The (Non)Active Company of Forces: A Deleuzian Reading of the Affected Agential Self in "Boundless Wandering" in *Zhuangzi*

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Abstract

How do we act when we are defined by the relations that we depend on to flourish? How can we celebrate the nonhuman constitutions that constitute us, but still actively become ourselves and take ethical actions for others? The abundant web of impersonal forces Deleuze theorizes calls for a reconfiguration of agency. This paper explores the agency of selves in the *Zhuangzi*'s 莊子 "Boundless Wandering" (逍遙遊) chapter in dialogue with Deleuze's theories of forces in affective relations. I argue for acts of creatively relating to others. These acts constantly redefine our selfhood, enable different ways of enjoying life, and reframe our perspective to include differences. The concept of the "agential self" conceives of who we are through what we are capable of doing. Conversing with Deleuze's thoughts on forces, activeness, and the will to power, this paper explores how the agential self can be active in affective relation through three sets of characters in "Boundless Wandering": First, *Zhuangzi* presents a self that is formally dissolved but affectively connective, elaborated through the description of four types of humans, including Song Rongzi 宋榮子 and Liezi 列子. Secondly, the story of Yao 堯 and Xu You 許由 foregrounds the activeness of a self that embraces its embeddedness in the world of forces. Lastly, the conversation between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi 惠施 shows the power to recreate relations that let diverse lives flourish.

Keywords: agential self, force, affect, active

Moč nedelovanja: deleuzovsko branje aficiranega dejavnega sebstva v Zhuangzijevem »Svobodnem lebdenju«

Izvleček

Kako delovati, ko nas določajo odnosi, od katerih je odvisno naše blagostanje? Kako slaviti nečloveške sestavine, ki nas sestavljajo, obenem pa dejavno postati mi sami in etično delovati v prid drugih? Bogata mreža neosebnih sil, ki jo opisuje Deleuze, zahteva rekonfiguracijo delovanja. Članek raziskuje delovanje sebstev v poglavju »Svobodno

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lebdenje« (逍遙遊) iz *Zhuangzija* 莊子 v dialogu z Deleuzovimi teorijami sil v aficiranih razmerjih. Zagovarjam dejanja ustvarjalnega povezovanja z drugimi; ta dejanja nenehno preoblikujejo naše sebstvo, omogočajo različne načine uživanja življenja in spreminjajo naše perspektive, tako da zajamejo tudi razlike. Koncept »dejavnega sebstva« vzpostavlja, kdo smo, glede na to, kar smo sposobni narediti. V dialogu z Deleuzovimi razmisleki o silah, delovanju in volji do moči članek pokaže, kako je v »Svobodnem lebdenju« dejavno sebstvo aktivno v aficiranih razmerjih na podlagi treh skupin likov. Prvič, Zhuangzi predstavi sebstvo, ki je formalno razblinjeno, vendar afektivno povezovalno, kar ilustrira z opisom štirih vrst ljudi, med njimi Song Rongzija 宋榮子 in Liezija 列子. Drugič, zgodba o Yaotu 堯 in Xu Youju 許由 poudari dejavnost sebstva, ki sprejema svojo vpetost v svet sil. Nazadnje pokaže pogovor med Zhuangzijem in Hui Shijem 惠施 moč preoblikovanja odnosov, ki omogočajo razcvet raznolikih življenj.

Ključne besede: dejavno sebstvo, sila, afekt, dejavnost

Through astonishing fables of transformative creatures and contrasting characters in dialogue with each other, the "Boundless Wandering" (逍遙遊) chapter in the *Zhuangzi* explores a series of questions, which I read as follows: How do we define the agency of a "self" whose realization necessarily relies on other forces? How do we consider our actions upon recognizing that we are conditioned by our relations with others? Rather than seeing ourselves as merely passive constitutions subject to the forces that form us, I want to continue asking the ethical question of what we can do. I propose that selfhood emerges precisely in the capacity to act within the activities of forces. Reading *Zhuangzi* in this light, I develop the concept of the "agential self"—we become who we are because of not just what acts upon us but also how we act.[1] For a self entangled in a web of forces, the ethical questions become: What can an agential self do to neither resist nor overpower the forces that are different from it?[2] How can an agential self not only actively develop itself, but also make space for others to articulate their different forces?

Redefining our agency is an urgent paradox for many contemporary thinkers who have reconfigured who we are through our embeddedness in the entanglement of forces beyond the human. Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark describe this reconfiguration as "the non-human turn": "a critical reappraisal of the human

1 In *Zhuangzi* studies in Taiwan, the most often used word in the place of "agential self" is "subject" (主體), but what the subject means differs greatly. Zhang Kang 詹康 (2014) categorizes different usages of the word "subject" in *Zhuangzi* studies into six categories and 17 types. But I do not adopt the term "subject" here because of its heavy philosophical and psychoanalytic implications that might not be in line with the *Zhuangzi*.

2 The choice of "it", a non-human pronoun, is deliberate, as the self in both the contexts of Deleuze and the *Zhuangzi* is not limited by an anthropocentric definition. For example, the *Zhuangzi* starts the whole book with a non-human magical creature playing the role of the agential self.

and its place in a broader, nonhuman context" (2015, 2). Many of these thinkers are deeply influenced by Gilles Deleuze, who frees philosophy from the confinements of rational subjectivity to affirm the vital forces of life in affective relations with each other. When these thinkers bring feminist, ecological, and other ethical concerns to bear, they identify "how we act toward/with others" as an urgent question that remains underdeveloped in Deleuze's theories. On this basis, they advocate for thoughts about subjectivity and agency that could lead to ethical actions. For example, reading Deleuze with a feminist concern, Rosi Braidotti configures posthuman subjectivity as follows: "The embodied subject is thus a process of intersecting forces (affects) and spatio-temporal variables (connections)" (2013, 21). Like Deleuze, she embraces forces and connections that are not limited to human definitions, but she differs from Deleuze in her insistence on configuring a subjectivity that has the power of being politically active.

With deep care for queer politics, Karen Barad created the neologism "intra-action" to signify "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, 33). Refusing the illusion of us living isolated and well-defined existences, this concept proposes enhancing the depth and complexity of our consideration of agency. With a deep love for other species and the Earth, Donna Haraway rethinks what we can do to form kinship with other species with the recognition that we have already been involved with them in our "sympoiesis" (2016, 58). As a foundational philosophical root that grows into these lines of questioning, Deleuze's theory inspires with its vitality as much as it stimulates transformation through its insufficiency. It is Deleuze who opens up our consideration of ourselves in the forceful fields of entangled becomings. It is also Deleuze who puts agency in the difficult position that is seemingly passive and possibly helpless. If the subject is considered as a constitution of many anonymous forces, such as "the site of bent force" (Boundas 2017, 115), the discussion of affective relations might not directly contribute to agency (Daratos 2023, 17). For this reason, conversing with Deleuze is my way of aligning my reading of the *Zhuangzi* with these contemporary concerns and rethinking the philosophical reasoning underlying their ways of formulating the questioning. This paper formulates the activeness of the agential self in the *Zhuangzi* in a conversation with Deleuze for two reasons: first, Zhuangzi's view of interdependent forces echoes contemporary notions of interconnected forces influenced by Deleuze; second, Zhuangzi's approach to activeness may offer an alternative conception of human existence that goes beyond Deleuze's framework.

