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Freedom Within Convention: A Cooperative Analysis of the Zhuangzi and A Thousand Plateaus

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The Zhuangzi, a foundational text in Classical Chinese philosophy, presents a notion of ideal humanity that involves a seemingly paradoxical relationship between a liberated existence and the barriers that restrict it. To achieve ideal humanity, one must confront the boundaries and attachments that have coalesced into a web of socio-physical conventions and developed dominion over human thought and action. This paper aims at shedding some light on this tension by offering a comparative analysis of the Zhuangzi and A Thousand Plateaus by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in terms of their conceptions of ideal humanity. While an abundance of time and different philosophical traditions separate these two texts, they share a relational ontology and similar concerns regarding the meaning and praxis of human freedom. These similarities allow for a cooperative understanding of ideal humanity in both texts without ideologically reducing them nor losing sight of the distinct and unique essence of each work. While the Zhuangzi provides a comprehensive reflection on the variability of constraints and conventions that delimit human freedom, A Thousand Plateaus illuminates the nature of this freedom using particular embodiments of the ideal person. Throughout the comparative analysis of both works, I will offer a framework for grasping the paradox of detached existence within a world of lively entanglements.

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The *Zhuangzi*, a foundational text in Classical Chinese philosophy, presents a notion of ideal humanity that involves a seemingly paradoxical relationship between a liberated existence and the barriers that restrict it. To achieve ideal humanity, one must confront the boundaries and attachments that have coalesced into a web of socio-physical conventions and developed dominion over human thought and action. This paper aims at shedding some light on this tension by offering a comparative analysis of the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in terms of their conceptions of ideal humanity. While an abundance of time and different philosophical traditions separate these two texts, they share a relational ontology and similar concerns regarding the meaning and praxis of human freedom. These similarities allow for a cooperative understanding of ideal humanity in both texts without ideologically reducing them nor losing sight of the distinct and unique essence of each work. While the *Zhuangzi* provides a comprehensive reflection on the variability of constraints and conventions that delimit human freedom, *A Thousand Plateaus* illuminates the nature of this freedom using particular embodiments of the ideal person. Throughout the comparative analysis of both works, I will offer a framework for grasping the paradox of detached existence within a world of lively entanglements.

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Introduction

The notion of a free existence often carries with it the implication that our thoughts and actions originate as a product of our own being; to be free is to have the power to direct our lives in accord with our personal judgments. But if we take a moment to interrogate this fundamental requirement of freedom, we quickly recognize that our lives are also guided by societal conventions that determine our conceptions of right and wrong, normal and abnormal. In this essay, I hope to explore the tension between freedom and convention in an attempt to answer this question: how are we to actualize a free existence in a world of entanglements? Using the *Zhuangzi*, a Classical Chinese text emblematic of Daoist thought, and *A Thousand Plateaus*, the collaborative work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I will investigate the function of convention and the nature of freedom in order to outline a style of living that I call ideal humanity, or an emancipatory state of being that allows for a detachment from unhealthy conventions and restrictions. To achieve ideal humanity is to confront the boundaries and barriers that make it an aspirational goal. In other words, life is inherently restricted by a web of conventions and perceptions that have developed dominion over human thought and action, but ideal humanity is a praxis that helps us to liberate ourselves from these constraints.

Although separated by an abundance of time and a multitude of philosophical traditions, the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* share notable similarities between their approaches towards achieving ideal humanity. Because both works employ a relational ontology that posits the primacy of relationships, it is possible to find common ground between the texts that can be used to offer key insights with regard to their conclusions. However, the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and of Zhuangzi should not be reduced to a singular objective. The texts are representative of numerous epistemological and ontological aims, which is why it is necessary to

acknowledge ideal humanity as one of many possible interpretive manifestations of their teachings. Nor is it advantageous to consider the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* as interchangeable texts that can be used to effortlessly elucidate one another, as this would be an erasure of their valuable differences. What, then, is the goal of a comparative analysis of the works?

In order to avoid presenting the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* as equivalent texts written a few thousand years apart, this paper will use their differences in association with their similarities to express ideal humanity. Pursuant to such an aim, the nature of conventions within the two texts will be examined separately. After a more detailed understanding of each text is achieved, they can be put into conversation with one another to reach a cooperative conception of ideal humanity as an entangled yet unrestricted existence.

