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# Rethinking Asceticism in Nietzsche with Zhuangzi: A Physio-Psychological Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article proposes a reconsideration of the physio-psychological dimension of the notion of asceticism in Nietzsche in the light of classical Daoist philosophy. Nietzsche famously criticises the nihilistic ascetic ideal for negating the body-self (Leib-Selbst) in the Christian religion as well as in Socratic metaphysics. Nietzsche critiques the metaphysical language that presupposes an opposition between the good (as the useful) and the evil (as the useless). However, the Nietzschean ascetic person who says yes to life remains mostly conceptual within the philosophical framework where physio-psychology stands as the superior form of thinking. To contrast such asceticism that bears traces of Greek Stoicism and Epicureanism, I argue that Zhuangzi's self-cultivating practices such as mind-fasting (xinzhai 心齋) can be incorporated into the Nietzschean physio-psychological notion of asceticism that goes beyond askesis with Stoic and Epicurean therapeutic connotations, given that both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche are more concerned with cultivating a lived body rather than purifying souls.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche; Zhuangzi; physio-psychology; asceticism; lived body; spiritual cultivation



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## 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, studies of Nietzschean philosophy have developed in the light of Eastern thoughts, especially regarding Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>1</sup> In historical terms, it might be harder to conceive a direct interaction, or to establish a direct interaction that presents what Nietzsche and Zhuangzi (classical Daoist who dates to the fourth century BCE) would have said to the other in a hypothetical exchange, compared to, for instance, the mutual exchange between phenomenology and Daoist philosophy. This is because Heidegger actively engaged himself in the study of Daoism, whereas Nietzsche showed a rather dismissive attitude toward “Oriental” thought in general. For instance, he relates Confucius and the Buddha with “Oriental” despotism, and criticised both for reducing the Chinese people to being passive, though equal under an invincible despot (Nelson 2017). However, this by no means indicates that philosophically speaking, Zhuangzi and Nietzsche's paths never cross. More specifically, a major parallel that is drawn between Nietzsche and Zhuangzi consists in the destabilisation of the self or the ego as a cultural construct (Froese 2018). Further, the issue of anthropocentrism is also discussed by Parkes in view of the two paradigms of perspectivism in Nietzsche and Zhuangzi, while the same issue is evoked in Ame's discussion of the different cosmologies in the two thinkers (Parkes 2020).

Given such a state of the art in the research of Nietzsche in relation to Daoism, I will demonstrate in this paper the possibility of redefining the Nietzschean non-nihilistic notion of asceticism by showing how it is not only conceivable as a theoretical concept but also feasible as a concrete practice of life that Zhuangzi regards as in accordance with the Dao. First, I will demonstrate how the problem of asceticism in Nietzsche has been theoretically contextualised within the framework of the physiology of art. Starting from a critique of Wagnerian art, Nietzsche considers the ascetic ideal as the negation of the body and the self, through the physiology of a body mortified by an aesthetic language that

differentiates good from evil: dualistic, hierarchical values presupposed by a decadent European civilisation. Thus, Nietzsche's philosophy, in essence, consists in a physiology that prescribes a lived body (Leib-Selbst) which is not repressed but nourished by an artistic language that goes beyond the metaphysical dualist one. As such, Nietzsche asceticism in a non-nihilist or life-affirming form implies a lived body that is devoid of artificial constructs (for instance, dualist values and a fixed subjectivity), and flourishes in the enhancement of the plurality of the will to power.

Second, non-nihilist asceticism as the naturalisation of a heterogeneous organism has brought us to a potential interlocuter from afar, namely Zhuangzi. More precisely, I take the Daoist concept of naturalness (self-so-ness or *ziran* 自然) to critically interpret the notion of naturalisation (Vernatürlichung) in Nietzsche. Indeed, a language of art that naturalises life is essential to life-affirming asceticism in both thinkers, but it is in Zhuangzi that concrete techniques of the ascetic practice are discussed at length. For instance, "forgetting oneself while sitting" (*zuowang* 坐忘) that leads to a detachment from the name (*ming* 名), and discourses (*yan* 言), which involves a categorical, purposeful and conceptual language. In return, such a Daoist language—as non-utilitarian, non-dualist and non-abstract—mobilises my search, within Nietzschean physiology, for a *non-attachment* to—instead of a negation of—the self, as a lived body, namely an ever-evolving pluralist organism that unlearns the history of a decadent civilisation and attempts to return to life in its natural state.