My attempt to read *Zhuangzi* with Deleuze is not entirely surprising, particularly not for Deleuzian thinkers.[3] The connections between Deleuze's philosophy and

3 And Deleuze himself would not be surprised, either. There are fleeing references to "Dao" and

Asian, particularly Sinophone, thought have been actively explored. As Deleuze studies have grown in Asia, dialogues between these traditions have emerged, exemplified by collections such as *Deleuze and Asia* (Bogue, Chiu, and Lee 2014, viii). This engagement is also driven by core challenges faced by European Deleuzian thinkers. The volume *Deleuze and the Humanities: East and West* seeks a "posthuman and nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti, Wong, and Chan 2018, 4) by drawing attention to "the specific relationship of Deleuze's philosophy of Life and difference, to the naturalistic and holistic traditions of Asian and notably Chinese philosophy" (ibid., 1). These thinkers intuitively recognize how these traditions are holistic in ways that resonate with—and possibly supplement—Deleuze's affirmation of difference and life. One of the central questions that drives this compilation is: "How do Deleuzian 'becomings' help sustain alternative processes of subjectification?" (ibid., 5). While Deleuze leaves this question open, *Zhuangzi* offers profound insights on human potential that are particularly well suited to address it.

The resonance between Deleuze and *Zhuangzi*—or more broadly, Daoism—has also been recognized. For example, Yu Peng thinks of "the bland body" in *Zhuangzi* as a "post-BwO" (2016, 99) to not only read it as an "indeterminate relational process" (ibid., 95) that resonates with the configuration of life in Deleuze and Guattari, but also as a supplement that adds to their theory's political potential he finds particular in Daoism. Not too differently, Peter Zhang and Lin Tian (2018) also try to read BwO with the Daoist practice of *qi*, while Chungmin Maria Tu (2023) finds resonance "between the Daoist Way and the Deleuzian idea of an aleatory point". Margus Ott (2019) connects the Daoist duality of genetic process and thwarting of forms to the Deleuzian actualization and counter-actualization. Continuing these lively and growing dialogues between Deleuze and *Zhuangzi*, my focus is on how human agency plays a role in the impersonal relations of forces. While both frameworks share an emphasis on affective relations, they diverge on the problem of agency—a divergence that invites deeper exploration. To think deeper about the capacity of a self in the entanglement with others, I propose to cross-read "Boundless Wandering" with Deleuze's theory of forces and affects. Rather than aiming for a fusion or simple comparison, I seek to let their questions speak to each another from their different frameworks. In doing so, I hope this dialogue becomes a conjoined questioning that "enables new perspectives through which these theories or systems can be seen" (Rošker 2022, 178).[4]

"Zen" in his writings, and his idea of immanence is even argued to have been made possible by his encounter with East Asian thought (Hetrick 2023, 138).

4 Jana S. Rošker's "Chinese and Global Philosophy: Postcomparative Transcultural Approaches and the Method of Sublation" (2022) offers an insightful discussion of the various philosophical assumptions underlying the different methodologies of fusion, comparison, and sublation.

Inheriting while modifying Nietzsche's philosophy of forces and Spinoza's theory of affects, Deleuze conceives of life as changes, movements, relations, and influences—processes that precede and exceed names and forms. In this framework, force and affect describe two aspects of the same process. As distinguished by Cliff Stagoll, "force" refers to "*any* capacity to produce a change or 'becoming'" (Parr 2005, 107)—capacity always in relation to other forces. By contrast, "affect" emphasizes the relation of forces: forces are described as affects when they influence each other. This concept focuses more on how forces change each other in encounters. A life is a force, and lives affect each other as forces. When Deleuze rethinks the capacity of being active among forces, he faces questions that are similar to those in *Zhuangzi*: When ephemeral lives are constituted by the relations among forces, what does "activeness" mean? Can action not be a passive submission to forceful dominations? What does the power of a force mean in affective relations, if not domination or submission? Facing these questions, Deleuze's paradoxical proposal is that the ultimate "activeness" is "the capacity to be affected" (1990, 217)—a life is more powerful and more active when it is capable of being affected and thus constituted by more affects that are different from the life itself. As any capacity is inseparable from its entanglement with others, rethinking agency means embracing affectability as a vital power.

If we think of agential selves—selves defined by the ability to be active—not as autonomous origins of action but as forces embedded in dynamic relations, then agency shifts from self-contained independence to relational potential. In this view, "activeness" is the ability to participate in and be shaped by the interplay of forces. Deleuze's answer to the question of activeness resonates with—while differing from—*Zhuangzi*'s description of what a human can become in "Boundless Wandering". *Zhuangzi* proposes an optimal state of being/becoming in which the agential self does not unitarily decide its own form (無己，無功, 無名)[5] and is capable of letting the different happenings outside/inside it become forces that constitute it (乘天地之正，而御六氣之辯，以遊無窮). The agential self can be formed without waiting for particular conditions to arise to constitute the particular form of the self. Interpretations of *Zhuangzi* have often conceptualized the self through its relations with what is outside it. The concept of the "interdependent self" emphasizes its "situatedness and contextuality" (Lai Karyn 2016, 156), while the concept of the "relational self" affirms a being that "attunes perfectly to the vicissitudes of the world" (Tao 2011, 484). In this view, "self-transformation" (ibid., 466) is deeply related to the "transformation *with* things" (ibid., 465). In the constant redefinition of a self in relation to its changing context, human

5 All English translations are mine, partly modified from those of Graham (2001) and Ziporyn (2020).

existence is an opportunity for the "spiritual exercise" of "transformation" (Møllgaard 2007, 20): "Zhuangzi wants to liberate human existence from the false values and views we have added to it; above all he wants us to see through the human form to the ceaseless emergence of life itself" (ibid.). What traverses and exceeds the human form is sometimes referred to as *Dao*, under whose sign the self strives for transformation, as in the argument that "though the self is a critical *factor* in one's unification with the Dao, the underlying goal is to strip the self of its role as *actor*, or self-conscious agent, in the world" (Brindley 2010, 55). The self is an agent that is defined by the role it plays in a larger context, instead of by the autonomy of acting against the context.

If we translate the agential self in the *Zhuangzi* into Deleuze's language, we could see that this book illuminates the role a human agent may play in the premise that the more different forces one can form relations with, the more active and capable it is. For *Zhuangzi*, the agential self has to practice its transformation. Activeness lies in not only allowing affective relations to become the changing contents of the self, but also in recreating relations with others that let both oneself and others become active. With and against Deleuze, I argue that, even though similarly affirming the affective relations, *Zhuangzi* develops nuanced layers of an agential self. To explore this, this paper analyses three sets of characters in "Boundless Wandering" in dialogue with Deleuze to examine what "activeness" means for an agential self who is capable of mutually, spontaneously, intimately connecting with other forces, as captured in the description "wandering as non-action company" (徬徨乎無為其側) at the end of this chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. On the one hand, this paper aims to explore the agential self that Deleuze might agree with but does not develop in his philosophy: I ask the question of "what we can do" instead of just "what a body can do".[6] On the other hand, this paper aims to elaborate on how *Zhuangzi* might play a compelling role in contemporary thoughts that redefine life as affective relations while craving agency in ethical relations.

The Dependency Necessary for Flourishing: Song Rongzi and Liezi

The "Boundless Wandering" chapter begins with a myth of a fish that is larger than human vision can capture. This fish transforms into a giant bird whose open wings cover the whole heavens. This eye-opening myth at the beginning of the whole book creates an expansive affective experience that provides the foundation for the subsequent thinking about incredible transformations, according to Hsu Sheng-Hsin (2017, 25–30). *Zhuangzi* shows that life can transform

6 The famous question in Deleuze's explication of Spinoza (1990, 217).

itself, reform its relation with different forces—waves for the fish or winds for the bird—and move magnificently across vast realms of the world. While the story of this magical creature hints at the possibility of life transforming beyond daily expectations, *Zhuangzi* does not hesitate to reveal how the development of such extraordinary ways of life depends intimately on other forces as necessary conditions for their journeys. The text continues this line of thought through examples of different nonhuman animals, whose different scopes of movement rely on different sizes of external sources. Activities define the animals as what they particularly are, and their agential autonomy is inseparable from their engagement with what is outside them.