Methodological Considerations

Before delving into a targeted analysis of the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, I want to raise a few methodological concerns regarding comparative philosophy and specify how I will work with two texts from distinct philosophical traditions. As I mentioned in the introduction, there are certain risks associated with comparative philosophy. To be confident in the methodological construction of this work, I will provide a definition of comparative philosophy, an overview of the potential vulnerabilities of comparative work, a guiding methodological approach for this work, and a precise account of the style of both texts.

Simply put, comparative philosophy is an "attempt to move across the boundaries of otherwise distinct philosophical traditions—especially insofar as these traditions are divided by significant historical and cultural distance—thus enabling a comparison of what lies on either side of the boundary" (Smid 2). Although seemingly straightforward, the act of moving across philosophical traditions can be a complex and, at times, diminutive practice that simplifies the premises of one or more texts. Without an examination of the mode of comparison, we might compromise the legitimacy of our texts and of their conclusions, which is why philosopher Robert Smid asserts that any comparative work ought to first scrutinize its approach to comparison (Smid 3). With this advice in mind, I will discuss the risks of comparative work as presented by Tim Connolly in *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* before outlining a methodological approach that avoids such pitfalls.

In his book, Tim Connolly reveals multiple potential problems with comparative philosophy, but he does not believe that it is entirely ineffective or unproductive. Rather, he thinks that comparison is vital to understanding other cultures and people but that without a careful and conscientious method of comparison, philosophers might succumb to linguistic

incommensurability, foundational and evaluative incommensurability, one-sidedness, and generalization. I find the issue of linguistic incommensurability particularly relevant for my purposes because I am working with two texts that were originally written in Classical Chinese and French. According to Connolly, linguistic incommensurability arises when certain philosophical traditions rely on languages that cannot be easily translated and understood by a non-native speaker (Connolly 72). He notes that philosophers engaging in comparative work might have a tendency to contextualize key terms and phrases from a text based on their own experience and personal history in a way that is familiar or palatable. Unfortunately, an attempt to create a point of reference for certain terms and phrases can result in an erasure of their meaning and function within the original text (Connolly 79). Some philosophers argue that such terms may never be fully translatable while others claim that a relative understanding can be reached despite language barriers. As a result of his critical evaluation of this debate, Connolly concludes that, "The idea of untranslatability can free us from thinking that we understand a term from another cultural tradition just because we think we understand its English translation… While we might never fully understand how culturally distant traditions use a particular term, we can at least learn to listen more carefully to what these traditions have to say" (Connolly 84). Moving forward, we will encounter terms from the *Zhuangzi* that were used in a specific historical and social context. In line with Connolly's prescription, a general outline of the terms will be provided based off the specialized analysis of secondary scholarship, but we will also maintain a recognition of the uncertainty of translation, forcing us to grasp the textual context of a term.

Similar to the linguistic problem of comparative philosophy, foundational and evaluative incommensurability exists when the worldview of a philosophical tradition is entirely distinct

from another. When this is the case, it is impossible to designate one tradition as superior (Connolly 72). In other words, if the philosophical history and foundation of two texts is different, then no common evaluative framework can be chosen to judge both. However, I will make no attempt to establish either the *Zhuangzi* or *A Thousand Plateaus* as superior. As a matter of fact, recognizing and appreciating the foundational differences of both texts is a fundamental goal of my work and is necessary to achieve a reciprocal understanding of the similarities and points of divergence between the two. As I will demonstrate later, the comprehension of both texts and of ideal humanity would only be muddied by any attempt to reconcile their foundational differences or establish a standard with which to judge both.

Even though I do not intend to make judgements regarding the superiority of either text, it is still important to note the possibility of engaging in one-sidedness. Connolly describes one-sidedness as the act of projecting the assumptions and concerns of one philosophical tradition onto another (Connolly 106). For example, comparative philosophers might suppose that other texts and traditions ought to conform to and participate in philosophical discourse according to Western standards.[1] To avoid one-sidedness in comparative philosophy, Connolly states that, "It must offer some initial basis for recognizing enough similarity between ourselves and others to get the comparison off the ground, yet at the same time give us some means for clarifying and engaging with what is unfamiliar. Properly done, comparison should take us from one place to another, building a bridge or fusing horizons" (Connolly 122). By engaging the subjects of this comparison according to their own assumptions and providing the space for an explanation of

[1] The one-sidedness of Western traditions has a deep and profoundly complex history within philosophy. While the specifics of such a history cannot be adequately explained here, any comparative work must recognize the historical process of the minimization and absorption of non-Western philosophies. On Western dominance in philosophy see, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "There Is No Such Thing as Western Civilisation." *The Guardian*, 9 Nov. 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture.

each text separately, this work will try to prevent one-sidedness and generalization. That is to say, I will develop the complexities of each text so that we can be sure the similarities we draw between the two are rooted in a strong comprehension of either philosophy.