Finally, despite Shang's claim that the greatest commonality that Zhuangzi and Nietzsche share is the religiosity that emphasises the spiritual liberation of individuals living in a denaturalised and decadent world—rather than social engagement and criticism—I argue that asceticism that says yes to life assumes an active and responsible role of the ascetic to the community she lives in (Shang 2006). I take "losing oneself" (*sangwo* 丧我) as an effect and Zhuangzi's ascetic practice of forgetting oneself while sitting (*zuowang* 坐忘) as a revelation of an image of the ascetic embracing the myriad things that share a harmonious interdependence. Likewise, non-nihilistic asceticism in Nietzsche is considered in terms of the "cultivation" (*Züchtung*) of a new humanity. This collective asceticism posits the lived body as the natural material of a people that constantly incorporates non-nihilistic values (for instance, about good and evil) that are creatively generated. Just like a tyrannical natural force, Nietzsche's philosopher-physiologist strives to elevate (*züchten*) the lived body of a new species (of the *Übermensch*) that has been previously marked by nihilistic constructs and thus decadence for centuries. To this extent, the non-nihilistic form of asceticism in Nietzsche is both aesthetically valuable (in terms of its detachment from the self by means of a non-utilitarian and non-abstract language of art) and ethically committed (in terms of its value-creating ability in a communal context). In this sense, it is not enough to understand collective asceticism—namely the cultivation of the *Übermensch*—merely as another manifestation of the will to power, which overcomes life by surpassing the limits of the human. Viewed from a Daoist perspective, though harmony with Heaven or Nature is perhaps not quite the right description for Nietzschean cultivation; the latter manifests itself as a retroactive effort that attempts to recover the denaturalised instinct in the human. This eventually implies the caution against the hubris in the unbridled overcoming of life in its natural or non-human form, in an excessively technological and anthropocentric world.

## 2. Beyond Negation of the Body: Recategorising Asceticisms

In the second half of the 1880s, the notion of the "physiology of art" appeared, especially with the publication of *The Genealogy of Morals*. For Nietzsche, art is not an idea or principle beyond phenomenal or empirical life experiences, but rather, it consists in nothing more than an "applied physiology".<sup>2</sup> This means that morality is consistent with aesthetic and thus, sensory, perceptive, or bodily experiences, such as sexual desires, dietary habits, natural and social environments. Meanwhile, physiology of art is also considered another name for genealogy.<sup>3</sup> It refers to a way of discovering origins of the problem of

decadence of a Europe that is not understood as a geographical, political or social unit, but as a civilisation that totalises itself as opposed to nature. Such a totality of civilisation is constructed upon a set of hierarchized moral values and principles, as well as the incorporation (Einverleibung) of such values and principles into the physical, bodily and sensory dimension of the human world.

However, it is especially in *Beyond Good and Evil* (and precisely in the section entitled “Peoples and Homelands”) that the physiology of art is explicitly considered as a way to think beyond any metaphysical dualism. More precisely, Nietzsche speaks of a form of art in which moral distinctions become unintelligible, i.e., a type of music that is deeper, more powerful and crueller than the Wagnerian opera, i.e., a genre of “over-German” or “over-European.” Indeed, he describes it as such: “I could conceive of a music whose supremely rare bewitchment would consist in no longer knowing anything about good and evil...”<sup>4</sup> In other words, a certain form of art is linked with a way of thinking that is not contaminated by the European decadence, namely the binary and utilitarian distinction between good and evil.

Furthermore, the decadence of European civilisation is diagnosed first through Wagner’s music. This artistic genre is featured with moral themes such as redemption, salvation and the sublimation of the soul.<sup>5</sup> As such, the musical quality appears quite “heavy”, due to its “moral and religious absurdities,” as well as its constant reference to a morbid, weakened and ascetic body that is condemned to the original sin.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the mortification of the body is indicative of the exhaustion of the will to power, namely a resentment against the natural, the instinctive, the corporeal.

As such, a nihilistic notion of asceticism—as the negation of the body-self (Leib-selbst)—comes to the fore. Nietzsche traces this asceticism (manifest in Wagnerian music) back to Socratic philosophy: “I asked myself if, all in all, philosophy up to now has not only been an interpretation of the body and a misunderstanding of the body (Missverständnis des Leibes).”<sup>7</sup> More precisely, nihilistic asceticism is considered as an ideal beyond the phenomenal world—as in Kant—or as a spiritual exercise of the self (askêsis) in the Stoic sense. Such a form of asceticism—stemming from Western metaphysics—recognises the necessity of subordinating the body to the mind, the physical to the spiritual, or the empirical to the intelligible. As such, by rediscovering the history of this misunderstanding as the foundation of decadence, Nietzschean philosophy as a physiology, examines decadence as a “disease” whose symptom is auscultated by the “philosopher-doctor” (Wotling 1995). In other words, Nietzsche considers that such a figure is necessary to study the “health” of the people and to solve the problem of decadence.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the nihilistic notion of asceticism is considered a “symptom” of decadence that awaits auscultation, diagnosis and treatment.