What concludes this series of inquiries in "Boundless Wandering" is a description of four types of humans. The first type is an agential self whose accomplishment is completely defined by its service to the external world. Its knowledge, action, and virtue are all measured against exterior standards: its official positions, the territory it rules, and the title it owns (知效一官，行比一鄉，德合一君而徵一國者) (Chen Guying 2020, 15). The agential self of this kind considers how to act solely through its effects on the world, and it even "perceives itself entirely accordingly" (其自視也亦若此矣) (ibid.). *Zhuangzi* reveals the deficiency of the first kind through describing the second kind of agential self: the life of Song Rongzi. If our self-perception is completely defined by how we serve what is exterior to us, praise and critique from others fully govern what we feel about ourselves. In this formulation, there is no autonomy.

In contrast, Song Rongzi 宋榮子 aims for a way of life that detaches his emotions from public opinion: "not being encouraged when the whole world praises him and not disheartened when the whole world criticizes him" (舉世而譽之而不加勸，舉世而非之而不加沮) (ibid., 16). To stay settled in himself, his method is to clearly separate what is external to and what is internal to him in order to distinguish honour and shame as matters that lie outside who he is (定乎內外之分，辯乎榮辱之竟) (ibid.). Because of the clear isolation of the self, his inner stability is not shaken by external change. Presenting Song Rongzi as superior to the first kind of humans, *Zhuangzi* quests for some kind of autonomy for the agential self—even a freedom from being wholly defined by the external standards. Song Rongzi's way of life highlights how distinguishing between inner and outer is essential for preserving a self that is not entirely shaped or destroyed by outside forces. Yet, as *Zhuangzi* comments, Song Rongzi still cannot flourish (猶有未樹). The isolation from the outside world cuts him off from the connections that are the necessary resources for him to thrive. He gains the autonomy of being freed from determinations, but he does not have agency—he is not free to create activeness in his engagements with others.

To think about the relation between autonomy and agency, *Zhuangzi* develops the third type of humans, as exemplified by Liezi 列子, who rides the winds to fly (御風而行) (ibid.). Liezi's choice is the definitive opposite of Song Rongzi. Instead of detaching his self-definition from what is external to him, he enjoys his masterful reliance on external forces—the winds, in this case. The realization of himself in this mythical flying depends on his skilful harnessing of the wind. *Zhuangzi* the rigorously and meticulously advances his argument through subtle comparisons between the four types of humans. Like the first type, Liezi seeks a beneficial relation between the self and outside world. However, while the first type defines the self by its service to the external, Liezi selectively engages with external forces that serve his chosen agency of flying. His identity as a flyer limits his interaction with the world. Like Song Rongzi, Liezi maintains a distinction between the exterior and interior of the self. His internal desire to fly defines his realization of the self through flight. Yet, while Song Rongzi isolates the self from external influences, Liezi chooses to actively depend on them. While Song Rongzi chooses autonomy at the cost of supportive resources, Liezi creates agency as a particular movement—this choice brings into his life the limits of conditions. *Zhuangzi* identifies deficiencies on both sides: Song Rongzi may appear autonomous, but without connection, he cannot flourish (未樹). Liezi thrives in the way of magnificent movements, but he depends (有待) on external forces that might not be present on days with no winds or adverse winds.

Through this contrast between Song Rongzi (who neither depends nor flourishes) and Liezi (who depends and flourishes), *Zhuangzi*'s argument turns into a series of questions: How do we define the "capacity" of an agential self when its realization necessarily relies on exterior forces? How can we define the "activeness" of this kind of self? In Deleuzian language: What can the agential self do to let its own force connect with other forces, without absorbing differences or being completely determined by them? *Zhuangzi* gives a brilliantly paradoxical answer to this series of questions:

> 若夫乘天地之正，而御六氣之辯，以遊無窮者，彼且惡乎待哉！故曰：至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名。(Chen Guying 2020, 17)
>
> If one can sit at the axis between Heaven and Earth and ride on the changes of six *qi* in order to wander in the infinite, how does he still depend! In this way, we can say: the ultimate human has no selfhood, the most mythically capable human does not have accomplishments, and the holiest human does not have names.

Acknowledging that the abundance of the self always relies on the infusion of exterior forces does not negate its agency. Rather, agency arises through a practice

applied to the form of the self in the face of abundant affective relations. As Geir Sigurðsson points out, the negation "*wu*" in *wújǐ* (無己) "does not mean that what is being negated has thereby ceased to exist" (2018, 117) but signifies "a temporary letting go of the self while one tends to the world and one's tasks" (ibid.). It is precisely in the embrace of changing connections with the world that the self finds endless new formations. Eric S. Nelson describes how the cultivation and individuation of one lies in "independent and effortless and yet responsive attunement with the myriad things and the way enacted through them" (2014, 728). In "Boundless Wandering", the negation of selfhood is the negation of fixed definitions of a self—an emptying of assumptions that might have been implied in the identity of self so as to more fluidly relate to others. The self continues to exist as a constant practice of becoming human through relating to others. The phrase "the ultimate human has no selfhood" (至人無己) does not deny that we are humans, but instead redefines humanity as the capacity of becoming relationally and responsively closer to things. If the agential self lets go of rigid forms and allows itself to be co-constituted through relation, then the meaning of "flourishing" becomes indeterminate (no longer limited to flying), and the dependency on forces is no longer limiting: selective reliance on particular forces is replaced by the adaptable ability to relate to all different kinds of forces.

The agential self has what Liu Tsanglong 劉滄龍 (2022, 56) terms "passive mobility" (被動的能動性), and what we should do is to "turn our limited body into a field of possibilities for indeterminate". He suggests that "when the objective knowledge and judgment are suspended, and the perception of certainty is loosened, the possibilities in the 'indeterminacy' in things have a chance to open up to the self". (ibid., 55) This opening up happens "when the self has emptied itself".[7] To take this a step further, the ability to see the other/things as "indeterminate" lies in the capacity of the agential self to become "indeterminate". A "thinking subject" actively imposing a system of knowledge risks enclosing itself within a closed oneness, thereby limiting its capacity for relation. In contrast, openness arises through embracing difference with empty arms—a mode of mobility rooted in passive receptivity and acknowledgment. Limitation, then, is not a problem of the finitude of our existence, but a problem of whether the agential self can embrace differences in its relation with other forces; the troubling finitude is being limited by its own system of oneness. In *Zhuangzi*, the agential self is not defined by a consistent form but by the capacity to transform itself, enter into relations with different kinds of forces, and flourish accordingly. This mobility overlaps with a plasticity fundamental to the self's constitution. This formulation of the agential self, defined by its capacity to relate to other forces, can be further developed in dialogue with Deleuze's theory of affects.