I will give the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* their own chapters to create the opportunity for a detailed understanding of each text before we discuss the works in tandem with one another. The aim of this structure is to embody a pluralist approach to comparative philosophy. A pluralist methodology for comparison does not require a reconciliation of the two traditions because differences between their conceptions of ideal humanity are not perceived to constitute a reduction in the value of their comparison. "The goal of comparative philosophy, in the pluralist view, is to understand and preserve the different cultural moralities, and enable communication between all" (Connolly 175). In working with two distinct texts, I will maintain the particularities and differences of each. A complete consensus between the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* need not be reached in order to develop connections between the philosophies and use the works to aid in a rich understanding of the many aspects of ideal humanity that can be applicable to our own lives. In addition to the pluralist perspective that justifies a comparative work, both texts demonstrate a type of radical openness that invites comparison.

The *Zhuangzi* is a non-expository philosophical text that often conveys its meaning through fictional stories and metaphors (Chung 217). While this style certainly differentiates the *Zhuangzi* from other philosophical texts in the West, philosopher Julianne Chung is clear in stating that the stories serve a purpose and craft a philosophy (Chung 228). What is notable about the *Zhuangzi* is that it does not necessarily aim to create a singular argument – as an analytical philosophy text would – but instead, it functions to illustrate perspectives about the world that

are variable in their application (Chung 232). The openness of its interpretive power and application allows the *Zhuangzi* to guide our comparative philosophy more broadly. "Its interweaving of stylistic form with philosophical content and its powerful suggestion that what drives us to do philosophy is rooted in background interpretive assumptions that stand either to be merely reinforced or to be productively challenged and expanded depending on the scope and complexity of our philosophical perspective" (Chung 219). Through the use of varied characters and stories, the *Zhuangzi* presents multiple viewpoints to show us that the truth is perspectival. What is true for one character might not be applicable for another in the text, motivating us to read the lessons and adapt them to specific contexts. We can try to embody this style if we approach a single topic like ideal humanity from different perspectives and texts from distinct time periods and cultural traditions. So not only is the *Zhuangzi* marked by openness within its pages, but its philosophy can be implemented on a meta-scale to support a comparative work between it and other texts. Similarly, *A Thousand Plateaus* is a remarkably open work of philosophy.

When writing *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wanted to separate their work from other philosophies. Specifically, they wanted to be certain not to recreate the hierarchies inherent to other philosophical traditions in the West (Adkins 23). They begin *A Thousand Plateaus* with an explanation of a rhizome. Unlike the common analogy we might encounter that visually represents philosophy as a tree that grows upwards and fosters different branches of thought, Deleuze and Guattari use the analogy of the rhizome.

> The tree is a marvel of stable, hierarchical organization. Lines of descent are always clear, as is the process of differentiation. Logic uses trees. Biological species are organized according to trees. Linguistics is quite fond of trees. Trees reveal the deep structure that lies behind the messiness of reality… What is the opposite of a tree? For Deleuze and Guattari the opposite of a tree is a rhizome. We encounter rhizomes all the time. Potatoes are rhizomes. Grass is a rhizome. Colonies of aspen trees are rhizomes.

> Rhizomes do not propagate by way of clearly delineated hierarchies but by underground sterns in which any part may send additional shoots upward, downward, or laterally. There is no hierarchy… The key to the rhizome, and the reason Deleuze and Guattari take it up as a way of thinking about not only books but things in general, is that the rhizome continually creates the new. It is not predictable. It does not follow a linear pattern of growth and reproduction. Its connections are lateral not hierarchical. What this means for *A Thousand Plateaus* is that "each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau" (TP 22). Not only do Deleuze and Guattari want to create new concepts in this book, they want to enable readers to create their own new concepts by making new connections. (Adkins 23)

As is demonstrated by the quote above, *A Thousand Plateaus* stands open to connections within itself and with other philosophies and cultures. The wonderful aspect of working with these two texts is that they both lend themselves to new ideas, new conceptions, new relations, and more. Even though there are risks and problems embedded in comparative methodologies, the nature of both works challenge, invite, and beckon individuals towards comparison. Thus, we can conclude that a comparative work between the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* is not only tenable but is also enlivened by the texts.