However, Nietzschean physiology prescribes another form of asceticism that cannot be defined as the negation of the body but rather as the life-affirming invention of the self. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche links the body (Leib) explicitly to life (Leben) and considers the lived body (Leib) “Beyond your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a powerful master, an unknown sage, who is called the Self. It inhabits your body, it is your body.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the lived body is neither dismissed as sheer objective materiality (the *res extensa* in Descartes) appearing to the mind, nor as a phenomenal body as the “I”, the “degree zero”, namely the starting point of concrete experience (as the Leib in Husserl). More precisely, the body, as a greater reason than the mind, “philosophises” on its own terms.<sup>10</sup>

As such, the asceticism that helps to create the self implies another way of looking at the body’s relation to itself: transformation. As a matter of fact, the physiology of art not only subverts the dualist hierarchy—letting the body overcome the mind—but rather, on an ontological level, challenges what underlies such a dualism: the unity of a consciousness, an isolated ego, or a subject that identifies perfectly with itself. Such a unified subjectivity clearly separates the “I” from the other (be it an alter-ego, or the body as a piece of material attached to the mind). But in contrast, Nietzschean asceticism consists in the pro-

cess of transformation of the “body-self” (Leib-selbst) that departs from the self-identifying “I”, namely a fixed, isolated and stabilised unity. In this sense, the body-self undergoes the ceaseless process of being destroyed and created at the same time and can eventually be considered a diversified and plural “we” (Stiegler 2004). Therefore, no longer bound by metaphysical dualism, the lived body engages in the ascetic process of transforming itself, on condition that it suffers, in its affliction, from another will to power, and that it resists it, with an attempt to appropriate the latter.<sup>11</sup>

Although Nietzsche’s non-nihilistic notion of asceticism consists in the transformation—instead of the negation—of the body-self (Leib-Selbst), it is not evident how this transformation is possible, namely not only conceivable in theory but also realisable in practice. Shang, for instance, points out that this is the weakness of the Nietzschean critique of morality and modernity in general.

Dionysus, over-man, eternal recurrence, will to power, are but mystic and spiritual ideals, which cannot help people to deal with their lives in a concrete way. They are too artistic, poetic, philosophical, and religious to be understood by ordinary people who face serious problems. Ironically, it is easy for such thinkers to be misunderstood and even misled into unintended directions, just as the Nazis appropriated Nietzsche during their reign. On the other hand, Zhuangzi was skillful at deconstructing opinions and language, but he preferred disengagement from the critique of social problems, seeking instead to address personal freedom. (Shang 2007)

Indeed, apart from a few discursive notes about marching, incubation and lying still, Nietzsche remains rather laconic about techniques of the body or the actual practice of self-transformation (Parkes 2020). As such, while Zhuangzian ascetics looks into specific techniques of self-cultivation that transform them into the genuine person (zhenren 真人) on an individual or personal level, Nietzsche’s consideration concerning asceticism strongly implies a shift of culture in a socio-political sense, which is somehow plagued by the lack of details about how this could be realised or what practical actions are entailed.

Thus, given this insufficient account of the practical dimension of the life-affirming notion of asceticism in Nietzsche, I will explain in the following why and how the practice of forgetting oneself while sitting (zuowang 坐忘), first appearing in Chapter Two “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (qi wulun 齊物論) in the *Zhuangzi*, could offer a new way to rethink asceticism in terms of a bodily practice of self-transformation (zihua 自化). More specifically, the key to achieve this state of forgetting while sitting is the technique of “mind-fasting” (xinzhai 心齋). In Guo Xiang’s annotation to this dialogue between Yanhui and Confucius, mind-fasting is ultimately about losing one’s own ego, namely forgetting the self (sang, you wang ye 喪, 猶忘也).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the person, embodied in a concrete and individualised form (xing 形), experiences the emptiness (xu 虛) of emotion, thought, and knowledge, such that the person dismantles the subjective perspective of the world and lets things appear in a non-subjective way. In this sense, the subject or the ego that is eliminated refers to the rationalising and analysing agent who posits things (wu 物) in opposition, as an object of reflection.

However, as Yang points out, zuowang is such a practice that, while getting rid of the analytical subject, cultivates another kind of subjectivity, namely the qi-subject, with “the interweaving of the five senses, the assimilation of the form, the qi and the spirit (shen 神), and the unity of cognition and action” (Yang 2016). In other words, wang is about halting intentional reflection or cognition, switching a conscious state of knowing to a subconscious state of non-knowing (wuzhi 無知), and focusing on one’s spirit as a refined vital force of living, namely the qi, to navigate one’s physiological and psychological behaviours. For Zheng, this amounts to a state of non-intention (wuyi 無意) in processes of artistic creation (Zheng 2018). Further, the key technique to achieve this state of non-knowing is “concentrating the spirit” (qishenning 凝神).<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is about focusing one’s attention and vision on one single spot, for instance, like painters focusing on their brush or meditators focusing on the point in between their eyes, and such high concentration puts the social and cultural restrictions of one’s life into the background.

