The Importance of Being Useless:
A Cross-Cultural Contribution to the New Materialisms from *Zhuangzi*

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Abstract

The recent 'material turn' focuses on materiality in two distinctive ways: one, by including nonhuman agencies, another, by mining indigenous knowledges for alternative conceptions of agency and human-thing relations. A troubling gap persists between the two endeavors. The gap insinuates an us-them dichotomy, and more importantly, curtails communication between radically different visions of thingly agency—thereby impeding the political drive of these conceptual enterprises. This paper is an essay in cross-cultural transposition. Through a close reading of a story of a useless tree in an ancient proto-Daoist text, *Zhuangzi* (莊子), I show how its fabulist and oneiric form illuminates a distinctive perspective on uselessness. Conversely, the trope of uselessness lets us begin from what I call a 'situated affectivity' amidst more-than-human materialities. The paper concludes with a brief comparison of three modalities of uselessness from different 'cosmologies' of thought—a foretaste of the potentials of cross-cosmological endeavors.

Introduction

Around the turn of the millennium, a discernible shift occurred in several disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Labeled the 'material turn,' and its authors, 'new materialists,' this form of materialism has little to do with the familiar categories of idealism versus materialism, mind versus matter. Instead, it focuses on the potentiality and power of nonhumans, from animals to non-sentient, inorganic, inanimate things—the last candidates to which agency would have normally been ascribed. This article focuses on the political motives of the material turn. In the classics of political philosophy, the *polis* is always a purely human affair. By contrast, authors of the material turn argue that the political effects of nonhuman things demand greater scrutiny, and conversely, that the epistemological and conceptual work of the material turn sheds light on hitherto occluded social and political efficacies of nonhuman things. There are two strategies in particular that I address. One brings nonhuman things, which were previously denied agency, into the fold of politically meaningful action. Another mines indigenous knowledges for alternative conceptions of agency and human-thing relations. Given that both aim at revising our vision of political agency to include nonhuman things, the persistent gap between the two endeavors is puzzling. The gap insinuates an us-them dichotomy, and makes problematic attempts to communicate radically different visions of thingly agency.

This is an essay in cross-cultural transposition: through a close reading of a story of a useless tree in an ancient proto-Daoist text, *Zhuangzi* (莊子), I show how a political economy of nonhuman things is illuminated by its distinctive perspective on uselessness, a perspective grounded in non-naturalist, non-rationalistic modes of fabulist and oneiric knowing. The trope of uselessness lets us begin from amidst all our attachments, attractions, affections to things. Rather than demanding a dispassionate gaze, it lets us begin from a situated affectivity (to recast Haraway's term), from a human perspective that has nonetheless always-already been affected by myriad nonhuman and more-than-human materialities (Barad, 2003; Harding, 2008). The paper concludes with a brief comparison of three different modalities of uselessness from different 'cosmologies' of thought—a foretaste of the promises of cross-cosmological endeavors.

1. The Political Implications of a Conceptual Project

A number of comprehensive reviews on the material turn and its critiques have been published (Coole and Frost, 2010; Henare et al., 2007; Hicks, 2010; Hodder, 2012; Ingold, 2012; Langenohl, 2008; Miller, 2002; Pels et al., 2002; Pedersen, 2012; Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013). Since it is counterproductive to retread the same ground, I leave the reader in their capable hands. This section focuses on three productive and provocative sites of political engagement for the conceptual and intellectual work of the material turn.[1]

The first, Bruno Latour's audacious *Politics of Nature* (2004), is one of the most explicit attempts to construct a normative political frame for the inclusion of nonhuman participants. For that reason, it also best demonstrates the difficulties inherent in the attempts to extract ethico-political implications from the empirical and theoretical work of the material turn.

In the *Politics of Nature*, Latour argues that a mistaken belief—in Nature as stable, determinate and ultimately knowable—is responsible for a constant temptation to put a technocratic end to seemingly endless political by appealing to irrefutable 'objective facts'. Yet nonhuman things are themselves political through and through. What Latour shows most convincingly is that 'objective facts' themselves, like penicillin and its properties for instance, have a history, and are emergent effects of highly integrated networks of humans and nonhumans working together in concert—as "actants" (to use the terminology from another of Latour's works).

Despite the agential capacity of nonhuman things, they have difficulty communicating with us, who are so wrapped up in human speech. Conversely, humans have difficulty recognizing, that is, discerning or acknowledging, nonhuman agencies. To remedy this, Latour suggests authorizing human representatives ('lab coats' [Latour, 2004: 64]) to give (human) voice to nonhumans. Latour is equivocal about what precisely this 'representation' entails. For Latour does not confine 'representation' to a communicative function. It acquires a normative political dimension, such that the political 'participation' of nonhuman things assumes, by the time we get to somewhere around the first third of Latour's *Politics of Nature*, the character of an 'ought': we *ought*, Latour argues, to politically enfranchise nonhuman others.

This turn in Latour's argument seems to me muddled. He fuses (or perhaps confuses) two different kinds of representation. To be sure, political representation is also a way of 'giving voice' to those constituencies who are represented. Yet the first motive for representation—to translate for humans, who otherwise would have neither the ears to hear nor eyes to see, the silent speech of their nonhuman companions—blurs into a *second* claim, namely, that nonhumans are unfairly left out of political deliberations (Watson, 2011). In fact, Latour's argument about

the agency of things seems to suggest that it is because we fail to reckon with the political capacities and agential powers of nonhuman things that an anthropocentric political ecology is in such a mess. If this is the case, then nonhumans already possess the sort of political efficacy he desires for them. Perhaps Latour is merely suggesting that we need to acknowledge and include nonhumans in a more judicious and informed way in our political accounting, which is not the same as saying they *ought* to be given a greater say in things; yet this is arguably what he advocates when he speaks for instance of the 'importance each must be granted' within a 'hierarchy of values', or of 'moral aptitudes' (Latour, 2004: 107), or of the different ways of ascertaining the 'legitimate rank' (Latour, 2004: 108) or '*legitimate* presence' (Latour, 2004: 109; italics mine) of things. The classical human-nonhuman divide, which he tries so hard to overcome, is reintroduced in his normative politics (see also Vandenberghe 2002).

