and eudaimonic happiness in favor of an autonomy identified not with virtue, but with detachment, equanimity and *wu wei*.

This is an important difference between accounts of the good life in the *Zhuangzi* and the Confucian *Analects*. Confucius would agree with Aristotle and Mill that the cultivation of virtue is an essential part of the good life. Zhuangzi agrees with Confucius that the good life lies in alignment with *dao* and fate, but they part company in the *Zhuangzi*'s rejection of the cultivation of virtue *per se* as a key component of such a life.¹⁹

1.2 Positive Accounts of Happiness in the *Zhuangzi*

These are negative recommendations. To consider what the *Zhuangzi* does do, I first juxtapose two discourses that do not normally coincide: the discourse on happiness and a philosophically separate discourse on the autonomy of animals.

The most famous discussion of happiness and animal minds is “the Happiness of Fish” (*yu zhi le* 魚之樂) section of *Zhuangzi* 17 (606–607), but Zhuangzi and Hui Shi are less concerned about whether the fish really are happy than in what they can, or cannot know about it. But Zhuangzi at the end of this passage does suggest a perspective for happiness: standing on the bridge looking down at the fish, who are, presumably happy.

The components of such happiness come up in Zhuangzi 21, where Lao Dan advises Confucius.

草食之獸不疾易藪，水生之蟲不疾易水，行小變而不失其大常也，喜怒哀樂不入於眚次。

Beasts that feed on grass do not fret over a change of pasture; creatures that live in water do not fret over a change of stream. They accept the minor shift as long as the all-important constant is not lost. [Be like them] and joy, anger, grief, and happiness can never enter your breast. (*Zhuangzi* 21.714)²⁰

On this account, animals are not vexed by the illusion of happiness.²¹ But is the text really claiming that humans can or should emulate animals in any significant respect? Another recommendation to emulate the behavior of at least

¹⁹ On this point see Ivanhoe 2013, especially pp. 274–277.

²⁰ Translation modified from Watson 1968, pp. 225–226.

²¹ In another famous account Zhuang Zhou declines to become minister of Chu, citing the example of the sacred turtle whose plastron is preserved and revered in the hall of state. Like the turtle of Chu, were it free to choose, Zhuang Zhou prefers to be left free to “drag his tail in the mud” (17.603–604).

some animals appears in the *Zhuangzi*'s account of uselessness and fate. A series of statements in the *Zhuangzi* seems not to restrict *ming* to humans, but attributes destiny to all living things, who are often killed for their usefulness. For such creatures:

其能苦其生者也，故不終其天年而中道夭

Their capability embitters their lives; therefore they do not live out their heaven-[allotted] years, but die prematurely in mid-course. (*Zhuangzi* 4:172)²²

In this passage the *Zhuangzi* applies the notion of allotted lifespan (*tian nian* 天年) to plants, animals and humans; and argues that usefulness or talent are obstacles to living it to the full. They extend the notion of an allotted lifespan – or more broadly, the notion of a fate or destiny – to mortal creatures only; the *Zhuangzi* does not attribute a *ming* to gods and spirits or to ancestors.²³

Finally, it has been suggested that some kind of full participation in the flow of life was an aim of the *Zhuangzi*'s teachings. Some accounts of positive themes in the *Zhuangzi* stress the theme of uselessness, construed as a rejection of false value or as a key to survival and preserving one's original nature. Other positive accounts of the *Zhuangzi* stress "knack" stories (especially A.C. Graham).²⁴ These accounts focus on *Zhuangzi*'s account of skill-knowledge and seemingly effortless and absorbed action, often the fruit of long study and experience.

The *Zhuangzi* has also been reconsidered in the context of Mihaly Csikszentmihaly's studies of the psychology of happiness and "flow," a theory of optimal experience in which "people are so involved in an activity that nothing seems to matter", where the experience itself is so central that people will do it for its own sake.²⁵ Csikszentmihaly describes this experience as intrinsically rewarding or

²² A similar statement appears again at *Zhuangzi* 4.177.