In this sense, forgetting, or *wang*, in terms of non-knowing is a helpful technique to complement Nietzsche's physiology of art, which does not know the opposition between good and evil, rigidly fixed by social and cultural constructions, for both philosophers care about subconsciously reconnecting with things in the world beyond those constructions. More specifically, *wang* involves the elimination of the analytical or rationalising subject, which corresponds well to Nietzsche's view of subjectivity as both a process of deconstructing the identity of a people based on dichotomised pairs of values such as good and evil. Yet, *wang* also suggests the cultivation of the *qi*-subject, which helps to enrich Nietzsche's account of subjectivity in terms of the body-self (*Leib-Selbst*) as a fluid process of creation of one's life as a work of art always open to interpretation and remaking, and not a fixated concept of being. Moreover, using this Daoist concept of *wang* to interpret the Nietzschean notion of asceticism could open a new horizon for an account of the latter in a practical dimension—that is, beyond a theoretical level—and make it applicable to the day-to-day practice, performance, or exercise of the self. I will now turn to this practical aspect in relation to the transformation of body-self (*zihua* 自化).

### 3. Naturalisation through the Language of Art: A Practice of Self-Transformation

Before going into the details of the Daoist interpretation of Nietzschean asceticism as a practice that transforms the body-self (*Leib-Selbst*), it is crucial to understand why the Daoist techniques of self-transformation are relevant to and apt for the task of rethinking or reinterpreting asceticism in Nietzsche. One can approach this question of legitimacy by examining the problem of language in what Nietzsche designates as naturalisation (*Vernatürlichung*), which amounts to a prescription of a new way of life that transforms the human without negating the body-self (*Leib-selbst*). In the theoretical framework of the physiology of art, axiological hierarchies are rooted in the normative and binary values utilised by the civilisation that redirect the human instincts, and more precisely, the instincts with the "hatred of the natural" (Blondel 2006). In other words, the moralisation of art, as well as that of the human way of life, involves a process of denaturalisation (*Entnatürlichung*) for utilitarian purposes—that is to say, for the establishment of civilisation based on moral ideals, as opposed to nature.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, such a process of denaturalisation defines the European ascetic ideal in which the moral—that evokes the mind, the soul, the intelligible, the truth or another world beyond this one—sublimates the natural, which concerns sensory perception, sensual impulsion (*Triebe*) or an untamed natural cruelty (*Naturgewalten*). To this extent, the instinct of cruelty is initiated by the will to power, which affirms the ascending tendency of life and not the kind of power that motivates slave morality, which is self-abnegating and full of resentment.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, civilisation is denaturalised in the sense that it is based on a nihilistic way of spiritualisation (*Vergeistigung*) of such an instinct of cruelty—by spiritualising cruelty, the desire for the feeling of power is stigmatised as evil, and thus the civilisation turns against life.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that such violent drives could also be manifested in more healthy ways of spiritualisation that are non-nihilistic, compared to Christian resentment and condemnation of the passions.<sup>16</sup> More precisely, in the face of this denaturalised and utilitarian process of forming a civilisation (*Kultur*), Nietzschean physiology proposes a new way of cultivation (*Züchtung*) in the sense of a reform of culture, namely the "return to nature" (*Rückkehr zur Natur*).<sup>17</sup> Properly speaking, this process of naturalisation of culture is a reconstruction of culture, which is considered the purification (*Reinigung*) and metamorphosis (*Umwandelung*) of nature.<sup>18</sup> Given that denaturalised culture means the spiritualisation of cruelty, which is defined by the feeling of power, the undertaking of a naturalising (*vernätürlichen*) culture implies the enhancement of the will to power. As discussed previously, such enhancement is prescribed in the Nietzschean aesthetic form of asceticism and concretely manifest in a healthy, powerful body dynamised by a will to power that affirms life in its ascendancy (as opposed to a slavish will to power that affirms and maintains life at its weakest level).

Further, it is crucial to point out that the key to this return to nature—that is, the naturalisation of life—lies in the invention of a new language, yet a direct explanation of its relation to naturalisation seems to be laconic, if this is not entirely absent in Nietzsche. It is a language that only breaks free from that which is determined by instrumental usages, but it also makes