7 My translation.

Inheriting Spinoza's philosophy, Deleuze rethinks the world through affects. He describes how forces affect each other and contribute to the temporary formations of life. In Deleuze's interpretation, Spinoza subtly, or not so subtly, subverts the world that centres around God. Instead of thinking of God as the perfect idea that serves as the starting point and ending point of all the causal relations, the Spinoza in Deleuze's description lets the transcendent overlap with the physical. Affects become the most substantial expression of ideas, apart from which ideas cannot exist:

> from one state to another, from one image or idea to another, there are transitions, passages that are experienced, durations through which we pass to a greater or a lesser perfection. Furthermore, these states, these affections, images or ideas are not separable from the duration that attaches them to the preceding state and makes them towards the next state. These continual durations or variations of perfection are called "affects", or "feelings" (affectus). (Deleuze 1990, 48–49)

The replacement of eternity with durations as the centre of thinking is certainly profane. What is even more intriguing is that, in so doing, Deleuze foregrounds affects, which are transitions and passages between states instead of nameable states themselves, to the extent that nameable states (images and ideas) are no longer the primary focus. The process of change is more important than its results. Transformations are not subordinated to forms. Instead, forms are temporary states of transformation. Translated into *Zhuangzi*'s language, the nameable states might be what is presented as the magical fish/bird in "Boundless Wandering". They are temporary forms that the mystical metamorphosis generates. What the fable truly wants to elaborate might be the process of transformation that is initiated by the relations of the forces. Every form of life implies a relation between forces. Deleuze thus explains what a particular life is in this view of affects, which are more impersonal than humans and less substantial than fixed forms:

> A body's structure is the composition of its relations. What a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected. (Ibid., 218)

Since a body is composed of relations, its capacity is determined by how many other forces it can be in relation to. Instead of assuming a substantial body/agent who has fixed qualities and can decide its own actions and create encounters, Deleuze proposes that the relations formed in contingent encounters fundamentally constitute bodies. Thus, the most fundamental capacity is the capacity to be affected. The term "the capacity to be affected" is itself paradoxical: How can

being influenced be a capacity, since we seem to be influenced without doing anything and without any preconditions? However, this term presumes that the body continues to exist despite the encounters, even changing and flourishing because of them. Being affected is a capacity because this body is capable of participating in the forces of others, whose changes and passages are different from what it is. Sean Bowden suggests that after the recognition of the affective relations that compose us, we are required "to become what we really are as expressions of the ceaseless becoming of the force relations that constitute us" (2019, 75). The capacity of ceaselessly becoming in attunement to force relations requires the action of "engaging in an experimental process of creatively interpreting and exploiting one's internal and external 'necessities,' and thereby developing new forms of life" (ibid., 79). There are distinctions between different lives not only in how they are passively constituted by forces, but also in how they are capable of becoming new forms of life within the relations of forces that compose them. The capacity to be affected is accompanied by the capacity to continue itself as a becoming that turns into different forms without being destroyed in encounters.

In light of how lives differ in their varied capacities to be affected. The third and fourth kinds in "Boundless Wandering" can be elaborated in this light: If Liezi's (the third kind) agential self can be established only when he rides the winds and flies high, then he is capable of being affected only by the winds that are suitable for rides. He might not be able to connect with other kinds of aerial or marine forces so that he can become himself in the "proper" definition as "the person who flies". Different from Liezi, the agential self of the fourth kind (乘……) is someone who can be affected by all different kinds of forces. It can joyously wander (遊) in relation to the changes of six different *qi* (六氣), letting its selfhood be constantly redefined by the relations with forces that are different from it. In this way, the relation between agency and dependency is rethought in an interesting manner. When *Zhuangzi* questions if this state of agential self still is still dependent (彼且惡乎待哉) after the description of this fourth type, what he thinks about is not that the self no longer depends on forces but that the self actually is so capable of connecting with the forces and letting them constantly reconstruct its selfhood that dependency is replaced by active relating. This self is an agent even in relation to itself: it can act on itself—it can let its form change and then more flexibly participate in relations. The character for dependency, *dài* (待), also means waiting: it is a dependency that has to wait for favourable conditions. Since the fourth kind of humans does not select only a few particular forces to be the conditions for a particular selfhood to exist, it does not need to wait. It actively relates. This dependency without waiting (無待之待) opens up to relations that are open to differences and that communicate differences without making them homogeneous. What the self depends on no longer causes limitations; instead, the unlimited relations let the self be constituted by infinite others. "Infinity" (無窮) refers to not only the endless

different others that the self is capable of relating to. It also refers to the infinity in every other: in one relation with particular others, the self can embrace the others as infinitely changing processes instead of a nameable form.

The capability of dissolving its persistence in fixating on certain forms enables the agent to connect with differences. In this connection, the physical particular encounter coincides with the fundamental generative process of life. As Yang Rurbin 楊儒賓 puts it in his discussion about how the opening up of scopes of life is in dialogue with mythologies in the *Zhuangzi* (2019, 350), the mythical elevation into Heaven (which corresponds to the story of the flying Liezi) does not truly do away with dependency (無待). Yang argues that *Zhuangzi*'s practice is threefold: dissolving the ordinary (俗), becoming fully one with *Dao*, and then returning to the secular world to wander. As the agential self is capable of cancelling its own fixed forms and has accessed the deepest reality of *Dao*, it expresses itself through the particular relations with different existences. The three folds in Yang's argument concur: the oneness with *Dao* lies in the capacity to co-become with different particular others; the ultimate state is implied in every actual connection between differences. Jean François Billeter 畢來德 suggests that this is a repetitive process in which one goes back and forth between the cosmic "emptiness/potential" (虛) and particular things and constantly redefines itself (Billeter 2011).

Resonating with this view of *Zhuangzi*'s, Deleuze's definition of an individual is closely connected with individuation, the generative process that is more than human and gives rise to humans.

> The great discovery of Nietzsche's philosophy, which marks his break with Schopenhauer and goes under the name of the will to power or the Dionysian world, is the following: no doubt the I and the Self must be replaced by an undifferenciated abyss, but this abyss is neither an impersonal nor an abstract Universal beyond individuation. On the contrary, it is the I and the self which are the abstract universals. They must be replaced, but in and by individuation, in the direction of the individuating factors which consume them and which constitute the fluid world of Dionysus. What cannot be replaced is individuation itself. Beyond the self and the I, we find not the impersonal but the individual and its factors, individuation and its fields, individuality and its pre-individual singularities. (Deleuze 1994, 258)

Inheriting Gilbert Simondon's focus on individuation more than "the I" and "the Self", Deleuze even finds "impersonal" to be an inadequate description. In Deleuze's view, in the Dionysian world in which all are in the constant process of becoming, there is no place for personal problems that assume abstract

consistency. If an individual is defined by the consistency in itself, the constant metamorphosis is an abyss that eliminates all forms and differentiations. The word "subject" might be inadequate to describe this individual: When Yannick Souladié argues for Deleuze and Guattari's mastery of "desubjectification" in their writing, the reason he gives for this choice is that "[t]o define the human being as 'subject' misses the complexity of forces which traverse the individual" (Souladié 2015, 395). Individual is not a term in contrast to the collective but a concept that is inseparable from "individuation". As Keith Ansell Pearson explains, "[t]he subject on this model is … transformed into an 'event' of individuation" (1997, 72). An individual is what happens in the process of individuation. The process of individuation keeps creating different individuals and keeps engulfing them into even more processes of change. The description of an "individual" is only a contingent assemblage of forces without presumed identity. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari even unhook "individuality" from the "individual" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 253). Individuality is composed of different affects in relation to each other. There is no assumed consistency for an individual before, during, and after the encounter.