²³ These passages also suggest that life span is an upward limit, rather than a predetermined quantity. Otherwise, there would be no use in uselessness; and the "useful" plants that die prematurely would simply be fulfilling their *ming*. These issues are discussed in greater detail in Lisa Raphals, "The *Zhuangzi* on *Ming*: Perspectives and Implications," in *Conceptual Histories of Philosophy/zhexue in China*, eds. Ralph Weber and Robert H. Gassmann (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

²⁴ See A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1989), pp. 186–194, cf. Lisa Raphals, "Skeptical strategies in the *Zhuangzi* and Theaetetus," *Philosophy East & West* 44.3 (1994): 501–526.

²⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 4, cf. Chris Joachim, "Just Say No To No Self in *Zhuangzi*," in *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998: 35–74), esp pp. 60–64.

autotelic. It is characterized by total concentration, unawareness of the passage of time, and lack of self-consciousness, followed by a strong sense of self after the experience. Csikszentmihaly cites Cook Ding as an example.²⁶

It is worth noting that several of these positive accounts may be different expressions of the same thing. Happiness in the *Zhuangzi* is paradoxical in three respects. First, it is deeply of the moment but is not hedonic. Second, it is skilled, and often didactic, but it is not eudaimonic. Third, it eclipses the self but reaffirms it. The good life as described in the *Zhuangzi* is in accord with *dao* and with *ming*, prominently including the meaning of one's fated lifespan. Several vignettes illustrate equanimity toward illness or impending death. Disregard for political fortunes (beyond avoiding political engagement) is a leitmotif of the text. This good life is thus thoroughly compatible with both chance and fate, and relies on a kind of autonomy that does not presuppose independence from or control of luck or fate.

In other words, the *Zhuangzi* describes a kind of good life that is distinctive in two important ways. First, it does not depend on hedonic or eudaimonic happiness as defined by Aristotle and the subsequent tradition. Second, it is *not* the sole property of "philosophers" (however defined) or other intellectual and social elites. But we can go further. Third, it seems to be a kind of autonomy that is to some extent shared by animals. To put this point very differently in contemporary terms, we may speculate that Zhuangzi's good life reflects both a reflective ethical sensibility and an awareness of broader human needs as a species whose needs for survival are contiguous with the needs of other animals.²⁷

2 Solon on Happiness and Risk

I now turn to a Greek account that precedes the hedonic-eudaimonic distinction. In the *History* of Herodotus, Solon makes the first Western philosophical argument that happiness can only be assessed on the basis of an entire life. According to Herodotus, Solon visited the court of Croesus of Lydia in Sardis. Croesus entertained him and showed him his treasures, and finally asked Solon who was the most fortunate person (*olbiôtaton*) he has encountered (Hdt. 1.30–32). Croesus expects to be the man so distinguished, but Solon names Tellus of Ath-

²⁶ Csikszentmihaly 1990, 49 and 143–63 esp 151.

²⁷ On this point see G. E. R. Lloyd, *Cognitive Variations: Reflections on the Unity & Diversity of the Human Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

ens and the brothers Cleobis and Biton. Croesus is horrified and demands to know what distinguished the good lives of these obscure men.

Solon explains that Tellus was personally prosperous, came from a prosperous city and had children who were good and noble. Second, he had grandchildren by them, all of whom survived; in other words, his prosperity extended beyond his immediate person. Third, after a prosperous life, he had a glorious death: in battle, fighting for the Athenians in Eleusis. He was buried at public expense and given much honor.

Cleobis and Biton were Argives; they were comfortable in means, strong, and winners of athletic prizes. When there were no family oxen available, they yoked themselves to a wagon and bore their mother five miles to the temple of Hera in time for a festival. And everyone saw them: men congratulated them on their strength and women congratulated their mother on her sons. She prayed that Hera would grant her them the best thing humanly possible. After the sacrifices and feast, the boys slept in the temple and never awoke. The Argives dedicated statues of them at Delphi as being the best of men.