The second provocation, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), while written within the discipline of Political Theory, has fewer explicitly political prescriptions than Latour's *Politics of Nature*. The critical work lies in her turn away from an anthropocentric contemporary mainstream that consists not just of the discourse rationalities of Jurgen Habermas and the contractualism of John Rawls, but also the Marxist and critical theory traditions. Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is motivated by the argument in political ecology that a hubristic anthropocentrism coupled with an exploitative and instrumental stance toward the nonhuman world is responsible for our current environmental crises.[2] However, rather than advancing additional normative arguments about ecological justice, Bennett argues that we must begin with the 'classificatory categories' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 29) we use in thinking about the more-than-human world (Whatmore, 2006). Based on an innovative close reading of several authors, Bennett's argument resists encapsulation in a few sentences. There is however one strategy that is particularly relevant, and especially portable.

Bennett's conception of 'vital materiality' extends the ambit of agency, traditionally limited to human will, intentionality, and subjectivity (Pickering, 2001; Connolly, 1991), to nonhumans, and in doing so, alters the very idea of agency itself. The key strategy is inspired by Benedict Spinoza's *Ethics*, and focuses on the *affectability* of things. Recent Spinozist scholarship has emphasized his counterintuitive conception of power: all finite things are mutually interdependent, and this interdependence is not a weakness, but rather constitutes the true nature and power of things (*res* in Latin). This is why power always involves an element of sensitivity, of receptivity, or what Spinoza calls 'being affected' (Deleuze, 1988; Kwek, 2014). Instead of specifying from the outset what qualifies as a thing, actant, or body, Bennett traces their varying capacities for affecting and being-affected. This forestalls the hypostatization of materialities, and allows us to trace the passage of a 'thing' beyond the boundaries of its dissolution. The accompanying idea of *affect* (Latin: *affectus*) describes the mutual affecting and being-affected of all things in an encounter (Seyfert, 2012), and allows us to speak simultaneously of the encounter and its trace upon individual things, and lets us scale up or down the levels of analysis in accordance with the complexities of the bodies under study (from bacteria to the human to a waste dump). Thus Bennett captures the 'microphysics of power' generated by nonhuman things.

The third and final provocation. The disciplines of Anthropology and Sociology have always deciphered the cultures they study through things and material landscapes, so there is not one but several material 'turns' shading into one another (Appadurai, 1986; Lefebvre, 1974; Miller, 1987; Olsen, 2003; Winner, 1980). The distinctiveness of the recent 'ontological turn' lies in the authors' attempts to fold indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems into social and anthropological analysis in a novel way. The attempt to 'take seriously' alternative cosmologies goes beyond a late liberal 'politics of recognition' (Taylor, 1994). To simply regard indigenous

cosmologies as different 'worldviews' or 'belief systems' evacuates the truth of the nonhuman efficacies that they claim. According to authors of the ontological turn, indigenous cosmologies such as animism or totemism in fact constitute wholly different *realities*—hence, ontologies—in which the characteristically 'modern' binary opposition between human subjects and nonhuman 'objects'[3] is either irrelevant or non-existent; things actually exercise the strange (animistic, totemistic etc.) force or efficacy ascribed to them (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013; Tsing, 2005). The elaboration of these *alterealities* is both a political and an epistemic-conceptual critique.

The insistence on the 'ontological' nature of these cosmologies is a critique of a default epistemic technology, 'naturalism'. Philippe Descola's structuralist (2013) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectival (2012) approaches reinsert 'naturalism'—with its single plane of material bodies (human and nonhuman) unified by a single principle of movement, of being, and its concomitant reservation of subjective interiority for humans—into a schematic *alongside* other cosmologies: animism, totemism, and analogism.

The 'objects' of the 'naturalist' gaze map onto the 'Nature' pole of Latour's Nature/Culture divide. Nature is supposed to unfold in accordance with strict deterministic laws, while Culture is supposed to be the sphere of contingency, agency, subjectivity, and *freedom*. Yet the appellation is deceptive. For the varieties of naturalism are not 'natural'; or rather, naturalism itself is through and through historical (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012), the remnant of a pitched battle between (Christian) theology and forces that later came to be called secularism (and became coupled to 'Science') (Durkheim, 1915; Merleau-Ponty, 2003); one could go further and say that it continued to evolve as a technique of the scientific gaze, as specified by the term 'objective naturalism' (Daston and Galison, 2007). This final incarnation of naturalism as objectivity means that any knowledge system that does not fit its epistemic frame is denied explanatory force, and hence, material efficacy and any access to 'what is real' (Blaser, 2013).

Given this scheme of epistemic privilege, to call indigenous cosmologies 'ontologies' is as much a political as it is a methodological or theoretical move. (This why 'ontology' cannot be 'just' another word for culture [Venkatesan, 2010; *contra*, Palaček and Risjord, 2013].) Their elaboration *as ontology* is a critique of 'reigning hegemonic orders' (Viveiros de Castro et al., 2014). Despite the claim of 'objective naturalism' to represent things as they are (Daston and Galison, 2007), it is itself not always 'neutral' or 'detached' as claimed. It has historically served to 'make natural' discourses and practices of hegemony, exploitation, and brutality (Curran, 2011; West, 2005). Indigenous ontologies challenge existing arrangements of human-animal/-nonhuman relations and their attendant claims about territoriality, property, and resource allocation (Cronon, 1983; Scott, 1988; Tsing, 2005; White, 1995).

2. Recombinant Ontologies?

Using Descola's schematic, Bennett and Latour's work challenges a restrictive naturalism from within, while the ontological turn presses on it from without. (Although Bennett's profession of animist tendencies makes this rather an awkward fit.)[4] A real gap remains between these approaches, further exacerbated by the institutional drag of disciplinary concerns. Yvonne Marshall (*pace* Spelman 1988) evocatively articulates why this may be a problem (Alberti et al., 2011). Referring to the work of the 'ontological turn', Marshall warns that the invocation of 'multiple ontologies' risks becoming 'additive rather than transformative'. It is like adding more and more beads to a string: but 'no matter how many additions we make, the new beads will never transform the original one because each bead is understood to be an irreducible entity'

(Alberti et al., 2011: 903). Yet, as Marshall points out, '(a)lterity demands a transformative move that makes it possible for our original bead to engage with but not encompass all the other beads that we might imagine adding to our string'(Alberti et al., 2011: 903). Thus the label of 'ontology' is but the first of many subsequent moves that may be needed to bridge, and to translate across, ontologies.

One of the aims of the ontological turn is to give an account of how local communities situate themselves within their ecological *Umwelten* in order to combat dominant practices of development and conservation. But these accounts of indigenous cosmologies must also in some way be communicable with global regimes of ecological governance, no matter how unsatisfactory the latter may be, before indigenous communities can have any chance of having a say in the structuring of ecological protocols. Furthermore, as Leigh Jenco (2007) points out in the context of comparative (i.e., non-European and -North American) political theory and philosophy, the purely 'alternative' status of non-naturalist cosmologies reeks of cultural chauvinism: it is a mode of thought good enough for 'them', but has nothing important to teach 'us'. For the *political work* that the materialist turn seeks to accomplish, a 'separate but equal' conceptual approach is inadequate.