Zhuangzi would agree with Deleuze's abandonment of the "self" defined as an abstract generality or fixed, eternal meanings. They also both think of affective relations and lively metamorphosis as crucial to life. However, while *Zhuangzi* looks for the transformation of the self, Deleuze points towards its cancellation. This difference might be caused by the fact that the agential self of *Zhuangzi* is much more layered in its practice than Deleuze's self. *Zhuangzi* describes the agential self at the fourth level through three paradoxes that affirm and cancel selfhood at the same time. The agential self is capable of dissolving a layer within itself and continuing to transform. Interestingly, after Deleuze cancels the I and the Self, what emerges is not emptiness but the abundant differences in constant metamorphosis, the individuation that is prior to individuals. In contrast, when "Boundless Wandering" proposes cancelling a layer of selfhood, the agential self actually becomes open to the endless differences that Deleuze describes. In *Zhuangzi*, the active realization of an agential self activates the infinite differences.

Strangely, when *Zhuangzi* describes the fourth level of the agential self, he uses three very active verbs for their actions: "riding" (乘), "mastering" (御), and "wandering" (遊). These verbs seem to imply that the agential self not only becomes one of the many forces it relates to, but also has some capacity to become more active than the other forces. What does this activeness mean? How can the agential self be active even when embedded in affective relations? "Boundless Wandering" develops this series of questions through two sets of dialogues between two pairs of characters.

The "Activeness" in Affective Relations: Yao and Xu You

In deepening his reflection on human-world relations, *Zhuangzi* presents the encounter between two people with distinct choices: Yao, the esteemed political leader of a flourishing civilization, and Xu You, a legendary hermit (Chen Guying 2020, 20). The dialogue unfolds when Yao visits Xu You. Despite having established a peaceful civilization, Yao feels inadequate as a leader and offers the imperial position to Xu You, who firmly declines. A question underlies this dialogue: How can an agential self contribute to the web of different forces it inhabits? After proposing that an agential self can empty its forms to fluidly connect with varying forces, "Boundless Wandering" turns to explore how this engagement might manifest in different choices to act in the secular world.

What concerns Yao is the agential self's relation with the world (天下). Aspiring to influence the whole world, Yao prefers Xu You's relation with the world to his own. The dialogue between them is intriguingly composed of two sets of characterizations—each shaped by the perspective of the speaker. *Zhuangzi*'s argument is presented as much through the two characters as through the way they view each other. From Yao's perspective, the differences between them are presented in metaphorical language:

> 日月出矣，而爝火不息，其於光也，不亦難乎！時雨降矣，而猶浸灌，其於澤也，不亦勞乎！夫子立而天下治，而我猶尸之，吾自視缺然，請致天下。(Chen Guying 2020, 20)
>
> Isn't illumination vainly difficult for a torch that is not put out when the sun or the moon has come out? Isn't irrigation but needless trouble when rain falls timely? Your mere presence puts the world in order, but I still occupy the emperor's throne. I see my own inadequacy, and I hope you will govern the world.

In Yao's view, although both he and Xu You affect the world with their light and hydration, his efforts resemble artificial aids (torches and irrigation), and Xu You's influence aligns with natural forces (sun, moon, and timely rain). It seems that, according to Yao, he himself can only affect the world like an external force, but Xu You can affect the world as something that has already been embedded in the natural world. Yao's preference for Xu You over himself implies the wish to respect differences, a tendency in *Zhuangzi* that Huang Yong describes as a "Zhuangzian ethics of difference", which exhorts us to respect the differences between us and those who are involved in our actions: "it is not only wrong for us to do things to others for our own benefit, but it may also be wrong for us to do things to others for what we consider to be their own good" (Huang 2010, 74).

While Yao starts from the wish to influence the world with his power as if he is looking at the world of other forces from the outside of it, he ends up valuing Xu You's relation with the world: being within the affective relations of the world. The question of "what I can do to the world outside me" is turned into "how I can act to honour how I have already been situated in the web of affective relations".

Xu You's view is different:

> 子治天下，天下既已治也。而我猶代子，吾將為名乎？名者，實之賓也，吾將為賓乎？鷦鷯巢於深林，不過一枝；偃鼠飲河，不過滿腹。歸休乎君！予無所用天下為。(Chen Guying 2020, 20)
>
> If I were to replace you after your rule has already put the world in order, would I be acting merely for the title? The title is supplementary to its actual work. Should I be supplementary? A tailorbird can nestle on only one branch in the deep forest; a beaver can drink only the volume of its belly from the river. Please return! I have no use for the world.

In Xu You's refusal to take over the political position, he reveals how deeply he inhabits the world. While he compares himself to a little bird that can only occupy the space of one branch, the branch involves and is involved in the deep forest. While he is a small beaver who can only drink the amount water that would fill his little belly, he actually connects with the vast river running. For Xu You, the way to contribute to the world is to dive into the particular relation of forces that he has already been involved in. As a result, the world of differences opens up to him, and he flourishes with other forces. It is also from this perspective of respecting the context that one has already been embedded in that Xu You praises how Yao has already adequately contributed to the world in the position that he has been uniquely suitable for. Yao and Xu You might just be different, instead of one being superior to the other in their practice in life. As Hsu Sheng-Hsin (2019, 25–56) puts it, they show two aspects of the namelessness that *Zhuangzi* affirms. While Yao accomplishes things through the name of the emperor and moves beyond it, Xu You remains desireless for names throughout.

According to Guo Xiang (2007, 28), Yao's rule is considered to have already involved the practice of "not ruling"—the deactivation of fixed ideas of what ruling means. If Yao is any less than Xu You, it is in the inadequacy of his view: Yao does not understand that he and Xu You have different capacities suitable for different positions. While Xu You appreciates the different positions each of them takes, Yao does not seem to be capable of appreciating his own choice. He does not step back to view both conditions at the same time.

The dialogue leads to an interesting challenge to thought: why can the seemingly less active choice of Xu You's be an adequate answer to Yao's quest for action? As "Boundless Wandering" seems to affirm some kind of activeness in Xu You's way of life, what does this activeness mean? I propose to cross-read this activeness with Deleuze's theorization of Nietzsche's active forces to shed light on what it could mean.

Activity and passivity are concepts that define two different types of forces in Deleuze's (creative) reading of Nietzsche:

> reactive force is: 1) utilitarian force of adaptation and partial limitation; 2) force which separates active force from what it can do, which denies active force (triumph of the weak or the slaves); 3) force separated from what it can do, which denies or turns against itself (reign of the weak or of slaves). And, analogously, active force is: 1) plastic, dominant and subjugating force; 2) force which goes to the limit of what it can do; 3) force which affirms its difference, which makes its difference an object of enjoyment and affirmation. (Deleuze 2006, 61)

Reactive forces evaluate and establish themselves according to whether they can be useful for a larger context. From this utilitarian point of view, larger contexts are inherently partial and limiting because they serve single-minded objectives rather than embracing change and multiplicity. The usefulness of a force is defined by its capacity to serve a goal that remains a consistent standard for different forces. For these forces, determination comes from something external to them. Their potential is not assessed by how they thrive or relate to one another; instead, their purpose is detached from their inherent capacities.

Deleuze's interpretation of the forces fuses the theories of Spinoza and Nietzsche. In his formulation of the Spinozian capacity to be affected, he also speaks of "activeness", as "only active affections could effectively or positively exercise our capacity to be affected; the power of action was thus identical to this capacity itself: as for passive affections, they cut us off from that of which we were capable" (Deleuze 1990, 246).[8] As forces, we are active when we affirm the forces that we are and enjoy their activity. Instead of striving to satisfy external standardized contexts that we are assumed to be in, we embrace the changing, heterogeneous relations that we are in. We constantly reconfigure who we are and what we can do in the affective relations that we are in. The capacity to be affected—the ability to constantly redefine ourselves as what our relations constitute us—is thus identical to the power of action. In Antoine Daratos's words, "true activity does not

8 Jan Rehmann (2022, 57) even suggests that Nietzsche himself was inspired by Spinoza in his theory of active and passive forces.

depend on the conscious will of an individual subject but, rather, is an affective process that occurs when forces combine into new relations" (Daratos 2023, 13). The "activeness" of an agent lies in how it affirms the relations it is involved in through becoming who it is.