Solon continued that, in a long life, one may see and suffer much. The limit of a lifetime is seventy years plus thirty-five intercalary months: a total of twenty-six thousand, two hundred and fifty days, each unique. He concluded:

So, Croesus, man is entirely chance. To me you seem to be very rich and to be king of many people, but I cannot answer your question before I learn that you ended your life well. (Hdt. 1.32)

Solon explains that many very rich men are unfortunate, and many of moderate means are lucky. It is better to be lucky than rich. Although the rich man can better satisfy his appetites and deflect disaster, the lucky man's luck saves him from disaster and protects him from deformity, disease and evils. And he has fine children and good looks. If he also ends his life well, he may be called fortunate after his death, but during his life he can only be called lucky (Hdt. 1.32.7–8).

This point is developed further in Solon's Elegies (fr. 13.5), in which he prays to the Muses, but also to Memory (Mnēmosunē) for two gifts: lasting repute among mortals, and good fortune (*olbon*, the very thing Croesus lacks) from the gods.²⁸ He adds that wealth is desirable, but that riches cultivated with violence lead to divine retribution, later if not sooner, since ultimately the fate of the gods will overtake them, even if it takes generations (θεῶν μοῖρ' ἐπιούσα κίχη, 13.30). It is in this context that Solon describes the dangers (as well as the goals)

²⁸ In M. L. West, *Iambi et Elegi Graeci*. Vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 120–144.

of different occupations, including seafaring, agriculture, craft, and the work of the bard, the *mantis* and the healer (13.43–63). However Solon concludes that:

Μοῖρα δέ τοι θνητοῖσι κακὸν φέρει ἠδὲ καὶ ἐσθλόν,
δῶρα δ' ἄφυκτα θεῶν γίγνεται ἀθανάτων.
πᾶσι δέ τοι κίνδυνος ἐπ' ἔργμασιν, οὐδέ τις οἶδεν
πῆι μέλλει σχήσειν χρήματος ἀρχομένου·

Moira bears mortals both ill and good;
the gifts of gods to mortals are inescapable
There is danger in every kind of work; no one knows
at the beginning how things will turn out. (Solon fr. 13.63–66)

It is because Fate (Moira) is dangerous and unpredictable that happiness is an attribute of an entire life; it equivalent to success, which can only be judged after the fact.²⁹ Thus for Solon, the good life is significantly determined by fate and luck, so much so that it cannot be assessed until it is over. Tellus, Cleobis and Biton are *olbios* or *makarios* (blessed) or have *eutukhia* (good fortune). In this sense, there is nothing autonomous about any of them.

This view of happiness was widely shared in the Greek world, and was expressed in tragedy especially.³⁰ Aristotle summarizes it as “doing well combined with virtue” (*eupraxia met’ aretēs*, *Rhet.* 1360B14). In this view, happiness requires good fortune, which is unstable. One Greek response to this dilemma is admiration for flexibility, of which the paradigmatic individual is Odysseus. Yet others admire the inflexible hero (of whom Ajax is the paradigm), despite his loss of prospects for happiness. Such flexibility is closely identified with *mētis*, which, as Detienne and Vernant have shown, was highly regarded in the Greek world over a long and continuous history.³¹

Aristotle addresses – and disagrees with – this prevailing view of well-being in several places. As he makes clear in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

²⁹ See Terence Irwin, “Permanent Happiness: Aristotle and Solon,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985): 89–124, p. 91.

³⁰ E.g. Aesch. Ag. 928, Soph. Trach. 103, OT 1524–30, Eur. Andromache 96–103, TW 505–510, Heraclidae 863–84, Iph. Aulis 161–63, cf. Irwin 1985, 91n3.

³¹ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [1978]). Debates about the status of “metic intelligence” in the Chinese philosophical tradition underline the multiplicity of both Greek and Chinese views of what virtue is. See Lisa Raphals, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

To be happy takes a complete lifetime; for one swallow does not make spring, nor does one fine day; and similarly one day or a brief period of happiness does not make a man supremely blessed and happy. (Arist. NE 1097b17)