Now that we understand the nature of both works, you might notice that a potential contradiction is already at work between their approach to truth and my goal in this essay. I have made clear that I intend to outline a type of ideal humanity that allows us to form healthy relationships with convention, but words like "ideal" and "healthy" carry normative connotations. If – as I have said – the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* are averse to universal claims of truths, then it appears that the axiological terms I use in this essay are meaningless. Moreover, it appears that any attempt to draw lessons about what we *ought to do* from these texts is in direct opposition to the core tenets of their philosophies. It seems as though we should stop this essay here, but I have no intention of doing so because I believe the following pages will offer us two solutions to this contradiction. First, while I will show that the texts support the notion that there are no transcendental truths independent of perspective, I will also demonstrate

that there are certain conditions that apply to the human perspective. Rather than try to construct invariable truths that can be understood as governing principles of our universe, I will try to illustrate how a focus on the human perspective can show that all of us encounter convention in our lives and that some of those conventions can be harmful. It is the responsibility of each individual to decide how they might want to transform their relation to convention (if at all), and the goal of my work is simply to emphasize how we might begin such a process. I use terms like "healthy" and "ideal" because I want to assume that we would engage in the transformation of convention in order to feel more free and comfortable, not in order to produce the destruction of our relationships with others or of ourselves. Second, I believe this essay will show us that the paths towards ideal humanity that exist in the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* may not be universally valid but that they offer us a strong possibility for a life of happiness, freedom, balance, and peace. This happiness might be perspectival, but the possibility of its realization is worth pursuing. Put simply, when you read the axiological terms and judgments in this essay, it is my hope that you will understand them as invitations for change, not as demands that must be met for freedom's sake. Having established a comparative methodology, the real work of examining ideal humanity and social conventions within the texts can commence.

Chapter One: The Mitigation of Conventions in the *Zhuangzi*

The struggle between freedom and convention is a central theme in the *Zhuangzi*, and a close reading of the text offers us a nuanced conception of this oppositional relationship. It is true that many of the conventions that shape our thoughts and behavior are formed at the societal level and cannot be changed by any one individual. For instance, I alone am unlikely to alter the cultural significance and power of money in my country, but stories in the *Zhuangzi* indicate that our relationship to many of the conventions we consider to be outside our sphere of influence can be modified through purposeful action. We need not shift the importance of money for others in order to live our lives free from a totalizing pursuit of wealth. The problem, however, is that we must be careful not to lose sight of the benefits of agreed upon norms if we attempt to redefine our relationship with societal conventions. That is to say, individual desires should not unilaterally supersede social standards. To reveal this tension more adequately, we can look to the text to define convention and understand when and how it should be transformed through ideal humanity on an individual level.

Before considering how the freedom associated with ideal humanity can be achieved, it is helpful to first define conventions, outline their positive functions, and look to specific examples in the text to illuminate and critique their negative aspects. In this essay, we can consider conventions to be beliefs or norms that dictate the acceptability and quality of certain thoughts, behaviors, or actions, and we can split them into two categories: behavioral and cognitive.[2] At the societal level, behavioral conventions might appear as judgements about how to act, about what kind of language is appropriate, or about how to conduct yourself in a professional setting,

[2] It is worth taking a quick moment to note that the two types of conventional restrictions outlined in this paper are not necessarily distinct phenomena. In other words, it is helpful to delineate between conventions in order organize their impacts, but that does not mean that more restrictions do not exist or that the two offered here cannot operate together.

whereas cognitive conventions dictate how we think about ourselves, about gender roles, about sexual expression, and more. At the individual level, these conventions might determine what television shows we like, how we dress, or who we are friends with. In general, conventions are interpretative frameworks that become engrained in us as a part of our individuality, and we should acknowledge that they can be beneficial. For example, standards that motivate us to avoid violence, to treat people with kindness, or to listen to others are all productive conventions that allow for personal flourishing amidst social situations, but conventions can also be harmful.

To comprehend the true complexity of ideal humanity, it is imperative to expose how behavioral and cognitive conventions can be detrimentally restrictive through stories in the *Zhuangzi*. Beginning with behavioral conventions, one of the most glaring examples of inflexible behavioral norms can be found in the discussion of funeral practices within the *Zhuangzi*. "When Lao Dan died, Qin Yi went to mourn for him, but after wailing thrice he immediately departed. His disciple asked, 'Weren't you a friend of the Master's?' 'Yes,' he said. 'Then is this the proper way for you to mourn him?'" (*Zhuangzi* 23). There is an expectation that Qin Yi would stay and weep continuously for Lao Dan and that he would offer condolences to the friends and family of the deceased. However, Qin Yi abandons the pervasive funeral norms because he realizes their adverse impacts.