Relocating Deleuze's discussion in the context of my discussion of the agential self, I propose to read the self as a force—in fact, each force comprises multiple forces—negotiating its activity in affective relations. In Deleuze's enjoyable affirmation of active forces, there are two layers: On the one hand, as nothing but a force in affective relations with other forces, a self that is defined as a force does not consider itself to be the centre of the process. Rather than viewing other forces as separate from it, the self is a difference among other differences that it is in relation with. In other words, even the reference point—which a self serves as—is a difference constantly reconfigured through its relations to others. On the other hand, even though being capable of affirming differences, the self is still just one of forces. It does not assert superiority over other differences but remains relatable and communicable with them. The unfolding of the force(s) of the agential self seems to affirm differences in such a way that other forces are mobilized to unfold themselves as they are. The activeness of this agential self seems to enable other forces to unfold not according to external standards but according to the relations between the forces themselves.

In light of this view of the self as a force, the difference between Yao and Xu You might be analysed as two distinct types of forces. Both seek to become active in a larger context of forces, both recognize that the world has already been full of forces that are active in their ways, and both wish to respect other forces through their actions. However, Yao's desire to influence others rests on the assumption that he thinks that his force is beneficial to others. He is willing to let the force enter the realms of other lives to become useful for others. In wishing so, he assumes that there is an all-encompassing influence that can be useful for all, and he actually defines his force by this use for others. In Deleuze's definition, this model of relation is reactive—it serves a homogenous use instead of living out what it is capable of.

In contrast to Yao, Xu You's model is active as he returns to his own realm and becomes "adequate" to his fate, as in Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza (Deleuze 1990). He settles in the depths of the forest and lets the water of the river water run through him. He lets the forces different from him nourish him. Instead of trying to universally influence the world, he abundantly lives out the difference that his life is. By doing so, this life of his opens ways for magical capacities that *Zhuangzi* praises highly, as told in the esoteric stories that follow. In these stories, mythical humans (神人) can live in plenty with all the various forces in the universe. Even if they only practice on themselves, other living beings

flourish because of them (其神凝，使物不疵癘而年穀熟). It seems that when one force lives out its difference, other forces can also live actively, and thus it is as if the transformation of one force activates other forces as well. But how can the abundant unfolding of one force enable other forces to live actively? How can one agential self's unfolding of its force become simultaneously a way to affirm other differences? "Boundless Wandering" explores these questions through the conversation between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi (惠施).

The Capacity to Be Not Only One of the Forces: Zhuangzi and Hui Shi

As shown through the preferred model of Hsu You, the agential self in *Zhuangzi* acts at two levels in the web of affective relations: 1) the realization of itself as one of the many forces; 2) the ability to enable other forces to realize themselves. It seems that the agential self has a capacity for activeness that not all forces are capable of. What is this capacity? How can this capacity not violate but even contribute to the relations between forces and the affirmation of endless differences? Deleuze's intriguing answer is that the capacity to affirm the forces that are different from one lies in another level of capacity: Deleuze distinguishes force from the will to power. Forces differ from each other and can be active or reactive in their own becomings, while the will to power persists at another level. Orkhan Imanov summarizes Nietzsche's definition of the will to power as "a creative and transformative principle driving the process of becoming" (2023, 77). It is not the becoming itself but what drives the becoming.

Intriguingly, Deleuze interprets this principle through four different verbs: "affirming and denying, appreciating and depreciating, express the will to power just as acting and reacting express force" (2006, 53–54). The will to power is the affirmation or denial of forces, and thus it is described as "affirmative" or "negative". In other words, the will to power is not just one of the forces, but what involves and affirms different forces. Instead of defining others as how they are different from itself, the will to power affirms differences in their own right. A force functions as a perspective among perspectives; while the perspective is constantly reformed by the relation with other perspectives, it is still a single perspective at a time. The will to power functions as a perspective that is itself multiple; it is a perspective that differentiates and beholds multiple perspectives. A force is a becoming that is always involved in co-becoming. The will to power is what propels the becomings of forces by forcing them to become in their different ways. This kind of will is by no means the will of a human in the sense of free will. James Mollison argues that "Deleuze further takes the evaluative dimension of the will to power to be non-anthropomorphic: evaluation is part of the essence of life"

(2022, 434). "Evaluation" in this sense is not the judgement of a force according to a system of value. As the will to power lives out itself in generating different forces, its action simultaneously affirms those who enact their unique characteristics and denies those who just try to fulfil themselves according to the assumed determination of their contexts.

The will to power is a force, but it also has another level of functioning:

> We should not be surprised by the double aspect of the will to power: from the standpoint of the genesis or production of forces it determines the relation between forces but, from the standpoint of its own manifestations, it is determined by relating forces. This is why the will to power is always determined at the same time as it determines, qualified at the same time as it qualifies. In the first place, therefore, the will to power is manifested as the capacity for being affected, as the determinate capacity of force for being affected. (Deleuze 2006, 57–58)

The will to power resides in the relation between particular forces. Paradoxically, it not only decides the fundamental relation between the differences, but is also itself decided by this relation. Just like all the other forces, the will to power is formed by relations. The capacity to create differences does not rely on a presumed eternal truth or fixed point of view. Instead, the capacity to affirm differences lies both in being involved in relations of different forces and in holding both perspectives in its perspective of multiplicity. This capacity lies not in shifting between perspectives, but in letting itself become the relation between differences. In Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, the will to power concerns both interpretation (2006, 53) and the generative process of different forces. The interpretation of the will to power is what Joshua Avery Dawson calls "interpretive multiplicity" (2023, 90)—an affirmation of multiple interpretations that arise from the multiple perspectives of the different forces, which the will to power generates.

From force to will to power, Deleuze reconceives actions. For Deleuze, affirmation is not an action nor is it simply defined by "being active":

> Affirmation is not action but the power of becoming active, *becoming active* personified. Negation is not simple reaction but a *becoming reactive.* It is as if affirmation and negation were both immanent and transcendent in relation to action and reaction; out of the web of forces they make up the chain of becoming. (Deleuze 2006, 54)

Affirmation and negation are the becoming of being active or reactive, and this becoming of the will to power has two layers. 1) the becoming of the will to

power as itself a force: it becomes as the difference it is, a difference among differences. 2) The "side effect" of the becoming of the will to power in itself: its becoming enables the becoming of other forces. The becoming of the will to power has one more layer than the becoming of a force. The becoming of a force in the relations of forces seems to be fully determined by the expectable causal relations of the web. In contrast, the becoming of the will to power has the creative power to enable other becomings by recreating the relations that support other forces. When the will to power unfolds itself as becoming active, it functions as the agent that enables the forces to be different. The activeness of the will to power is not a single, specific action, but the facilitation of different becomings. It does take an action as one of the forces that finds its way of being active, and this action has an effect that not all actions possess: it affirms other ways of being active.

Deleuze emphasizes that affirmation is not action, but it does not mean that affirmation is contradictory to action. Instead, he suggests the affinity of affirmation and action.