Confronted with the Solonic and commonplace view, Aristotle faces several dilemmas. He agrees with Solon in considering contingent fortune a necessary component of happiness. He disagrees with Solon – and agrees with the *Zhuangzi* – on a crucial point: that happiness *depends* on something external. Happiness, to be the highest good, is equivalent to “living well and doing well” (*eu zên kai to eu prattein*, 1095a19). It must be complete (*teleion*, 1097a28–30) and self-sufficient (*autarkeias*, 1097b6–10). This would seem to preclude fortune, but Aristotle thinks that happiness requires good fortune (1099a31-b8), and he rejects the Socratic view that virtue is sufficient for happiness (1153b14–25). In contrast to the *Rhetoric*, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle does not consider external goods part of happiness, because they are not so in their own right. As Terence Irwin puts it, Aristotle defends the claim that fortune can make us happier, but if we lose it, we may “cease to be happy” without becoming “unhappy,” because of the composite nature of happiness, which has both stable and unstable components (Irwin 1985, p. 100–101).

Aristotle thus rejects the claim that pleasure and happiness are identical. This is the first of three concepts of the best life, the Life of Gratification. This is “a life for grazing animals” (NE 1095b16–20). This is inferior to both the life of action and the life of contemplation. And Aristotle recognizes that a happy person can lose his happiness, as did Priam (NE 1101a6–11).

Where Aristotle differs from Solon is the view that the dominant part of happiness is the stable component that is immune to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This stable component is virtue (NE 1100b11–22), the source of eudaimonic happiness. This stability also explains Aristotle’s apparent preference for the inflexible but stable Ajax over Odysseus, since virtue is stable.

So we can view Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonic happiness as a critique of certain problems raised by the prevailing view of happiness, as expressed by Solon. We call it eudaimonic after the fact, but in its original context it was more nuanced. Aristotle takes steps to shield *eudaimonia*, and virtue, from vulnerability to chance. In doing so he introduces autonomy into the good life. It is worth noting that what he is “protecting” *eudaimonia* from is chance, not fate.

In summary, Zhuangzi, Solon and Aristotle all reject hedonic happiness, but for very different reasons. For Solon the problem is empirical and pragmatic; during a lifetime there is, by definition, incomplete information, and the possibility of reversal is so great, that “almost” is not good enough. Aristotle echoes Solon’s concern for reversals of circumstance, but his “permanent” component

of happiness is eudaimonic virtue. For Zhuangzi the problem is deeper, in that hedonic happiness, even at its best, does not produce well-being, and conventional virtue depends on illusory values. The happiness described in this text may indeed produce pleasure, or benefit others, but these are circumstantial, rather than the essence of the matter. The account of both happiness, autonomy and virtue in the *Zhuangzi* would seem to invite comparison with Stoic attitudes, especially.

3 The Good Life, Fate and the Mantic Arts

Another viewpoint shared by the *Zhuangzi*, Solon and Aristotle is that the good life is affected by the imponderables of luck, fate and chance. The *Zhuangzi* grounds virtue in *dao*, but also emphasizes the importance of fate.³² Awareness of the unpredictability of life and the importance of chance and luck in particular is at the core of Solon's advice that no one's happiness could be assessed during their lifetime. Aristotle too emphasizes the importance of chance and luck, but tries to solve the problem by making his "good life" independent of them.

Greek philosophical considerations of fate are also distinct from explicit debates about *eudaimonia*. As has been discussed extensively elsewhere, divination and fate were subjects of heated debate in Hellenistic Greece. The question of whether the future can be known is logically distinct from the question of whether the universe is deterministic, but in antiquity arguments about fate and prediction were considered related, perhaps because individual fate was so often the object of prediction and divination. Divination was central to arguments about fate, causality, necessity, determinism and their ethical implications. The Hellenistic debates about determinism and freedom began as ethical reactions to Aristotle's incomplete analysis of causation, determinism and responsibility.³³

32 Most Chinese philosophers argued about *ming* 命. They disagreed about its nature and what to do about it, but all considered it part of the landscape. They also argued about prognostication, but in separate contexts. In both China and Greece debates about divination arose relatively late, in China with the growth of a specifically Confucian philosophy in the late Warring States and in Greece with the efforts of third-century Stoics to address arguments of Aristotle and his later contemporaries.

33 For a review of some of these debates see Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), R. J. Hankinson, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1980).