possible “a common emotion that simplifies life” (Crépon 2003). As Crépon notes, “if it is true that our abstract language no longer allows us to feel and express what life calls upon, that it makes us doubt the possibility of bringing any relief to our double feeling of ignorance and powerlessness in front of the mysteries of life, art (and more precisely drama) gives life a more immediate meaning”.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the artistic language in Nietzsche consists, first of all, in the detachment from the abstraction that often blocks us in our relationship with life in its immediate, improvised, unforeseeable form. To a great extent, getting rid of abstraction is actually returning to the most natural or primordial mode of language. To borrow from Kofman’s analysis of the metaphorical language in Nietzsche, abstract language filled with logics and concepts represses the language of metaphors which is the very root of all forms of language (Kofman 1972). While the former is used for metaphysical and moral constructions, the latter seems omnipresent in poetry and arts. Although Nietzsche posits the latter as indispensable for the cultivation (Züchtung) of the Übermensch (in terms of a new civilisation or community), he does not seem to give an explicit or concrete account of how such a poetic and aesthetic language helps to facilitate cultivation (Züchtung) as a process of naturalisation, which amounts to a non-nihilistic asceticism or—in his own words—a healthy morality in the form of spiritualisation that does not abnegate the body-self.

Given this lacuna in the Nietzschean account of life-affirming asceticism, I will show in the following how Zhuangzian thought could provide a clearer explication of the way in which non-utilitarian language or the language of art facilitates the process of naturalisation of life, though without establishing a new kind of values—as Nietzsche has attempted. For the classical Daoist, the root of the problem of human language is that it divides reality which is a harmonious whole: the Dao. Although Dao is the name for the total reality, it cannot be grasped in debates or dialogues. It is the Way that grounds reality that cannot be named in human language. In fact, such artificial language fragmentises the oneness of reality; the word “cut” or “separate” (bian 辨) is written almost interchangeably with the word “debate” or “argument” (bian 辯) (Cheng 1997). As such, human language conveys knowledge (zhi 知) of the names (ming 名) that humans give to things. In other words, Zhuangzi regards such language as artificially constructed, and thus unstable and divisive (Wang 2003).

While human language categorises and isolates things from one another, the Dao 道—manifest in the “natural” or “naturalness” (ziran 自然)—names the Oneness, the irreducible link between the human and the non-human, which is arguably impossible to be pronounced or called (dao 道) by human (Chai 2016). From an etymological perspective, the binomial “naturalness” is composed of the characters zi (自 designating the “self”) and ran (然, signifying “thus”, “so”, or “such”), implying a way of letting go with life, according to the movement of Heaven (tian 天) (Liu 2016). Zhuangzi states that one must not harm the bodily and physical form of life (xing 形) with one’s own preference for values of good and evil constructed by an abstract language by the human, but that one should live in accordance to one’s naturalness (ziran 自然) (Zhuangzi 1993). In other words, it is unnatural to sacrifice one’s life or distort one’s body according to artificial constructs that are not in harmony with the Dao as the ground of reality. On the other hand, it is also unnatural to be too attached to one’s own physical body by intentionally (keyi 刻意) making every effort to preserve it. This relates to the cultivation of the qi-subject in the aforementioned practice of zuowang in Chapter Two, of which the highest level of forgetting goes beyond forgetting the moral (renyi 忘仁義) or the social (liyue 忘禮樂), and consists in forgetting the body and the heart-mind (shenxin 忘身心)—for instance, the capacity of ‘smashing up one’s limbs and body’ (duo zhi ti 墮肢體) (Ma 2018).

While human activity is defined by conscious, utilitarian, willed activity, the non-activity of Heaven (wuwei 無為) is found in the necessary and yet unwillful movements. It is a matter of allowing oneself to be moved in a spontaneous flow of the Dao. Yet, non-activity does not refer to the absence of movements or dynamics, but a responsiveness that is not initiated by external phenomena around the artificial self or the ego (wo 我), but by the natural way in which the human and the myriad things are created. In other words, despite the artificial and divisive constructs of the human language—exemplified by the name of the ego (wo 我)—the human could and should be as natural (ziran 自然), just as the non-human is supposed to be.

Given that conceptual or abstract knowledge is rendered possible by names (*ming* 名) that differentiate things from each other, such as that between the self and the other, or usefulness and uselessness (Cheng 1997), Zhuangzi regards the activity of knowing as actually unnecessary and even harmful to the fulfilment of Dao (Chai 2014). However, as Chai points out, the human mind is unavoidably disrupted by such knowledge (such as the patterns, *wen* 文, and orderings/principles, *li* 理, that the Confucians uphold), which is instrumental and artificial and therefore becomes lost, distant from what is natural—namely the Dao that unites the human, the myriad things and the Heaven and the Earth (Chai 2016). Thus, it is through the abstinence of the mind that knowledge (in forms of concepts, names and categories) can be emptied out and that the mind could return to the natural state of unknowing, just like the Heaven. Unknowing is the great knowledge (*dazhi* 大知) about the unknowability of Dao, or in other words, the limit of conceptual knowledge (*xiaozhi* 小知), as Chai notes, “the nothingness associated with the Dao is an empty equanimity whose purpose is to facilitate the actualization of its own unknowability” (Chai 2014).

