An Introduction to Daoist Thought: Action, Language, and Ethics in Zhuangzi (review)

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An Introduction to Daoist Thought: Action, Language, and Ethics in Zhuangzi, by Eske Møllgaard, may be situated within the fertile movement of recovering the Zhuangzi, a movement in recent decades in which Western sinologists have strived to highlight the critical and philosophical dimensions of this complex, fascinating text. In this case, I believe the hermeneutic method chosen by Møllgaard has produced a valuable contribution that combines reading backed by a rigorous philosophical structure, including a knowledge of the work of other sinologists (among them the essential works by the Swiss sinologist Jean-François Billeter) and a freer interpretation in which Møllgaard draws on the reflections of such leading contemporary intellectuals as Giorgio Agamben, Pierre Hadot, Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Zizek, Émile Benveniste, and Jacques Lacan, among others.

In combining these two seemingly opposite yet necessarily complementary hermeneutic dimensions, Møllgaard sidesteps the risks of a reiterative, paralyzing perception of classical Chinese thought in general and of the Zhuangzi in particular, offering an interpretation that is original and often stimulating. His choice of contemporary interlocutors clearly reveals the standpoint from which he undertakes his reading of the Zhuangzi. In the first chapter, devoted to presenting the interpretive keys to his project, he notes that since the Zhuangzi continually resorts to prose poems, fables, satire, songs, fictional dialogue, aphorisms, and other literary strategies, it is necessary to opt for “a philosophy that takes into account what is existentially at stake in reading, and where there is no clear division between philosophy and literature (or psychology). This kind of philosophy is rather imprecisely called ‘continental philosophy’” (p. 6). He then endeavors to steer clear of a more technical philosophy that he deems to be a sort of ritual developed by academia wherein the same structures are repeated over and over again. In its aim of resisting mummification and counteracting the tendency to view classical texts as mere “archaeological” objects, both sanctified and deactivated, Møllgaard’s hermeneutic project is commendable. It essentially attempts to restore the power, the internal tensions, and the validity of a body of thought by adopting the faithful reading of a historian or philologist while making an “inactual”—in the Nietzschean sense of the word—interpretation. This is to say that Møllgaard raises questions about the text that perhaps would not seem to pertain to it in any strict sense, while also outlining a way of reading characterized by a fidelity that is at once unfaithful and revitalizing.

Though brief, Møllgaard’s essay manages to offer an overview of the architecture or basic principles underlying the construction of the thought presented in the Zhuangzi. A good number of the most essential issues it deals with—for example its radical criticism of any form of domination; the condemnation of certain forms of unilaterally tending discursive modality; the breaking down of rigid forms that stifle existence; the quest for a freer, more spontaneous approach to life; and so on—receive
refined exposition and scrupulous, suggestive treatment. Among the most germane elements of analysis offered in the eight chapters of this short work, one must highlight the privileged position that Møllgaard very acutely attributes, within the inner logic of the argument of the Zhuangzi, to the opposition between “life” (sheng) and “completion” (cheng), which, in the last instance, goes back to the contrast between the celestial (tian) dimension and the human (ren) dimension. According to Møllgaard, in the Zhuangzi “life” is the spontaneously emerging life generated by Heaven, while “completion,” with connotations of “formation,” “accomplishment,” and “achievement,” is what human beings add to life when they enclose themselves in a world of their own making (p. 15). From this standpoint, Zhuangzi’s work fosters, in the fashion of spiritual exercises, a transformation that manages to “liberate human existence from the false values and views we have added on” (p. 20). This process of transformation and liberation crystallizes, as is reflected in Møllgaard’s analysis, in a systematic critique of technical action, the socio-ethical structures that make up the moralizing human being, cultural institutions (rituals, codes, laws, etc.), the quest for efficiency, the strategic mentality, the technical language used in philosophical disputes, and bio-spiritual practices that seek total control over things and the attainment of longevity.

Less felicitous, I believe, is Møllgaard’s resort to the religious sphere when interpreting Zhuangzi’s thought. The assertion that Zhuangzi “rejects sage-knowledge and so he ultimately goes beyond the tradition of ancient philosophy elaborated by Hadot and enters a realm we can only call the religious” (p. 9) requires a much more consistent and better-elaborated grounding than Møllgaard offers in this book. Much the same happens when, in the chapter devoted to ethics, he persists in projecting onto Zhuangzi a profoundly religious ethics that transcends positive morality (p. 106), once again without providing convincing arguments for doing so. Also needing a sounder footing is the notion that, within this dialectic between the celestial and the human dimensions, Zhuangzi would have opted for a halfway, “in-between” position (pp. 58–59). While the hypothesis is interesting, and has also been defended by other Western scholars such as François Jullien, Møllgaard’s reasoning is almost exclusively drawn from a rather lean passage in chapter 23 of the Zhuangzi that is somewhat unclear in terms of its authority and composition, without satisfactorily accounting for Zhuangzi’s overwhelming rejection of everything connected with the human dimension and, in turn, his manifest eulogizing of effects derived from the celestial dimension.

All in all, this book is a valuable introduction to the Zhuangzi that will, without a doubt, help the reader to delve more deeply into one of the most complex and least understood philosophical works from ancient China.