Zhuangzi, Solon and Aristotle, as well as many other philosophically minded Chinese and Greeks concerned themselves with fate and divination and their implications, but not necessarily as solutions to the vulnerabilities associated with their formulations of the good life. Rather than review these debates, which have been extensively discussed elsewhere, I turn to a very different treatment of the problem of the dangers and risks of life, as so eloquently set out by Solon.

A very different view of chance, luck, fate and the good life emerges if we shift from the views of philosophers to the views of ordinary people, insofar as we can find them. One such opportunity is the evidence of personal consultation of mantic expertise as a method for the management of risk and uncertainty. Mantic questions posed by private consultants indicate what areas of life they consider most uncertain or dangerous; these questions also suggest how ordinary individuals used the mantic arts to manage risk in daily life. This approach draws on the anthropological view that risk is socially constructed, the view of Mary Douglas that dangers are culturally selected for recognition. Perceptions of danger and risk reflect culturally specific views of agency and the nature of luck and misfortune. What a society perceives as *particularly* dangerous and what steps it takes to manage that risk vary according to ideas of time, space, values and beliefs, especially notions of choice, blame and responsibility.³⁴ (The term risk itself has a complex and uncertain history. Within a European context, until the nineteenth century the term was neutral and referred to both positive and negative situations. Only later did it come to refer only to negative or dangerous situations.)³⁵

In both early China and Greece, many mantic consultation topics speak more to state concerns than the concerns of commoners (for example, the oracle bone inscriptions, many accounts in dynastic histories, and most inscriptions remaining from Delphi). For a sense of private consultation and perceptions of danger we can turn to the many personal consultations recorded in the lead tablets from Dodona, and to the question topics found in the daybooks from Shuihudi.³⁶

³⁴ Mary Douglas, *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1985), esp chapter 4 and *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (1992, Rpt. London: Routledge, 2002), esp pp. 38–41.

³⁵ Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) and *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁶ For Dodona see Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), which includes a detailed catalog of the Dodona inscriptions. For Shuihudi see *Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓竹簡, ed. Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu (Beijing: Wenwu, 1990). For studies of this text see Li Xueqin 李学勤, “Shuihudi Qin jian

While there is much debate about the users of the latter, the questions in the daybooks clearly reflect concerns of everyday life.³⁷ I consider this evidence separately elsewhere, and here restrict myself to a summary of the results of such a comparison.³⁸

Several categories are common to the Dodona inscriptions and the Shuihudi daybooks and suggest comparison: travel; marriage and children; illness; occupation, livelihood and general wellbeing; violence, including fighting, thieves, warfare and crime; desertion or flight; and ritual activity. The individual consultants of both the oracle of Zeus at Dodona and the Shuihudi daybooks seem to have used the mantic arts for immediately practical purposes in trying to establish or preserve “good lives.”³⁹ To describe these activities as hedonic in the negative senses disparaged by Solon, Aristotle or Zhuangzi seems to be beside the point. When we turn to what kinds of risks they sought to circumvent, many areas of perceived risk seem to be common to both Chinese and Greek consultants, but within each apparently similar category there were important differences in the exact perception of what the risk or danger was. I give four examples: travel, marriage, progeny, and religious cult.

Greek questions about travel tend to ask whether it will be profitable, either for one’s livelihood or whether migration is in an individual or family’s interest. Questions about changes of residence are also very specific, and many name individual destinations. These concerns reflect a society in which trade, pilgrimage and migration are commonplace. Travel is also extensively treated in the daybooks, but it is differently categorized. Recommendations for travel distinguish embarkation and return, and local and distant journeys. The goal is to travel on an auspicious day in an auspicious direction. Other passages address the

rishu yu Chu Qin shehui” 水虎地秦简《日书》与楚秦社会. *Jiangnan Kaogu* 4 (1985): 60–64; Liu Lexian 劉樂賢, *Shuihudi Qin jian rishu yanjiu* 睡虎地秦简日书研究 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1993); and Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

37 See Lothar von Falkenhausen, “Social Ranking in Chu Tombs: The Mortuary Background of the Warring States Manuscript Finds,” *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003): 439–526.