As such, one wonders how exactly the human can return to this natural way of being. More precisely, Zhuangzi discusses asceticism in terms of mind fasting (*xinzhai* 心齋), and more specifically focusing on its linguistic aspect: *forgetting language* (*wangyan* 忘言) or that which is centred around the name (*ming* 名) of the egoistic and artificial self (*wo* 我). Thus unfolds the following dialogue between the ascetic Ziqi and his disciple about listening to the “music of the Earth” (*dilai* 地籟) in the beginning of Chapter Two, entitled “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (*qi wu lun* 齊物論).

Ziyou said, “By the piping of earth, then, you mean simply [the sound of] these hollows, and by the piping of flutes and whistles. But may I ask about the piping of Heaven?” Ziqi said, “Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself—all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?” (Burton 2013)

At the end of the dialogue, the ascetic (in practicing mind-fasting) says: “Now I (*wu* 吾) [the natural self] have forgotten my [artificial] self (*wo* 我).”<sup>20</sup> More precisely, the abandoning of the egoistic self means the forgetting of little and petty words, namely a retreat from the conventional and artificial language of differentiation and separation (*bian* 辨) that identifies an artificial self (*wo* 我). As such, forgetting speech (*wangyan* 忘言) and losing the self (*sangwo* 喪我) are two ways of describing the same process, which is the Daoist practice of listening (*ting* 聽). Being united with the natural world, the Daoist ascetic Ziqi detaches himself from his intention-driven self, the ego, and the anthropocentric perspective. In attempting to listen to the sounds as natural as those coming from the Heaven and the Earth, one forgets the language that separates the human from the non-human, which is determined by the names (*ming* 名). Thus, the egoistic self—or the first person in everyday contexts—is transformed into what Zhuangzi calls the natural self (*zi-ran* 自然 or *zi-ji* 自己).

Given this effect of the ascetic practice, it still begs the question how this exercise of mind fasting is plausible in real life. Most notably, it is important to be aware of the notion of the mind that Zhuangzi refers to, which is usually cited as the heart-mind (*xin* 心). As Jullien points out, unlike the soul or spirit in Plato, it is inseparable from the organic corporeality of the human (Jullien 2015). In other words, as part of the physicality of the person, the heart-mind is a sensory organ that perceives its surroundings in a pre-reflective and emotive mode, as much as a cognitive faculty that conceptualises the world. As such, though cognizing the world by distinguishing between names and categories in daily life, the heart-mind is always capable of detaching itself from such activities and returning to the pre-cognitive mode. Sounds, for instance, could be encountered by the heart-mind without being categorised into different musical genres, if they are heard by an untrained ear. To this extent, fasting the heart-mind is about unlearning the conceptual, remaining in contact with what is the natural (*ziran* 自然) way of being—the Dao 道, and staying independent from what is distorted, namely the world fragmented and distorted by knowledge (*zhi* 知) and names (*ming* 名). In brief, returning to the Dao as the natural way of living requires the forgetting of the human language through the practice of mind-fasting.

As a matter of fact, similar to Zhuangzi's emphasis on the detachment of the artificial self (sangwo 喪我) through the forgetting of human language (wangyan 忘言), Nietzsche also talks about the aptitude of forgetfulness (das Vergessen), namely a "capacity of not being able [to remember]" (Können des Nichtkönnen), which one can learn from artists.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, while Nietzsche would agree with the Daoist that human language cannot help naturalising civilisation—for the former is but a construct of the latter—he seems to see the potential of naturalising life in a particular human technique: art. In fact, he regards artists—not all, but those of a certain type—as capable of perceiving everyday reality from a different perspective that breaks from conventional knowledge and utilitarian language.<sup>22</sup> To this extent, the account of mind-fasting could fill some gaps in the Nietzschean notion of non-nihilistic asceticism on the practical front—namely as an applicable technique or exercise of forgetting the language.

However, simply applying the Daoist account of retaining the natural (ziran 自然) self (wu 吾 or ji 己) to the Nietzschean project of naturalisation still seems inadequate, for the body-self (Leib-selbst) appears as collective and communal, implying a subject in plurality: "we" (wir). The body-self, albeit being radically destabilized, alludes to a cultural, artistic and all-too-human community that attempts to unlearn the history of civilisation constructed by artificial boundaries.