A possible alternative is modeled in Eduardo Kohn's two-step process for re-visioning human and nonhuman relations. Kohn's work joins a Bennettian focus on nonhuman affective capacities to the indigenous praxes of the ontological turn. Kohn argues that his account of the Runa in *How Forests Think* (2013) is not simply a demonstration of 'How the Runa Think Forests Think', nor how the forest *as such* thinks. In Kohn's own words: 'I'm attempting a kind of engagement with Runa thinking with thinking forests such that this sort of sylvan thinking (which is no longer human, and therefore not just Runa or mine) can thinking itself through us—making us over in ways that could make us otherwise'(Kohn, 2013). Kohn provides an example for maintaining that productive tension that authors of the ontological turn seek— neither dismissing indigenous cosmologies as 'the fantasies of others', nor 'fantasizing that they may gain the same reality' for ourselves (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen and Holbraad, 2014). The contact between indigenous knowledges and non-indigenous discourses (in varieties of naturalism) should ideally 'transfigure' (Gaonkar and Povinelli, 2003) the ways in which we imagine, think, and approach nonhumans—and these new modes of human-nonhuman relations would emerge as a wholly new third, irreducible to either the indigenous knowledge or its contact point in naturalism (Jensen and Blok, 2013).

The section that follows enacts just such an encounter. Through a close reading of a story of a useless tree[5] from the proto-Daoist text, *Zhuangzi*, I explore how, within the context of a specific cosmology and textual tradition, both its trope of uselessness as well as its fabulist and oneiric modes of knowledge illuminate human relations to nonhuman things. It is an exploration of methodological and conceptual possibilities. In this task, I am emboldened by Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen and Holbraad's ecumenical view: 'material can be drawn from anytime, anywhere, and anyone, there is no limit to what practices, discourses, and artifacts are amenable to ontological analysis'(2014).

3. A Useless Tree

Daoism, the tradition to which the *Zhuangzi* has often been ascribed, consists of a large corpus of texts, including not just classics *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing* (道德經), but also temple scriptures passed down from master to disciple, as well as alchemical, meditation, medical and longevity practices (Chan, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Kirkland, 1997, 2002; Strickman, 1980).[6] This unwieldy

corpus is itself part of diverse traditions that have only with much difficulty—often through the force of a bureaucratic State apparatus—become corralled within a singular descriptor: *Chinese* (Descola, 2013; Needham, 1954; Schwartz,1985; Smith, 2003). The political resonances of Daoism are multiple, as is evidenced in its changing fortunes: its role as gatekeeper in imperial bureaucracy, its prohibition by the Chinese Communist Party (Robinet, 1997), and perceived political apathy (Van Norden and Ivanhoe, 2005).

Hence rather than attempt to import wholesale the ontology and normative frame of Daoism, I focus on one specific *corpus*, the *Zhuangzi*, and within it, a parable of a useless tree. The elisions, occlusions and ambiguities on multiple levels in the text of *Zhuanzi* constantly call attention to its own limited and partial nature. A compilation of originally orally transmitted paradoxes, anecdotes, stories, logic puzzles, riddles, and jokes, its provenance cannot be conclusively ascertained, although there is a broad consensus that if at all, then it is the first seven or 'Inner Chapters' that were composed by the eponymous Zhuangzi, and the other, 'Outer Chapters,' by various unattributed followers (Graham, 1990; Roth, 1991). The thematic and compositional relations between the different chapters and sections remain hotly contested. The protagonists of the *Zhuangzi* are as unconventional as the text: hunchbacks, cripples, criminals, and an assortment of creatures animal, vegetable, and mythical. *Zhuangzi*'s discontinuous and fragmentary nature, its multiple genres, points of view, and embrace of paradox, positively militates against a propositional systematic consistency (Hansen, 1992; Wong, 2005; Yearley, 2005). Which is not to say that it does not possess an oneiric and narratival logic (Raphals, 1994).

3.i. The Story, as Told in Zhuangzi

Here is the story of the useless tree, from one of the Inner Chapters entitled 'Affairs in the human world', (人間世) quoted in full to preserve its nuances.

> Carpenter Shih (石 – Stone) went to Qi (齊) and, when he got to Crooked Shaft, he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering above the hills. The lowest branches were eighty feet from the ground, and a dozen or so of them could have been made into boats. There were so many sightseers that the place looked like a fair, but the carpenter didn't even glance around and went on his way without stopping. His apprentice stood staring for a long time and then ran after Carpenter Stone and said, "Since I first took up my ax and followed you, Master, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you don't even bother to look, and go right on without stopping. Why is that?"
> "Forget it - say no more!" said the carpenter. "It's a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time; make vessels and they'd break at once. Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It's not a timber tree – there's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old!"
> After Carpenter Stone had returned home, the oak tree appeared to him in a dream and said, "What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with those useful trees? The cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citron, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs - as soon as their fruit is ripe, they are torn apart and subjected to abuse. Their big limbs are broken off, their little limbs are yanked around. Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don't get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey. They

bring it on themselves - the pulling and tearing of the common mob. And it's the same way with all other things.

"As for me, I've been trying a long time to be of no use (無所可用), and though I almost died, I've finally got it. This is of great use (大用) to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large? Moreover you and I are both of us things. What's the point of this - things condemning things? You, a worthless man about to die - how do you know I'm a worthless tree?"

When Carpenter Stone woke up, he reported his dream. His apprentice said, "If it's so intent on being of no use, what's it doing there at the village shrine?"

"Shhh! Say no more! It's only resting there. If we carp and criticize, it will merely conclude that we don't understand it. Even if it weren't at the shrine, do you suppose it would be cut down? It protects itself in a different way from ordinary people. If you try to judge it by conventional standards, you'll be way off!"[7]

The tree is recalcitrant materiality. Its wood is unusable or useless (是不材之木也，無所可用). The carpenter's name, usually transliterated as 'Shi' [8] in English, is the Chinese graph or character for 'Stone.' So the story pits carpenter Stone, or Stone, against the useless tree, one kind of materiality against the other.