To mourn and to weep for Lao Dan would be to merely accommodate the performative conventions expected of individuals at a funeral, but the expectation of sadness simply degrades the celebration of the transformation of life and death. For Zhuangzi, death is simply a part of life, so a life well lived is also a good death. If this is the case, then we can break free from the habit of mourning death out of sadness. Qin Yi recognizes that Lao Dan lived as long as he was fated and that he left when he was called, "resting content in the time and finding his place in the

flow, joy and sorrow had no way to seep in" (Zhuangzi 24). In this case, behavioral conventions would have prevented Qin Yi from acknowledging the way in which Lao Dan freely traveled along the course of things, and he would have been unable to access his own contentment within the situation as a result. Unfortunately, social conventions also limit freedom of thought and determine axiological judgements.

In the *Zhuangzi*, cognitive conventions are exemplified through examples of bodily impairments. When the *Zhuangzi* was written, people who had committed crimes were often punished using bodily harm or amputation, and in the text, we see that physical impairments denote deviance. That is to say, preconceptions about characters who have lost limbs act to delimit what is considered to be possible for those people, embodying a cognitive or epistemic boundary based on prejudices that are socially learned. Just as behavioral conventions are prohibitive for individuals who are unable to transcend them, predispositions with regard to physicality can have the same, avoidable effect. "There was an ex-con in Lu, named Toeless Shushan, whose feet had been mutilated as a punishment. He heeled his way over to see Confucius, who said to him, 'You were careless in your past behavior and thus have ended up in this condition. Isn't it a little late to come to me now?'" (*Zhuangzi* 35). Confucius confronts Toeless Shushan with a strong bias regarding the implication of a physical disability. In this case, Shushan's impairment moves beyond a bodily characteristic and is seen as a mark of virtuosity, or the lack thereof. The physical and the immaterial converge to form a nexus of presumption – or a point of reference – from which Shushan is judged. His damaged body implies a tainted mind, and it is concluded by people like Confucius that Shushan is incapable of acting in a virtuous manner.

Analyzing the role of deviant bodies in the *Zhuangzi*, Albert Galvany offers us further insight into how characters like Shushan demonstrate the dominant and destructive nature of cognitive convention. For Galvany, deviant bodies are social constructions that separate the "monster" from the "normal" (Galvany 2). In other words, there is nothing inevitable or fundamental about deviant bodies such as Shushan. Confucius might regard Shushan as a criminal who is inferior because his amputation indicates a normative deviation, but that conception is solely attributable to the broader social conventions which associate deviant bodies with impure souls. The way in which we perceive Shushan and other "monsters" has nothing to do with the realities of their character or convictions. Instead, cognitive convention has generated an a priori characterization of Shushan that we can accept without any personal experience interacting with him. The importance of this perspective cannot be understated because it shows that social convention aids in the production of knowledge. If we were to live within the same cultural context, we would already have preconceptions about the personality and morality of deformed bodies without ever having met an amputee. We would not be free to choose what we think about someone like Shushan nor would we be able to form a primary opinion. It may be the case that after meeting Shushan we could work to deconstruct our assumptions about him, but the initial assembly and construction of knowledge was a process that existed outside of our own agency. It does not take much effort to extend this example to present circumstances. While bodily impairments may not carry the same assumption of criminality today as it does in the *Zhuangzi*, they can certainly regulate what we believe such individuals are capable of achieving. In the case of Shushan, he used his disability to eclipse such established ideals and access a way of life that is more open than those with strong physical health, but before discussing this process

of transformation more thoroughly, I want to expand our understanding of cognitive conventions with an additional example from the text.

In addition to influencing our epistemic values, cognitive conventions can serve to drastically narrow our creativity and perspective. One of the best examples of cognitive restrictions is presented in chapter one when Huizi speaks to Zhuangzi about a supposedly useless gourd and tree. Huizi was given a gourd seed that grew to weigh over a hundred pounds, and because of its size, he found it to lack the conventional uses of a gourd. Instead of thinking beyond the gourd as a ladle or container, Huizi "smashed it to pieces" (*Zhuangzi* 7). Similarly, Huizi found a tree that was so deformed and misshapen that, "Even if it were growing right in the road, a carpenter would not give it so much as a second glance" (*Zhuangzi* 8). Zhuangzi criticizes Huizi for his actions and attempts to explain to his friend that the failure to look beyond preconceptions in order to discover new utility meant the loss of valuable opportunities. The gourd was so large that it could have been used as a raft for floating carefree down a river. The tree was so useless that it would never be cut down and could have served as a place to relax in the shade for a long time. Conventionality had tempered Huizi's creativity.