Forgetfulness is not a simple vis inertiae, as superficial minds believe, but rather an active faculty of inhibition, a positive faculty in the full force of the term; thanks to it all our experiences, all that we do, live, and absorb, becomes no more conscious, while we digest (what we might call psychic assimilation (Einverseelung), than the multiple process of physical nutrition (leiblich Ernährung) which is assimilation by the body (Einverleibung).<sup>23</sup>

As such, the capacity to forget is considered in relation to history. Civilisation proclaims itself to possess a history as undigestible and limited to the illusory origin of the "we" as the underpinning of memory and the hero of outdated monuments. By contrast, the history of the lived body shows itself in the form of a "plastic force" (Kraft) that penetrates, infiltrates and transforms life.<sup>24</sup> In other words, to forget is to be able to relate to life in the present and the future, which leads us to conceive ourselves as one lived body (Leib). As such, aesthetic asceticism in Nietzsche implies a way of incorporating (Einverleibung) our "selves" by breaking boundaries that are set by knowledge of history and language. As such, the naturalisation of this body-self (Leib-selbst) appears mostly pertinent to a people (Volk), unlike the Daoist ascetic or the genuine person (zhenren 真人) that reconnects with Heaven (tian 天) and the myriad things (wanwu 萬物) through an individual practice of mind-fasting. Therefore, the Daoist may interrogate that this boundary-breaking body (Leib) prescribed in Nietzschean naturalisation remains limited to an all-too-human realm of life.

#### 4. Conclusions

To conclude, the contribution of this article to the understanding of asceticism in Nietzsche by integrating perspectives of Zhuangzian philosophy self-cultivation is two-fold. First, I have attempted to examine the non-nihilistic notion of asceticism in terms of naturalisation (Natürlichung) and cultivation (Züchtung). I argue that forgetting oneself while sitting (zuowang 坐忘), with its key technique of mind-fasting (xinzhai 心齋), can potentially help as a concrete practice of self-cultivation that complements Nietzschean life-affirming asceticism. Contrary to the recent consensus among certain scholars that the Nietzschean anti-Christian epitomes such as the Übermensch or Zarathustra appear to be more individualist and lonesome than the mind-fasting Zhuangzian sage who sits in harmonious Oneness with the Heaven and the myriad things, this article shows the opposite.<sup>25</sup> It turns out that Nietzsche's strong proposition for a *communal assimilation* (consisting in the destruction and creation) of *new moral values* is—to a great extent—more socially engaged and collectively bound than the Zhuangzian ascetic exercises. This is because the ultimate level of zuowang refers to *forgetting the body and the heart-mind*, beyond the forgetting of social and cultural norms, whereas Nietzsche's emphasis on Züchtung as the discipline and cultivation of a new people is part of an agenda of changing collective values and returning to the natural state of society, without challenging the body-self (Leib-Selbst)

as an metaphysical construct that can be potentially forgotten or dismantled. Yet, this does not affect the compatibility of zuowang and Nietzsche's asceticism qua cultivation, for zuowang also includes forgetting the ethical and social aspects of life. To this extent, the incorporation of the Zhuangzi's philosophy of qi-cultivation into Nietzsche's asceticism helps the latter to be more concretely grounded in day-to-day practice and less abstract and theoretical.