38 For detailed comparison of perceptions of risk in the Dodona inscriptions and Shuihudi daybooks see chapter 6 of Lisa Raphals, *Divination and Prediction in Early China and Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

39 There are important differences in the contexts of consultation. The queries at Dodona frequently specify individual persons, places, circumstances. Consultants of the daybooks surely inquired about specific journeys, wives, or activities, but the daybook recommendations are all generic in form. Their underlying assumption, that certain days of the calendric cycle were inherently auspicious or inauspicious for particular activities, has no Greek equivalent.

dangers of the road, and reflect a milieu in which both thieves and local governments were potential sources of violence and danger.

Chinese and Greek mantic queries on marriage and progeny also differ in kind. Greek questions about marriage are often quite specific: will marriage to so-and-so bring good fortune? Should I give my daughter to this man or that? By contrast, the daybooks characterize the choice of a wife or son-in-law in two ways: the (usually negative) traits of a prospective wife and the prospects for a loving relationship. Both Chinese and Greek questions on marriage seek many children, and sons, but some Chinese questions also concern the welfare of the prospective wife.

The overwhelming concern of questions about children in the Dodona tablets is how to have them: which woman to bear them by and which god to address for help. The daybooks focus on the prospects and futures of grown children born on particular days, often from the viewpoint of the parents. Desirable prospects for children include temperament, prosperity and career, as well as physical beauty and being loved by others. Several positive predictions seem to concern the child's personal welfare. The single largest number of entries is for happiness. By contrast, the treatment of progeny in the Dodona tablets only reflects the welfare of the parents.

Both the Dodona tablets and the daybooks suggest that divine guidance was both necessary and possible, in order to mitigate the perceived risks of both daily life and important decisions. Both assume that the gods are interested in human affairs at some level. Many questions ask to what god to sacrifice and pray in order to obtain some desired result. For example, the daybooks attribute illness to the influence of ancestors and spirits and give detailed instructions for their exorcism and the management of sacrifices. The daybooks seek to mitigate risk by taking advantage of systematic correlations between auspicious or inauspicious actions and precise times, but there is no sacrificial or other interaction with the cosmic powers that control good and ill auspice.

The Shuihudi daybooks and the Dodona lead tablets are useful "comparables" because each presents a taxonomy of risks that spoke to the needs of ordinary people, who have little voice in the classics of elites. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that the contexts of consultation were very different. The daybooks are mostly concerned with things to avoid; they identify generic, patterns of risk (inauspiciousness) based on predictable temporal patterns. The Dodona tablets, by contrast are detailed responses to individual queries.

Despite these important differences, these two corpora give indications about how their consultors perceived risk in everyday life. In both cases, inquiries were not open-ended; consultors sought advice in choosing between alternatives. Many of the questions to Dodona ask "will I fare better" (*lōion prattein*) or

whether a choice will be “better and more good” (*lôion kai ameinon*). Many of the daybook responses are that a choice is “auspicious” (*ji* 吉). Questions of this kind seek to optimize alternatives; they do not seek certainty or prediction. It might be said they seek a “better” life by mitigating risk and maximizing divine goodwill.

4 Conclusions

These limited reflections on autonomy, fate, divination and the good life suggest several areas for further consideration. In particular they suggest a departure from prevalent approaches to comparative ethics via very limited comparisons based on Confucius and Aristotle. The testimony of Zhuangzi and Solon suggest nuanced views of happiness or the good life, and its vulnerability to the effects of chance, fate or risk. We find these problems energetically pursued in archaeological sources such as the Dodona inscriptions and the daybooks.

We completely miss these perceptions of autonomy or good lives if we restrict ourselves to the received history of philosophy, and simply read Solon as a predecessor to Aristotle. Zhuangzi and Solon (in very different ways) describe “good lives” that are eudaimonic insofar as they are concerned with virtue, but are also concerned with physical well-being, starting from the most basic needs of survival. Both also recommend equanimity or detachment, specifically toward culturally induced desires such as wealth, power, reputation, etc. Both are very aware of the fragility of life and well-being, but neither attempts to secure (or even recommends) anything remotely like any modern notion of autonomy as a way to counter these risks. Both are deeply concerned with virtue, but virtue is only a part of what makes a good life possible.

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