Having been exposed to the consequences of attachment to convention, we are left to consider how they can be transformed. The *Zhuangzi* provides three methods for becoming a consummate person and moving beyond societal paradigms: a full detachment from convention, a total acceptance of it, and a middle-ground approach.[3] In what could be considered a severe design for breaking from social convention, there are examples of consummate individuals who have completely detached themselves from the world and their desires. "To liberate your body

[3] Many interpretations exist about the nature of the consummate person, but instead of assuming only one to be true, three will be given in order to access a broader field of possible theoretical approaches towards social convention. Additionally, it is important to recognize that that the value of the disparate approaches is a matter of debate in scholarship and can be dependent on personal interpretations of the text.

from always having to be doing something, there is nothing more effective than letting go of the world. When you let go of the world, you are free of entanglements…When life is forgotten, the seminal quintessence of vitality remains undamaged" (*Zhuangzi* 77). Put simply, one interpretation of how to deal with boundaries is to completely leave them behind, to move beyond the restrictive nature of convention. Entanglements exist to limit thought and action, but we will never be truly free so long as we attempt to struggle against such restrictions. Yet it is uncertain whether such an approach is possible. We can imagine ourselves moving to a secluded plot of land in the wilderness and living out our days free of any interaction with societies or people that might want to provide input on our behavior, but even then, we would be directing our lives according to a standard that we believe to be advantageous, to a standard of isolation. Given this ambiguity, we might be inclined to take a total acceptance approach that asserts the possibility of reformulating our conception of conventions so that they are not understood as limitations, thereby allowing ourselves to exist without dependency on social exigencies. However, such an approach does not come without its own risks.

In an article titled "The happy slave isn't free: Relational autonomy and freedom in the *Zhuangzi*", philosopher Mercedes Valmisa scrutinizes the idea that contentment is sufficient for creating freedom. According to Valmisa, modern interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* often conflate mental states with freedom (Valmisa "Happy slave" 3). As evidenced by the total acceptance approach, it is assumed that by letting go of the need to change the world we can also let go of the stresses, worries, and anxieties that accompany existence. In this way we can conclude that a total acceptance of convention will produce a state of contentment that provides us freedom regardless of enduring bodily and societal conventions. Put simply, freedom is an affective act not a performative one (Valmisa "Happy slave" 3). By not desiring the things we unable to do

(not celebrating life and death, not hoping to be considered anything but a monster, not wanting to foster creativity), we might achieve a type of situational freedom that is dependent on the limitations of the context in which it exists (Valmisa "Happy slave" 3). The problem with such an approach to ideal humanity is that, "When we think of freedom as a purely psychological and subjective state, we make room for persons in all sorts of situations of oppression to be considered free and autonomous (the battered wife, the happy slave). This position can potentially threaten social transformation. The psychologizing approach to freedom may be harnessed to serve conservative ideologies" (Valmisa "Happy slave" 5). A total acceptance of restriction may cultivate contentment, but it also shatters any possibility of transformation. We might find peace if we fully accept our conditions regardless of how constraining they are, but that does not mean we will freedom. Although such an interpretation of ideal humanity appears, at first glance, to be quite effective, Valmisa's work makes apparent that it does not necessarily correlate with many of the other teachings in the *Zhaungzi*.

More closely aligned with a deference for convention and more intimately connected to the idea of transformation, the middle ground approach towards ideal humanity asserts that there is nowhere an individual can go to be free from the entanglements of life; escaping connection and dependence is impossible. Therefore, the consummate person acknowledges themselves within those entanglements but frees themselves from the belief in the invariable legitimacy and validity of boundaries by recognizing the flow and impermanence of all things. A perfect way to contextualize this process of variation is through Chapter 20 of the *Zhuangzi*. In this chapter, we see Zhuangzi encounter a tree that is so mangled it cannot be cut down for wood and a goose that is unable to honk. Whereas the tree was left untouched because of its supposed uselessness, the goose was chosen to be killed because of that same quality. "'The tree we saw yesterday could