> Becoming active, on the contrary, presupposes the affinity of action and affirmation; in order to become active it is not sufficient for a force to go to the limit of what it can do, it must make what it can do an object of affirmation. (Deleuze 2006, 68)

Affirmation is not only letting the process of differentiation beyond individuals emerge, but also affirming the powers of the particular forces. Jan Rehmann observes that, in Deleuze's interpretation of the will to power, "the concept of determination should actually be replaced by that of differentiation" (Rehmann 2022, 254: 49). For Deleuze, rather than an external principle determining forces, the will to power functions like individuation—it is a generative power that propels different forces to become themselves. The will to power is an action that affirms other activities of forces through affirming the generative process in which forces participate in each other. In Deleuze's view, the deepest affirmation of individual forces lies in the affirmation of individuation, the process through which the forces become themselves and continue to become. Thus, the question becomes how can an action that belongs to a particular force not only be active in the sense of living up to the particular difference it is, but also unfold the communicative relations of forces to enable different forces to unfold themselves as themselves? It is unclear in Deleuze's theory how to practice this duality. In such a philosophy that orients itself towards subjectlessness, it is difficult to think about who practices the will to power, and what is the will to power like for us who want to figure out what to do with our lives? I propose that reading the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi could help see a way of becoming an agential self whose particular practice may include the perspective beyond the limitation of our finite existences.

The dialogue about "utility" (用) between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi further develops the problem of situating the force of an agential self in a larger context of the web of forces, which is explored in the conversation between Yao and Xu You. The conversation between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi foregrounds nonhuman agential selves: a huge gourd, a tree, and even an ox (Chen Guying 2020, 28–31). Their conversation revolves around two nonhuman existences that Hui Shi does not know how to make use of. In the first story, Hui Shi has been given a giant gourd as a gift, which is too heavy to be held by a single person if used as a bottle and too big to go in and out of any bucket if cut in half and used as a ladle (其堅不能自舉也。剖之以為瓢，則瓠落無所容) (ibid., 28). Considering it useless, Hui Shi ends up smashing the gourd and throwing it away. Hearing this, Zhuangzi suggests that Hui Shi could have filled the huge gourd with air, instead of water, and tied it to his waist to be a flotation device. This way, he could enjoy floating in the rivers and lakes with it (何不慮以為大樽而浮乎江湖) (ibid.).

In the second story Hui Shi tells Zhuang about a huge tree that does not fit into the carpentry's measurement because its trunk is too bulging and its branches too twisty (其大本擁腫而不中繩墨，其小枝卷曲而不中規矩) (ibid., 30). Even though it stands conveniently on the side of the road, no carpenters will even look at it. Zhuangzi responds to this evaluation of the tree's uselessness by suggesting letting the tree flourish in wide and empty wildness, and then wandering around the tree and sleeping under its branches. In this way, the walking celebrates "non-action" (無為), and the sleeping invites boundlessness (逍遙). (子有大樹，患其無用，何不樹之於無何有之鄉，廣莫之野，彷徨乎無為其側，逍遙乎寢臥其下？) (ibid., 31). By shifting the context, Zhuangzi creates new visions of our relationship to nonhuman beings and the actions available for our enjoyment.

Based partly on the reading of this ending dialogue of "Boundless Wandering", Mercedes Valmisa discusses the freedom and autonomy of agency proposed by *Zhuangzi* in the framework of the agent in relation to the constraints of its condition (2019, 9). She thoughtfully points out how the interpretation of *Zhuangzi*'s freedom as contentment in any conditions may endorse the ethically troubling idea of happy slaves (ibid., 3–5). She argues instead that *Zhuangzi*'s proposal is more profound: the ability to "harness changing conditions so as to attain optimal outcomes in light of those changes" lies in the capacity of "transforming constraints into freedom-conducive conditions" (ibid., 9). Actions can be taken to change the conditions (ibid., 8) for the happiness of the agents. Aligned with this argument, I propose that the key to changing the conditions lies in changing the relation between the human agent and other—nonhuman, in this case—agents. Since what conditions us is our relations with other agents, a "condition" is a web of relations that we have always already been involved in, instead of an external

environment we struggle against, even though it might feel like that. I argue that Zhuangzi's brilliance lies in revealing how conditions are constantly recreated by the way we relate to others. Viewing conditions as relations echoes Deleuze's replacement of determination with differentiation. It is no longer a problem between us and the world, but a creative process in which we can recreate relations to shift the conditions for both us and others—we can become the creative force of affirming differences that fluidly constitute instead of fixatedly determining who we are.

The relation between humans and nonhuman agents emerges in this dialogue. As Lai Hsi-san describes it, the most intriguing and significant focus of this conversation is the relation between humans and "things" (物) (Lai 2011, 198).[9] Hui Shi does not reflect on his relation with things when he focuses on finding uses for the things in his hands. Instead, things are foregrounded in Hui Shi's perspective of utility. When he tries to find the contexts in which the things can be useful, he encounters difficulties when the things do not fit the already defined usages, such as holding liquid or becoming furniture. As Lai puts it, the definitions humans give things reflect their perspectives (2019, 204). Hui Shi "innocently" identifies with the utilitarian view through which humans dominate things with technique (ibid., 210). The one-way defined technique decides the fate of things without letting the forces implicated in the thing realize themselves.[10] In the Deleuzian view, as analysed in the previous section, this model of making use of things is very "reactive"—it evaluates the forces in the limiting, preexisting contexts of usages.

On the other hand, Zhuangzi finds contexts in which he can relate to the things fundamentally differently. He situates the giant gourd in rivers and lakes, freeing it from the role of a container for liquid; he places the tree in the wilderness rather than by the roadside or a living room with wooden floors, thereby transforming the activities through which we can engage with the tree. While Hui Shi frustratedly moves from one context of utility to another in search of a place for the gourds, Zhuangzi's shift in contexts is facilitated by his change in relation with the thing in question. The key to the fundamental difference is what Hui Shi overlooks: himself, the agential self. In both stories, Hui Shi does not reflect on how he has been embedded in the context of usage. When he tries to see if the things can serve him, he unconsciously submits to being a slave of the utilitarian view that determines his actions. In contrast, Zhuangzi takes actions that reform the relation between him and things in ways that affirm both his and the things' enjoyment—they float in water together or enjoy the company of each other in the

9 *Wu* (物) refers to existences that are other than humans that includes both nonhuman things and nonhuman animals (動物).

10 For the relation between uselessness and being in a Heideggerian context, please refer to Chung Chen-yu (2021, 113).

wilderness. By changing his relation to the other existences, he recreates contexts. In Chen Yun's 陳贇 view, selflessness is the subjective condition that enables us to appreciate the use of what seems to be useless (Chen Yun 2017, 127). Selflessness in this case could be interpreted as the ability to reform the starting point of his action without fixed assumptions. In these two stories, Zhuangzi is capable of letting his actions be redefined by the optimal relations he finds at that moment between himself and the things. In these relations, what happens is not only the new activities (floating and wandering/sleeping in the wilderness), but also a redefinition of the human agential self that transforms with the other existences.

The particular others in the story, the gourd and the tree, imply rich significations. Steve Coutinho explicates the metaphorical implications of the gourd and the river floating:

> The seeds of the gourd become a metaphor for the propensities of natural development, the vastness of the gourd a metaphor for unexpected turns of development, and the floating, drifting, meandering along the river a metaphor for accepting and being responsive to the openness in which we are enveloped. (Coutinho 2017, 74)

As the ground embodies the prosperity of a plant that is beyond human measurements, Zhuangzi's recreation of his relation with it implies a redefinition of the human's relation with the wilderness, a wilderness that actually includes us. In the enjoyment with these others in the wilderness, Zhuangzi introduces into the context of relation the openness of the wilderness. In this openness, differences can flourish together.