Trees often emerge as central characters or images in the Inner Chapters of *Zhuangzi*.[9] The chapter where the story above occurs (人間世) makes four references to trees, including the one just cited; all of them address in some way the theme of use and uselessness. The passage I have just cited is the only one in which the tree speaks.[10] It is therefore most challenging problematic for the naturalist perspective.[11]

A note on textual categories. While a lot of English language scholarship has focused on issues traditionally associated with academic philosophy, the term 'philosophy' can only with difficulty be applied to the Chinese thought of the Warring States in retrospect (Defoort, 2001; Fraser, 2011).[12] I follow the suggestions of some scholars in concentrating on the dimensions of fabulation and metaphor in reading this story of the useless tree (Chong 2006; Defoort 2001, 2012). Its storytelling, when read with care, reveals multiple layers of significance (Wu 2007).

The first and most apparent lesson of the story is echoed in two short narratives that immediately follow. The first describes a tree which, though enormous, has branches too crooked for beams and rafters, and a trunk too gnarled and pitted for coffins. Upon encountering it, Zi-Qi (子綦) says, 'This is indeed wretched timber, which is why it has grown so big. The most daemonic of men are made of such poor stuff! (神人以此不材！)' The second describes a place where catalpas, cypresses, and mulberries thrive. But small ones are cut down for tethering posts, larger ones for rafters, and the largest, for wealthy men's coffins. 'So they do not last out the years Heaven assigned them, but die in mid-journey under the axe. That is the trouble with being stuff that is good for something.'[13] These short fables support the few Anglo-American readings of the story of the useless tree and the theme of uselessness in general: uselessness enables survival or self-preservation, and is therefore paradoxically useful (Cook, 1997; Major, 1975).

3.ii. Beyond survivalism

Yet it seems to me that the significance of the story extends beyond the art of survival. In the primary fable, the useless tree, when speaking to the carpenter in his dream, denotes the 'use' of

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other trees with the graph or word 用 (yòng) (which functions both as a verb and a noun), which does not occur in the two shorter narratives. Moreover, *Zhuangzi* elsewhere scorns preservation and survival (Chong, 2006; Möller, 2008), especially in tales that exult in the embrace of changes—even those that seem positively harmful, painful, destructive for humans and nonhuman alike, such as disease and death. Finally, when his apprentice objects that the tree is not really useless because it serves as a shrine, the carpenter rebukes his apprentice—a rebuke that suggests uselessness should not be understood in a one-dimensional way, or rather, that it does not exist in simple opposition to 'use' or usefulness,' that useful/useless are not a simple binary pair. In the *Zhuangzi* 'use' (用) perhaps has only a single modality, but there are multiple modalities of uselessness. We should not underestimate the importance of survival—for after all *Zhuangzi* is practical, earthy, and does not aim at some uncommon, esoteric wisdom, some hallowed state. But there are many other valences at play.

The clue that the story is more than a survival manual lies in its language and tone. The tree's size is hyperbolically described; it is an almost comic exaggeration. The hyperbolical excess is meant to suggest another kind of excess, which may perhaps be said to be an excess of *energeia* or *potentia*, an excess expressed in ritual or religious upwelling. There is at any rate an air of something more, and element of mystery: people from all over come to see the tree, indeed, it has become the site for a shrine. There is something otherworldly about it. But this 'religious' aura is not a solemn one; *Zhuangzi* tells us the people gather as if at a great fair; it is *festive*.

The otherworldliness of the tree is not 'transcendence', not some sign of a 'higher' power that stands beyond and outside of this world; rather it remains immanent to the world.[14] It is something the rude peasant can grasps, albeit obscurely, as a certain 'gut instinct,' perhaps, accessible through ritual and not rationality. Since *Zhuangzi* does not care for the noble or the learned (it makes relentless fun of logicians and Confucian ritualism), but celebrates beggars, cripples, those figures who tend to be objects of social condescension, pity, or ridicule, the observation of the *popular* nature of the rituals is not meant as critique.

By contrast, 'mastery', and its prerequisite modes of knowledge, as embodied in the master carpenter Stone, is inadequate. It fails to grasp the true significance of the tree, which exceeds all mundane measurement and evaluations of utility. This critique of mastery is echoed in the technique of 'anti-teaching' (Defoort, 2012). Not only does this involve a reluctance and outright refusal of masters (子) to instruct, it also 'contain[s] a measure of not teaching, of letting go, un-doing, liberating, or undermining'. In the stories, these masters convey 'an intuition that gets lost as soon as one tries to turn it into a moral system or formal training'; they lay waste to 'fixed norms, elegant theories, clear judgments, good intentions, and efficient techniques' (Defoort, 2012; Levinovitz, 2012). Here we cannot separate the form from the content. 'Zhuangzi resorted to all kinds of literary acrobatics, including figurative language, neologisms, metaphors, imagery, and novel rhetorical devices in an heroic attempt to defamiliarize our automatic, habitual ways of perceiving and imagining' (Lo, 2002), and his use of storytelling form is as important as the story he tells. The story is open, and its significance always resonates with the sensibility and sensitivity of its audience (Wu, 2005). (We leave aside for now the question of the 'correctness' of the readings; one has the sense that this is not the first thing *Zhuangzi* would be most concerned about.[15]) *Fabula* or fabulations are those strange fairy tales, or stories our grandmothers told us; they are playful. (To us, they may read like nightmares, but Kafka's friends collapsed in laughter when he read them his tales of beleaguered bureaucrats.) In *Zhuangzi* there is no originary, free-willing subject to act as an engine for recuperative action of any sort, no pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. It is the story that transports us, renders us capable of another kind of being-affected, and its results are never guaranteed. One can never determine in advance how the

audience will react. In *Zhuangzi* there are all sorts of things and creatures, strange and non-human bodies—giant trees, oversized gourds, useless yaks, quails, sparrows, leviathans, hunchbacks, cripples and criminals—that can teach us; the useless tree teaches the carpenter, who in turn schools his apprentice. The inherent openness of the narrative form is intensified by the context of the dreaming within which the teaching takes place.

3.iii. Of Dreaming

What is to be made of the fact that the tree's message is conveyed in the carpenter's dream? Does that make it somehow 'unreal', a mere figment of the carpenter's imagination? Here, we must attend to the specificity of the dream landscape in *Zhuangzi*.

In Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, dream is seen as a deceptive foil to what is real, an inconstant shade to be banished by the certitude of true thought. But this is not what the dream signifies in *Zhuangzi*. A dream is not what is unreal, a mere figment of the imagination. The difference is illuminated in a short episode in *Zhuangzi*, the "Butterfly Dream":

>Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamt—and there was a butterfly, fluttering[.] Zhou is not known. Upon sudden awaking, there was, unmistakably, Zhou. One does not know if Zhou dreams a butterfly, or if a butterfly dreams of Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be a distinction. This is called the transformation of things.