live out its natural life span because of its worthlessness, while our host's goose was killed for its worthlessness'… 'I would probably take a position somewhere between worthiness and worthlessness. But though that might look right, it turns out not to be – it still leads to entanglements'" (*Zhuangzi* 84). This quote demonstrates that becoming a counter-conventional agent would be just as narrow as tethering ourselves to fixated standards. The problem here is not only with social conventions but with blindly following them and limiting our epistemic and creative capacities. Therefore, the middle-ground approach to ideal humanity recognizes that entanglements may be impossible to fully escape but affirms the fallibility and the inconstancy of those entanglements, permitting us to operate within convention when we are the mangled tree and releasing us to transform convention when we are the voiceless goose. I will examine additional evidence of the inconstancy of conventions within the structural organization of the text itself later, but first, we need to identify the methodology for producing the middle-ground approach.

The method for achieving a transformation of convention is a matter of continuous debate, but some scholars propose spontaneity as the foundational element of such a process. A.C. Graham, one of the most influential *Zhuangzi* scholars, explains that in order to be free from distinguished alternatives and from the habit of delineation we must act as a mirror for reality, allowing our attention to encompass the totality of a situation and losing ourselves in the absorption of the world. "With… the dissolution of rigid categories, the focus of attention roams freely over the endlessly changing panorama, and responses spring directly from the energies inside us. For Chuang-tzu this is an immense liberation, a launching out of the confines of self into a realm without limits" (Graham 8). Actions are taken and decisions are made without forethought or analysis, and spontaneous activity occupies fateful determination in our lives. The

limits of the body and the contingencies of reality are transcended and replaced with a spontaneous relation to the world.

For scholar Brian Bruya, spontaneity has been traditionally conceptualized in Western philosophy as a phenomenon outside of human control, but in the *Zhuangzi*, it represents "self-caused movement" (Bruya 207). The Chinese character *zi* is used throughout the *Zhuangzi* and "carries the meaning not only of 'action from,' and not only of 'action performed by the self,' but also of 'self-caused action'" (Bruya 213). According to Bruya, "spontaneous" is the common translation of the third definition of *zi*, meaning that, in the *Zhuangzi*, spontaneity can be a human state of action. Rather than perceiving causation as being enacted by an autonomous agent, the *Zhuangzi* invites us to consider the complexity of acts of causation by recognizing the multitude of irreducible and unidentifiable phenomena that might result in unpredictable effects. Therefore, "Spontaneous action emerges from situations rather than being an effect of this or that isolated cause or being a volition of this or that isolated agent" (Bruya 217). So, what does this mean for social convention and entanglements? To act spontaneously is not to act randomly without regard for circumstance. Instead, it means being attuned to the intricacies of causation – to the abundance of information – in order to act in accord with the unpredictability and uncertainty of a given situation, to be the tree in one moment and the goose in the next. "Self-caused action is a holistic fluency that can be analyzed generally as cognitive-affective focus (collection), the shedding of distractions, ease, and responsiveness to constantly changing circumstances" (Bruya 218). This embodiment of spontaneity can be further explained by considering an example from the *Zhuangzi*.

In chapter 19, Zhuangzi presents the story of a hunchback cicada catcher who explains how he achieved his skill to Confucius. "I settle my body like a twisted old stum, holding my

arm still like the branch of a withered tree. Although heaven and earth are vast and the ten thousand things numerous, I am aware of nothing but cicada wings" (*Zhuangzi* 78). The catcher has so intently focused his attention on cicada wings that in the moment they spring forth he is able to respond with a similar degree of spontaneity. He has molded his body and his mind to the conditions before him to such an extent that he is able to forget them, and the whole of his attention can be directed at cicada wings. This might not be common practice among cicada-catchers, but according to philosopher Karyn Lai, his unique approach allows him to be "free to develop a firsthand way – a dao – of responding to the limitless possibilities afforded by any one situation" (Lai 17). He can be as spontaneous as the situation. Convention mandates certain ways of acting, thinking, and behaving, but by mirroring the spontaneity of a situation, we are able to find new modes of being. We are conditioned over time by convention to filter experiences and situations through a pre-constructed lens of knowledge production – as was the case for individuals like Confucius and their perception of deviant bodies like Shushan. But through a personification of spontaneity, we can avoid the distractions of convention and respond to the "transformation of things through an inner wholeness that is described as a unity of nature, a tending and purification of energies, and a containing of his charismatic power" (Bruya 218). In addition to identifying spontaneity as a means of convention transformation, some philosophers have interpreted other approaches.