In the affective relation, three elements transform simultaneously: the human agential subject, the nonhuman existence, and the context. There are two sets of three: first, a huge gourd, rivers and lakes, and Zhuangzi; second, tree, wilderness, and Zhuangzi. In this relation, the task is no longer to find uses in the seemingly useless. As Wang Fu-zhi (1964, 82) puts it, what is in question is how to "use uselessness with uselessness" (以無用用無用). In other words, it is to deactivate our fixed definitions of usefulness (making the method of using itself useless) so as to relate to others in their uselessness. It is to make use of things in a way that allows them to remain defined by themselves instead of their utility for others. It is to thrive without regard for the utilitarian assumptions. It is to replace determination with the acts of relating to things, letting relations serve as the deciding context, which encourages both the user and the used to live out their forces. In this approach, the practice that the agential self does on itself lets things become "useful" according to their own different definitions (神凝者，窅然喪物，而物各自效其用) (Chen Guying 2020, 23). In Zhuangzi's vision, the agential self

creates—through the act of relating—spaces of indeterminacy in which the different existences, forces, and selves can live out what they are capable of. This self is capable of creating relations and changing contexts to let differences better fulfil themselves. Such a capacity resonates with the capacity of the Deleuzian will to power if practiced by an agential self. In affirming differences between individuals, the self enables diverse forces to become active for their own sake (floating, flourishing, and wandering…).[11] As a will to power, the agential self appears capable of activating diverse forces, like the process of individuation. The relation between different active forces creates a space that encourages difference—whether it be rivers and lakes accommodating vessels of various sizes, or a wilderness that does not require trees to exist as furniture. Simultaneously, the human agential self, despite being as capable as the will to power, remains nothing but one of the many forces, albeit one with the unique characteristic of initiative.

Conclusion

I want to begin concluding this paper by analysing the significant use of the verb "to flourish" (樹) in "Boundless Wandering". The two instances in which it appears offer different yet interrelated senses to the ethical action of flourishing. In the first, "to flourish" refers to the agential self's capacity to thrive, exemplified in the contrast between Song Rongzi's and Liezi's cases (彼其於世，未數數然也。雖然，猶有未樹也) (Chen Guying 2020, 16). In this sense, to flourish is to live up to one's potential, becoming what one can become. The second appearance shifts the focus from self-flourishing to "letting flourish"—letting others realize themselves, as elaborated in *Zhuangzi*'s proposal to let the tree stand in the wilderness where he can also rest under it (何不樹之於無何有之鄉，廣莫之野，彷徨乎無為其側，逍遙乎寢臥其下？) (ibid., 31), an alternative to Huizi's proposal. Moving from "to flourish" to "to let flourish", *Zhuangzi* reveals that the practice of realizing oneself is deeply related to letting others flourish. What can make one flourish is the recreation of relations in which one is embedded. The ability to creatively relate enables *Zhuangzi* to recontextualize what he does. Why can a self recontextualize itself beyond the single framework it may have assumed in becoming who it is at the moment? *Zhuangzi* would answer that this is the wish for others to flourish, differently from but simultaneously with the self's own flourishing. If isolated, every human could be limited to their own habitual ways of functioning. When we actively relate to others with sincere, open consideration for them, we let the different tendencies and characteristics they carry

11 The ability to affirm both one's own difference and that of others connects this chapter of the *Zhuangzi* with the next, particularly in relation to the concept of "both courses" (兩行). Please refer to Lin Mingzhao's work in this regard (2016).

renovate us. In this relational process, we are capable of radically shifting between frameworks, not abstractly, but through concrete encounters with diverse ways of being.

The methodology of the very writing of "Boundless Wandering" reflects *Zhuangzi*'s refusal to argue from a fixed framework. Instead, he writes from a fluid (yet precise) perspective that affirms the coexistence of multiple frameworks, and *Zhuangzi* thinks through more than three sets of characters. It is in relating these different characters that a vision affirming multiplicity emerges. In this paper, I also try to formulate thoughts of the agential self through the different voices of Deleuze and *Zhuangzi*. On the one hand, I supplement Deleuze's theory of forces in affective relations with the interpretations of *Zhuangzi* to discuss how a self is fundamentally embedded in relations. Our actions express the activities of the forces that constitute us. Since the forces may nourish us, we wish to act in ways that celebrate rather than suppress them. The Deleuzian view of forces helps foreground the fluid, molecular relations that underlie *Zhuangzi*'s redefinition of self. What enables *Zhuangzi* to propose a practice of a flexible self is his penetrating gaze into what composes a self.

On the other hand, to intervene in the contemporary redefinitions of who we are through affective relations, I propose reading *Zhuangzi* as a way to reform Deleuze's philosophy towards a more practicable notion of agency. I challenge Deleuze's strict emphasis on the nonhuman: given that humans are constituted by nonhuman forces and relations, human agency should also be recognized as capable of acting *for*, *with*, and even *as* nonhuman forces. When redefined as the capacity to relate to and become a composition of relations among diverse forces—human or nonhuman—humanity can be a starting point for ethical actions. Zhuangzi never finds being human an insurmountable obstacle to transforming ourselves or relating to others. The real challenge lies in whether we can constantly redefine who we are. In this paper, I insert human agency in a position that is strictly nonhuman for Deleuze: I argue that creative relating to others is a way we can act from the perspective of the will to power, which Deleuze identifies as the generative process that precedes and underlies individual existences: individuation. By creating affective relations that support both ourselves and others, we prompt different lives to flourish in their diverse abundances. The creation of relations implies our ability to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously.

This reading redefines crucial concepts in the discussion of selfhood—such as determination, freedom, autonomy, and agency. Since a self is embedded in the relations of forces that define what it is, the determination of selfhood does not refer to conditions external to the relations. Instead, what determines who we are *are* the relations we are involved in. *Zhuangzi* suggests that relations are not exclusively given but can be actively created: we can actively relate to each other in

new ways. We have always been involved in the activities of relations, consciously or unconsciously. Active and creative relating can thus alter external conditions and even replace the beliefs in fatalistic determination. Since determination is no longer the only background to think about what we can do, freedom can no longer be simply understood as the degree to which we are limited—or not limited—by our conditions. I propose that *Zhuangzi* would say freedom (the exemption from limitations) lies in the ability to not be limited by the particularity of our finite existence—that is, the ability to hold multiple perspectives and to act in ways that reshape the relation between finite beings. Since the ability to connect different particular perspectives and modes of life is valued as a strength, autonomy must also be rethought, and not out of a desire for independence. Autonomy would not be valued as the ability to act without the interventions of other agents. It can be considered as the capability to choose to zoom out from one's immediate standpoint, to recreate relations, and to redefine who we are. Since we redefine who we are by recreating the relations that form us, agency is thus redefined as our ability to enact the activities of forces that constitute us. This enactment would be most successful if we enact multiple forces at the same time. Agency is the agency of relating.

In my reading of *Zhuangzi* in dialogue with Deleuze, *relating* emerges as the most fundamental action. Relating is an action that cannot be initiated by a fixed, predetermined will of the agent. It must affirm the differences of the self and the others it encounters. It is an action that respects the activities of forces involved in the relation without seeking to impose specific outcomes. This mode of action is a non-action (無為). *Zhuangzi* ends "Boundless Wandering" with the "non-action company" (無為其側): the human walks and sleeps in the company of the tree. Without trying to do things to each other, they are involved in the non-action of relating. Relating affirms the activities of their constitutive forces and allow their selfhood to be practiced in the mutual activity. They become companions of ease. The concept of the "agential self" defines a self by what it is capable of doing. The capacity to relate in non-action enables both the human and the tree to become who they are in the movement and restfulness they enjoy with each other.

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