This translation—my choppy revision of another revised translation from Hans-Georg Möller—is awkward, not only because of its more literal style, but also because it lacks, as Möller notes, the dreaming subject that usually ties these narratives together. Contrast this, for instance, to Burton Watson's: 'Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt (he) was a butterfly ... (He) didn't know (he) was Zhuang Zhou. […] Suddenly (he) woke up and there he was, Zhuang Zhou.' In Watson's translation, the subject (he) that I have parenthesized is in fact absent from the original (Chinese) text. This dreaming (human) subject, Zhuang Zhou, appears in Watson's translation as the "real" entity, the abiding substrate of which the butterfly is a dream. Yet, Möller argues, such a reading is quite unwarranted, an intrusion of a misplaced Cartesianism into the translation. Möller follows a prominent Daoist tradition (based on Guo Xiang's commentary) in arguing that each dreamer—Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly—is equally real, in its own time; this is what is meant by that absolute distinction between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly, for 'being awake is by no means more "real" than dreaming'(Möller, 1999: 444).[16] The absolute cut between the two dreams, between butterfly and man, points toward the transformations (of state, of degree *and* kind) that all things undergo—one of the key themes of *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing* (Ming, 2012). Dreams are polyvalent in *Zhuangzi*. But they have less to do with illusion; rather they both embody and serve as a metaphor for the transience and transformations to which all things are subject.

Zhuangzi has been read as a philosophically skeptical text. That is not a claim I wish to refute or affirm. Nonetheless, its trope of dreaming seems to me to have less to do with the epistemological problems that motivate skepticism, than praxiological ones: how must one live one's life in the midst of ceaseless change and uncertainty—of which the dream state appears the most apt approximation?

Rather than a variant of philosophical skepticism, the dream trope in *Zhuangzi* resonates more with Merleau-Ponty's description of oneiric logic, which I briefly recount here. This is a limited and contingent conceptual coupling to explore what we think dreams can teach us.

In a series of Collège de France lectures entitled *Nature*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains that the oneiric has the same structure as the orientation of a creature toward its *Umwelt*: 'The *Umwelt* is not present like an idea, but as a theme that haunts consciousness' (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 178). This articulation does not force us to choose between consciousness or the unconscious, and sidesteps presumptions about subjectivity. The creature's *Umwelt* is not merely a matter of perspective; it is the totality of its world, containing everything by which the creature can be affected, and the entirety of its response and action. For instance, out of the myriad shapes, sounds, and textures of a forest, only three affect the tick atop a blade of grass: the odor of butyric acid, emitted by all mammals, the tactility of a hairless spot, and the sensation of heat, whereupon the tick begins its boring. These affects (and a photosensitivity of the skin) is the entirety of the tick's world (von Uexküll, 1934). For Merleau-Ponty, a creature does not merely 'survive', it is first and foremost *expressive*, and '(i)nstinct is above all else a theme, a style that meets up with that which evokes it in the milieu, but which does not have *goals*: it is an activity for pleasure'(Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 193). Hence, rather than something 'unreal', the oneiric expresses pre-discursive modes of affectivity, or, ways of being-affected that are expressive but nonetheless translate only with great difficulty into discourse-laden modes of thought.

The transformative work of the dream itself—the difficulty of reducing it to a lesson that can be taught or model to follow—is seen in the apprentice's inability to fully grasp what the tree says. When the carpenter tells the apprentice about the dream, the apprentice avers that if it were really useless the tree should not be serving as a shrine. For the apprentice, uselessness is still an absolute, simply the opposite of something useful; he does not grasp the real significance of the tree's message. The folding of the oneiric into a narrative mode means that unlike the apprentice, we too are 'present' in the carpenter's dream. In sleep we drop our ceaseless reaching; nothing is actively used, not even ourselves. The carpenter's dream is visionary: the tree reminds the carpenter of his mortality, but also, reminds him that they are both good-for-nothing things (物). Sleep, or slumber, becomes a space of transformation. The oneiric and fabulist modes affect us in different ways (because as readers we have to draw our own always tentative conclusions). Reading is like pregnancy—the ripening forms the fruit.

4. Modalities of Uselessness

Paying attention to what is deemed 'useless' enables us to perceive and trace what escapes human tendencies, and habitual approaches to things. This section briefly sketches out three modalities of uselessness, each of which serves as a critique of common relations between humans and nonhumans, namely, commodity production and consumption, technological mastery, and utility.

4. i. Mass producing uselessness

In *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (roughly, 'The Obsolescence of the Human'), of which only fragments have been translated, Günther Anders (1980) argues that in the epoch of mass industry, the singular object approaches a lower degree of reality than its Platonic 'idea', namely, its blueprint, or what he calls its 'non-physical recipe.' This is the fate of a mass-produced thing: to be 'murdered' (*umgebracht*) by their younger and fresher exemplars, 'packaged potentiality' impatiently and urgently standing by, in order to supersede the old. Thus the mortality of the mass-produced commodity guarantees the fecundity and productivity of industrial production, and 'the production process generates the product as defective for tomorrow, […] the production process is the generation of defective [things]' ['*die Produktion die Produkte als Ausschuß von morgen erzeugt,* […] *Produktion Erzeugung von Ausschuß ist*'] (Anders, 1980: 40). *Ausschuß* is a

'defective product', something that is discarded because it does not function as intended. Yet it only *becomes* defective *tomorrow*. The temporal dimension in Anders' thought suggests that the thing works just fine, and it is only once we have begun using its newer replacement that we retrospectively conclude that the old product actually never really worked all that well, that it was defective [*Ausschuß*]. The built-in obsolescence of things is indispensable to the discipline of mass-production (and an attendant consumption-driven economy). The thing is to be used up, and discarded when it has become useless. In its useless stage, the mass-produced thing joins another assemblage, that of trash, of waste. Trash possesses its own complex ecology, it produces its own socio-assemblage of humans and nonhumans, but we cannot expand on that topic here. The expanding chaotic universe of useless mass-produced things is the inalienable other side of the disciplines of mass production; on the one side the production of an endless array of 'supersessible' things, on the other, increasingly indistinct trash trails—the double-entry bookkeeping of an industrial discipline of things.[17]

Zhuangzi's tree and the mass-produced thing both *begin* with uselessness; uselessness is entwined with the conditions of their generation. However, while *Zhuangzi*'s tree is inherently useless, devoid of functionality, the uselessness of the mass-produced thing contradicts and condemns its functionality. Uselessness becomes its destiny as part of a political economy of mass production, of the assembly line, but cannot be said to be inherent in its incarnation as a (usable) thing; for it is made useless by the new products rolling off the assembly line, it is discarded regardless of whether it has lost its functional integrity. By contrast, the tree flourishes because it is useless.[18] Uselessness in *Zhuangzi*'s story is a mode of resistance, recalcitrance, to the demands of human production and its discipline (coffins, boats, beams, etc.).