Furthermore, I have also argued the importance of forgetting language in the technique of mind-fasting and how this is helpful in shedding a new light on Nietzsche's notion of forgetfulness as a capacity of artists who break free from conventional knowledge and embrace a form of knowledge of non-knowing that is active and subconscious. To do this, I have related language with the identification of the self in names (ming 名), as a social and cultural construction, showing that Zhuangzi takes mind-fasting as a technique to unsettle and disrupt such constructions. I have connected this to Nietzsche's asceticism which aims at deconstructing the utilitarian language of moral values, which claims to stabilise reality in dualistic oppositions. While I recognise that Nietzsche appreciates forgetfulness as a capacity to actively unlearn the history of the construction of such a language, I argue that Nietzsche's account of forgetfulness as a capacity that needs to be cultivated in some way can borrow from Zhuangzi's process of mind-fasting, which helps to dismantle the linguistically fixated constructs in one's heart-mind, namely sensitive and cognitive consciousness.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The epitomes of such research are the collective work. *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*. Edited by Graham Parkes. Katrin Froese's Monograph, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Daoist Thought*, and Geling Shang's *Liberation as Affirmation, the Religiosity of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche*.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ästhetik ist ja nichts als eine angewandte Physiologie" in *Nietzsche contra Wagner, KSA Band 6*, 418. In this essay, I refer to Nietzsche's texts in the *Kritische Studienausgabe*, hereafter cited as KSA, ed. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari (München/Berlin, New York: DTV-Walter de Gruyter), 1980.
- <sup>3</sup> One can consider Nietzsche's declaration in the opening aphorism of *Human, All too Human*: "Alles, was wir brauchen und was erst bei der gegenwärtigen Höhe der einzelnen Wissenschaften uns gegeben werden kann, ist eine Chemie der moralischen, religiösen, ästhetischen Vorstellungen und Empfindungen, ebenso aller jener Regungen, welche wir im Gross- und Kleinverkehr der Cultur und Gesellschaft, ja in der Einsamkeit an uns erleben: wie, wenn diese Chemie mit dem Ergebniss abschliesse, dass auch auf diesem Gebiete die herrlichsten Farben aus niedrige, ja verachteten Stoffen gewonnen sind?" This is a formulation of what genealogy does, which shows the strong ties between the aesthetic and ethical or religious dimensions of life. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I, KSA Band 2*, 24.
- <sup>4</sup> "Ich könnte mir eine Musik denken, deren seltenster Zauber darin bestünde, dass sie von Gut und Böse nichts mehr müsste, nur dass vielleicht irgend ein Schiffer-Heimweh, irgend welche goldne Schatten und zärtliche Schwächen hier und da über sie hinwegliefen: eine Kunst, welche von grosser Ferne her die Farben einer untergehenden, fast unverständlich gewordenen moralischen Welt zu sich flüchten sähe, und die gastfreundlich und tief genug zum Empfang solcher späten Flüchtlinge wäre." Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, KSA Band 5*, 201.
- <sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner, KSA Band 6*, 17. The sinner in Nietzschean criticism refers not only to Kundry, the heroine of Wagner's opera Parsifal, but also to other characters who are often female in Wagner's operas—for example, the "hysterical youth" in Lohengrin.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 26.
- <sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft ("la gaya scienza")*, KSA Band 3, 348–49.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Also Sprache Zarathustra, KSA Band 4*, 39.
- <sup>10</sup> "Der Ascetismus des Geistes (an die Geistigsten)/der Freund (der ideale Umgang)/die Einsamkeit/der Leib philosophirt/der Schaffende/Gefahr in der Predigt des Leidens/Gegen die Geringschätzung des Lebens/im Erkennen heiligen sich die Triebe/das Ziel der Menschheit fehlt bisher." Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1882–1883, KSA Band 10*, 5[32], 226.
- <sup>11</sup> The link between the body, suffering and resistance can be traced back to Greco-Latin philosophy, especially to the Stoics and Epicureans. For them, two properties are attributed to the body. First, Zeno defines the body in three-dimensional terms: "an extension of three dimensions, length, width and depth." However, three-dimensionality does not only categorise the corporeal, but also the incorporeal as "void and place." Therefore, it is necessary to add another property to define the body: resistance. In Cicero, for example, the body

is considered as “that which acts or undergoes,” in an indirect way, the Epicurean Lucretius is rather in favour of the definition from Cicero: “Nothing can do or undergo anything without a body.” This definition is thus anti-platonic insofar as the corporality of the soul is emphasised. Jean-Baptiste Gourinat et al., “Corps et incorporels; la cause et son effet,” in *Lire les stoïciens* (Paris: PUF, 2009), 66–67.

12 Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi zhushu*, 24.

13 (Zheng 2018, p. 293).

14 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, KSA Band 12, 10 [46], 477.

15 Ames, *Nietzsche’s ‘Will to Power and Chinese ‘Virtuality’ (De)*, 141.

16 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1869–1874*, KSA Band 7, 10 [1], 332. *Größen-Dämmerung*, KSA Band 6, 85.

17 Patrick Wotling, Céline Denat, *Dictionnaire Nietzsche* (Paris: Ellipses, 2013), 95. Wotling points out that, in Nietzsche, while civilisation (Kultur) specifically means a nihilistic or life-negating culture, the term culture (Cultur) refers to a series of vigorous interpretations to a human community during a precise historical stage.

18 Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen IV* [5], KSA Band 1, 456.

19 Ibid.

20 Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi zhushu*, 24; Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 7.

21 Liu Canglong, *Ziran yu zi you* 自然與自由, 35. The citation comes from Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, KSA Band 4, 351.

22 “[D]as Alles sollen wir den Künstlern ablernen und im Uebrigen weiser sein, als sie. Denn bei ihnen hört gewöhnlich diese ihre feine Kraft auf, wo die Kunst aufhört und das Leben beginnt; wir aber wollen die Dichter unseres Lebens sein, und im Kleinsten und Alltäglichsten zuerst.” Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (“la gaya scienza”) [299], KSA Band 3, p. 538.

23 Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, KSA 5, 291. My translation.

24 Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II* [4], KSA Band 1, 273.

25 Ames, *Nietzsche’s ‘Will to Power’ and Chinese ‘Virtuality’ (De)*, 148. “The Nietzschean Übermensch, in the fury of contest, seems to relish personal ‘joy’ rather than a shared ‘enjoyment.’” Also see Froese, *Machine Hearts and Wandering Spirits in Nietzsche and Zhuangzi*, 1. “While the need for social approval is deeply problematic according to Zhuangzi, it does not spawn the same kind of deep insecurity that a member of a herd might experience in isolation since the herd is little more than an agglomeration of separate selves, not a web of interconnected beings. This is perhaps why Zhuangzi’s sages can spurn convention and yet, at the same time, forge deeper social interconnections, while Zarathustra’s efforts to find friends and a community consistently fail.”

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