4.ii. Reclaiming the useless

Alfred Sohn-Rethel's '*Das Ideal des Kaputten*' ('The Ideal of the Broken-Down') and David T. Doris' (2011) account of Yoruba ààlè give us another modality of uselessness. Sohn-Rethel and Doris describe respectively how Neapolitans and the Yoruba reclaim things when they become useless, and turn uselessness into something *productive* within novel techno-material assemblages.

Alfred Sohn-Rethel's short essay on 'Das Ideal des Kaputten'[19] recounts in a picaresque manner a Neapolitan fixing the damaged motor on his boat with a stick picked up off the street, and then using that same motor to prepare coffee. This Neapolitan refuses to send the motor in for repair; he will leave that makeshift stick there, until the motor needs fixing again, at which point, he will find another provisional solution. This makeshift improvision is absolutely crucial. Things that are 'intact', that function of their own accord without a need for intervention, are to the Neapolitan uncanny (*unheimlich*) and suspect; they seem to have mysteriously acquired a life of their own.[20] It is precisely when things go kaput and need to be cobbled back together that the Neapolitan feels himself 'sovereign' and in excess of all technology. (Sohn-Rethel's Neapolitan is a slight caricature. Nonetheless, this Neapolitan is also each of us, when we come face to face for the first time with a technological device that we do not understand.)

Sohn-Rethel's essay describes the process whereby a thing becomes part of a more-than-human assemblage at precisely the moment when it breaks down, when it turns, in terms of its original efficacy, 'useless'. Thenceforth its functioning has to be recovered by means that seem to involve, yet at the same time, sidestep technical mastery. Here uselessness becomes the spark that calls forth human ingenuity; here is an entirely new human(-stick-coffee)-motor assemblage. The Neapolitan's unwillingness to have the broken thing repaired ensures he remains a constant factor within the assemblage, in comparison to which the uncanny automaticity of the motor or

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technical device becomes infused with an ephemeral and transitory tone. It is not so much that automatism is compromised (by non-expert repair), but rather that an inherent contradiction is set up between the motor and the stick that is both a guarantee of the motor's functioning and a sign of its non-functioning, uselessness barely just held in abeyance.

Useless things have a different potency in David T. Doris' analysis of ààlè, objects created by the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria to guard against thieves. Ordinary things are turned into ààlè by incantations, instructions, gestures. They become things that have the power to punish transgressors on one's property.[21] Ààlè can be composed out of myriad materials—corncobs, peppers, broken plates, old shoes, rags, palm fronds, snail shells, and so forth; they can be a combination of any of these. The one rule is that the thing must be useless; ààlè are created from 'useless objects—broken, worn-out, ragged, inert' (Doris, 2011: 247). 'In ààlè, uselessness is transvalued'(Doris, 2011: 248): ààlè operate by 'analogizing the brokenness and uselessness of objects with the repercussions for the transgressive acts of persons'(Doris, 2011: 247), and their very brokenness and uselessness as a former category of things is the point. They not only rouse 'fear and suspicion' through their uncanniness, they also trigger the punishment of the transgressor (Doris, 2011: 258).[22]

Yoruba ààlè and Sohn-Rethel's broken things become efficacious only after they become useless in terms of their original function. It is only as useless things that they can be transposed onto another system of valuation, and express another potentiality and power. (One could also say their uselessness itself enters into another world of use.) It is precisely as useless things that they become what Doris (*pace* Robert Plant Armstrong) calls 'affecting presences' (Doris, 2011: 56).[23] While Doris and Armstrong take such affecting presences to mean that the thing 'is treated as if it were a person, and is bound to networks of power and economies of exchange'(*ibid.*), we can reroute the term through Bennett's iteration of a Spinozist materialism and call an 'affecting presence' simply that which affects some other thing, some other person.

Unlike mass-produced objects, which lose their singularity at the moment they become useless, (before their turn into "trashiness", which is another category altogether,) ààlè and Neapolitan broken things become singular affecting presences when they become useless, and this singularity stems from their submersion within a nonreplicable contingent assemblages of found things. In this way they also have a specific and non-replaceable relation with the human elements of the assemblage. Thus they elude the sort of discipline that enforces a reproducible norm (Foucault, 1975).

5. Across Cosmologies

In the spirit of *Zhuangzi*, the paper will end with a few, somewhat inconclusive, fragmentary remarks. The most substantial work, really, lies in the close encounter with *Zhuangzi*'s text.

One possible way of translating across Descola's ontologies is to compare how the opposition of utility and uselessness works within each ontology, along the lines of binary pairs such as purity and pollution (Douglas) or the raw and the cooked (Lèvi-Strauss). However, as we have seen from the examples above, the category of uselessness does not form a simple binary pair with use or usefulness. In the *Zhuangzi* 'use' perhaps has only a single modality, but there are multiple modalities of uselessness. Uselessness is not absolute, it is capable of lateral affiliations (the ààlè derive function and potency from the uselessness of its elements), may be pulled into hierarchical formations (the Neapolitan man-machine), or may exist alongside usefulness in a polyvalent tension within a thing (the obsolete but still functioning commodity).

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Perhaps, rather than multiple ontologies, each with its stable of 'beings', we could switch the terms, and instead, use the idea of 'cosmologies', which speak of enfolding relations—that is, a focus on relations rather than beings. It gives us the possibility of cosmic folds, of cosmologies folding into each other along certain edges.[24]

Across cosmologies, then, one may compare the trope of uselessness. However, this also means that a conclusive statement on uselessness *as such* may not be possible.

So let us return, specifically, to the story of *Zhuangzi*'s useless tree. To begin from the perspective of social scientific idiom is to confine the useless tree: first, by genre, whether as folklore, fiction, poetry, and so forth, then, as irreality of dream. The useless tree speaks to the carpenter in a dream. But trees do not talk. Dreams are not real. What the useless tree says is at a double remove from the flatlands of reality in contemporary naturalism. Yet prophetic or visionary modes persist, even in communities where presumably a 'naturalist' cosmology holds sway; one only has to note the popularity of horoscopes, astrology, dream dictionaries, and other forms of what is often dismissed as superstition. The very persistence of these should signal to us that there is something significant about dreaming that has escaped those scholarly disciplines that have only managed to incorporate dream visions as exotic, cultural curiosities or as psychiatric-medico-biological epiphenomena. Likewise there is a resistance against relations to nonhuman things that are not utilitarian or aesthetic, Marx's notion of commodity fetishism being a prime example.

The embrace of plural genres, of plural modalities of the perceptible and sensible (which include dream visions and trees talking), is congruent with a guiding thread of *Zhuangzi*'s cosmology. This is the idea of 'letting be', which is explained by the term *zìrán* (自然), often translated as 'naturalness', or 'self-so'. Modern derivations from the Latin *Natura* bear a history of oppositions—nature against artifice, nature as the fallen and profane, as opposed to the transcendent, divine, heavenly—that do not apply to the 'naturalness' of *zìrán* (自然). As one of *Zhuangzi*'s classical commentators, Guo Xiang, noted, 'Everything is natural [*zìrán* (自然)] and does not know why it is so. The more things differ in corporeal form, the more alike they are in being natural. […] Heaven and Earth and all things change and transform into something new everyday […] What causes them? they do so spontaneously, that is all'(Guo, 1999: 387). It is the rhythms of existing, of death and life, waxing and waning, growth and decay. In these rhythms too are dream and waking, logic and poetry. Hence, *zìrán* may be said to be 'the way of things', and each thing has its own modality of naturalness, or *zìrán*. In *Zhuangzi*, the tree's uselessness is what is 'natural' to itself, or *zìrán*. This is opposed to the forms of utility at first envisaged by the carpenter, which are not only externally imposed, but also, utterly opposed to tree's 'way of being'. (There is a certain similarity between *zìrán* and Spinoza's conception of *conatus*, which is translated as 'striving'. Both refer to the nature of things, or the way things are—which is not characterized by homeostasis or equilibrium, but by dynamism and transformation.) The tree's uselessness not only does not conform to the carpenter's plans and measures of utility, it is also something the tree itself has had to strive for ('I've been trying for a long time to be of no use'.)

Uselessness, I think, is a concrete expression of 'letting-be'. It is particularly apt since it does not resort to essentialism, and constantly refers the useless thing to a protean, external world; uselessness at the same time destabilizes the thing's relation to this world.

Letting-be must not be confused with doing nothing. On the contrary, 'letting-be' involves a sensitization to things and expressions we may not even have begun to dream of. In expressing it

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tree-ness, the useless tree multiples the modes of affectivity. For the carpenter, the tree *listens*. This is why he shushes his apprentice, telling the latter not to 'carp and criticize'. The dream of the useless tree has reshaped the sensibilities of the carpenter, and made him more sensitive to modes of affectivity he had failed to notice before. From the initial relation of user-object, the carpenter has entered into a new relation with the tree, one centered around the latter's revelatory uselessness. We may say a new affect—the affect of 'tree'—has entered into the carpenter's *Umwelt*—and hence changing him into a different sort of creature altogether.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that 'no one has yet determined what the body can do'(*Ethics* Part Three, Proposition 2, Scholium; G/II/142). What is said of the human body applies equally to arboreal bodies.[25] We do not yet know what the vegetal or arboreal body can do, we do not adequately understand all the ways in which these bodies and our own human bodies are capable of affecting and being affected by one another. The carpenter had exhausted his own utilitarian mode of arboreal knowledge. The tree's longevity is not just about survival. It is first and foremost an incredible capacity for being-affected (by light, air, soil, rain). The story gives an account of the *affectivity* of the tree. It is shade, it is a shrine, it is useless. At the intersection of many worlds of affectivity, it touches, enfolds, and contains many *Umwelten* (Uexküll, 1957; Merleau-Ponty, 2003). The single tree is therefore already a heterogeneity of worlds. This is why the tree has an intense 'affecting presence': it attracts scores of sightseers, and is next to a shrine.[26]

Affectability here is beneficial, the sign of flourishing that comes from letting be. However, the ordering of human affectability by nonhuman things varies greatly across cosmologies. In the famous Quiché Mayan creation myth, for instance, the entire race of first prototypes of humans—made of wood and rushes—is crushed 'by their maize grinders and their cooking griddles, their plates and their pots, their dogs and their grinding stones'(Christenson, 2003: 75), because they could not understand 'their Framer and Shaper'—and because they failed to perceive the burning, the pain, the crushing and the soot to which they had subjected their tools. They focused only on use. Theirs was a failure of affectability.

In the political economy of contemporary capitalism, however, such affectability by nonhuman things must be routed through the circuits of profit and production. In a sympathetic analysis, Jane Bennett describes how hoarders amass things others deem 'useless'. Rather than dismiss their hoarding as a pathology, Bennett takes seriously the hoarders' own descriptions of their relations to their hoard. Rather than possessors, the humans are the possessed. Bennett argues that hoarders, like artists, 'hear more the call of things' (2012: 247); they 'notice too much about their things, are struck too hard by them' (2012: 245); they are, in other words, more sensitive to the affectability of things, more capable of being affected by nonhuman things. But for hoarders—or rather, those who want to help them—such affectability assumes the form of a problematic. The hoarder is unable to regulate the flows demanded by capitalism. The hoarder consumes, and lets himself or herself be consumed by things, and this more-than-human *horde* trips the circuit, blocks the circulation of things, from their production to obsolescence and disposal.

While the culture of consumption-accumulation that Bennett pinpoints as a part of the pathology of the hoarder and his or her hoard (Bennett, 2012: 250) is specific to contemporary capitalism, consumption takes place in different ways within different social formations (sumptuary laws have a long history across different economies and cosmologies). The useless tree disrupts patterns of consumption: it contrasts itself to the cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citron, and other fruit-bearing plants.

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The tree's uselessness also disrupts the propulsions of mundane utility, the incessant drive to turn things into other things. This is amplified by its mode of expression: it reveals itself to the carpenter in a dream, the traditional conveyor of the prophetic, the shamanic, the visionary.

Uselessness disrupts practices of consumption and utility, and thus, lets the tree be. It is telling that in each case—the tearing of fruit from the boughs and the damage done, the breaking up of the tree into parts for timber—, what the humans use and grasp are parts, and in grasping for these parts, they destroy the whole.

The useless tree thus turns Immanuel Kant on his head.[27] It is not that we should treat the human—*and* the nonhuman, as the new materialists might add—as an end in itself, and not the means to an end. The tree is neither end nor a means. In Karl Marx's characterization of the *lumpenproletariat*, humans are made superfluous, useless for production.[28] In the story of the useless tree, it seems the real problem is not that humans are made useless, but rather, that we do not know how to make space for useless things (and useless humans).

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[1] The orientation toward political implications means I will omit work that deals with pure ontology within the European and Anglo-American traditions (of naturalism), such as speculative realism and object-oriented ontology.

[2] This specific strand of political ecology argues that the appeal to human flourishing as the primary justification of sustainable conservation practices still subordinates nonhumans to human ends, and continues to perpetuate the problem (Biersack, 2006).

[3] The German *Gegenstand* ("object") vividly describes how objects are something that stand "against" (*gegen*) or confront us (Heidegger). This is the same sense in which Hannah Arendt speaks in *The Human Condition* of the objective world of things that we erect before us as the guarantor of our fleeting human one.

[4] I place Bennett 'within' the naturalist camp only because she works with 'Western' texts, and we have thus far not made this distinction.

[5] On another mode of kindred sympathy with plants, see Bennett, 2013.

[6] On the relation between ritual and texts see Saso, 1972; Schipper, 1993; Debernardi, 2006.

[7] Watson translation. Graham translates the final line as: "what that tree is protecting has nothing to do with the vulgar, and if we praise it for doing a duty won't we be missing the point?" Legge renders it: "Moreover, the reason of its being preserved is different from that of the preservation of things generally; is not your explaining it from the sentiment which you have expressed wide of the mark?"

[8] Burton, Legge, and Watson translations.

[9] Twice in Chapter 1, 'Free and Easy Wandering,' (逍遙遊), once in Chapter 2, 'Discussion on Making Things Equal,' often just left as the transliterated 'Qiwulun' (齊物論), 人間世 is the fourth chapter.

[10] In the Outer Chapters the trees are mentioned as a part of a wider landscape within which a human figure acts (or not), or function as analogies and metaphors for human action, or for describing certain deformities of human bodies, for instance, by comparing them to rotting tree stumps. A longer study needs to compare and contrast the different accounts, as well as the various elements (images, metaphors, phrases) in the story that connect up to others in *Zhuangzi*. That can be done only in the most cursory way here.

[11] On the not unrelated idea of 'naturalness' (自然) in Chinese cosmology see Harbsmeier, 2010 and Henderson, 2010.

[12] Though arguably, 'logic' is present in a certain form in *Zhuangzi* (Graham, 1989; Nivison, 1999; Harbsmeier, 1998; Møllgaard, 2005).

[13] On the meaning of 'living out the years allotted by Heaven' and the general idea of fate in Chinese culture see Raphals, 2003.

[14] On the appropriateness of transposing these terms, see Berkson, 2005.

[15] This does not mean everything is a hazy mist; after all, even ambiguity for instance can be parsed (Empson, 1930, 1966)

[16] Möller's interpretation is consistent with what *Zhuangzi* says elsewhere: 'When we dream we do not know that we are dreaming, and in the middle of a dream interpret a dream within it; not until we wake do we know that we were dreaming. Only at the ultimate awakening shall we know that this is the ultimate dream. (...) You and Confucius are both dreams, and I who call you a dream am also a dream' (Graham 60). Death is the "great awakening"—a contrapuntal reversal of words uttered half a world away at a different time: "To die: to sleep;/ No more; …"

[17] On the production of commodities see Appadurai, 1986 (a Marxist reading, Arvatov and Kiaer, 1997). In the context of Anders' argument, it is the human effects of these disposable relations that matter. When regard things not just as substitutable, but rather, as necessarily always-already superseded by the next, as 'supersessible' – when the world of things becomes disposable, this relation seeps into human relations as well, until we come to regard ourselves as disposable humanity (Anders, 1980: 42; see also Introna 2014). That we feel the mortality of these things is clear—at certain times, in a certain light, a dump site for discarded electronic equipment seems to be filled with a peculiar life, an elegiac melancholy.

[18] It is not enough to say that the tree differs from these other things, waiting in line to die, because it has been allotted a 'natural' span of life; not only is this unsatisfactory as an explanation, it is also theoretically infeasible since the nature/artifice distinction has been shown by the new materialists to be an unstable and untenable divide.

[19] This was translated into English but the English text has proved impossible to get hold of. The references here are to the original German.

[20] The original reads: 'Das Intakte dagegen, daß sozusagen von selber geht, ist ihm im Grunde unheimlich und suspekt, denn gerade weil es von selber geht, kann man letztlich nie wissen wie und wohin es gehen wird'. I have approximately translated the first half of the sentence, but omitted the final two clauses, since the pun on '*selber geht/gehen*' gets lost in translation.

[21] According to Doris, the use and then discard of the thing introduces the thing to a relation of *subjection*: the thing "made subject" to human intentions; the subsequent (re)use of the thing as *ààlé* constitutes 'a combinatory relationship of intention between the ààlè and its creator'. I focus more on the thingly side of the matter.

[22] Doris is quite clear that the effects of the ààlè are not only psychological (in the triggering of fear, guilt), but also symbolic and *material*—or rather, he makes it clear that these distinctions are not the right ones to use within this particular facet of Yoruba cosmology.

[23] Armstrong, 1971 and 1981.

[24] The term cosmology is standard in anthropological texts; however I have to confess the specific idea I allude to here comes from Walter Benjamin's work on mimesis and the mimetic faculty. On families of the fold see Deleuze, 1993.

[25] To speak in a naturalistic register: new work done on plant perception shows plants emit a chemical signal when under attack, for instance from insects, and that other plants in the vicinity respond to these signals. There are compounds derivable from plants that can be medicinal, or recreational. See, for instance, Daniel Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013). For an accessible introduction that contains links to references see Robert Krulwich, "Plants Talk. Plants Listen. Here's How." NPR, April 29, 2014. Retrieved

from http://www.npr.org/blogs/krulwich/2014/04/29/307981803/plants-talk-plants-listen-here-s-how

[26] It is significant that we do not know whether the shrine was built at the site of the tree, or if the tree grew or was planted next to the shrine. It suggests a simultaneous co-presencing, so that no question of precedence—whether the extraordinariness of the tree caused people to build a shrine there, or if the tree grew extraordinary because it absorbed the affecting presences of the shrine and its visitors—is possible.

[27] Recall Kant's dictum, 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made'. (From 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective' [1784].) This crooked timber, however, is nonetheless to be treated as an end in itself, and not a means. The tree supersedes this means(use)-end dichotomy; or, this dichotomy is in fact itself not very useful as an ethico-political injunction if we proceed along the lines just laid out by *Zhuangzi*.

[28] Not only does the capitalist mode of production render laborers useless by turning them into *Lumpenproletariat*, the lumpenproletariat itself, according to Marx, is useless even for revolution, because it lacks the requisite resources necessary for staging one.

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