Through an examination of skilled craftsmen in the *Zhuangzi*, Christian Wenzel helps to continue exposing an interpretive middle-ground approach to ideal humanity based upon awareness. "What shall we do when we are already involved? Sometimes we cannot stay out of particular situations. Sometimes we have to face a problem and have to make a decision that has major consequences" (Wenzel 117). In other words, entanglements may not dissolve in the face

of spontaneity, and there will likely come a time when we finds ourselves entangled and forced to make a decision. In this case, Wenzel supposes a supremely attuned awareness as the mechanism to avoid restriction. Although entanglements are inevitable, they are still navigable so long as we turn our minds towards the consideration of all possibilities. Using Wenzel, the middle-ground approach to the consummate person can be subjectively interpreted and discursively illustrated as an individual who, "Has to be aware of new possibilities that might open up once he makes one decision rather than another. He has to be aware of what might be around the corner, what might be next… He has to almost continuously choose, and he always has to choose in such a way that what might come next is something he can deal with" (Wenzel 122). With such an awareness, the consummate person need not reject entanglement and convention because he or she is capable of operating around their restrictions and delimitations.

So far, I have outlined spontaneity and awareness as methods of actualizing the middle-ground interpretation of the consummate individual. The final task that we must complete in order to accomplish a well-rounded approach to ideal humanity is an exposition of the adaptive-self that the consummate person embodies to erode the rigidity of conventions. To further conceptualize this adaptive-self as a characteristic of the consummate person and as a means of transcending convention, I want to return to the previously discussed examples of Qin Yi, Shushan, and Huizi.

The story of Qin Yi at Lao Dan's funeral operates to expose behavioral conventions, but it also teaches a lesson about how the adaptive-self approaches such convention. Karyn Lai understands the *Zhuangzi* to balance freedom with uncontrollable circumstances such as "whether we survive or perish, fail or succeed, live in poverty or wealth," etc. (Lai 9). In the story, it appears that Qin Yi is the only one who has an awareness of the intractable nature of

those circumstance and is the only one who adapts to them. “The passage highlights the inexplicability of certain aspects of life, advising against attempts to obstruct them or alter their course. It also proposes that we should not be so fixated on the unchangeable circumstances of life such that they disrupt our emotional well-being” (Lai 9). The adaptive-self is nuanced and careful about its approach to the world. The challenge surrounding any attempt at conceptualizing ideal humanity is that the restrictive aspects of existence can be varied. Social convention can be transcended, but there are also uncontrollable circumstances that cannot be changed or avoided. In the pursuit of ideal humanity, the consummate person must be conscious of these differences so that a path to freedom can be uncovered. Qin Yi cannot alter the death of Lao Dan, but he can adapt to reality without his friend by celebrating the transformation represented by life and death. For Qin Yi, uncontrollable circumstances do not delimit his freedom because he can adapt his actions and behavior to reflect a genuine appreciation of such circumstances rather than a denial of them. Additionally, characters like Qin Yi and Shushan operate to illuminate the implication of social convention to the reader, but they also function to interrupt it.

According to Galvany, deviant bodies in the *Zhuangzi* are not simply cautionary tales about the pernicious effects of a rigid attitude and approach to the world. “The aim of introducing these misshapen figures is not only to disrupt a good many of the values approved and authorized by the prevailing intellectual tendencies but also, and more radically, to undermine the foundations of the very ideal of a perfectly organized, divided, and hierarchical world” (Galvany 6). In the *Zhuangzi*, “monsters” move beyond an illustration of the ways in which social convention produces knowledge in order to upset the need for classifications such as “monster” and “normal” in the first place.

The story of Shushan does not attempt to convince us that deviant bodies should be considered normal but that the very notion of normal is, itself, a fabrication and that categorizations based upon widely held beliefs and commonalities do not constitute knowledge. Normal is not a fixed conception. As we begin to expand our awareness of the world, we can see that what is normal changes depending on social and historical context – country A's normal is nothing like country B's normal. Conventions simultaneously restrict our freedom of thought and foster an epistemology rooted in classifications that do not reflect reality beyond a small subset of individuals. Luckily, Shushan shows the reader that through adaptation those restrictions can be dismantled. "In not seeing their 'deficiencies' as deficiencies, they have not been hampered by a need to measure up to the norm… These figures have accepted their bodily form (the heavenly) and are not trying to shape it to fit with conventional expectations (the human). Unfettered, their liberation from fixation on what is not attainable allows them to attend more fully to what their circumstances actually offer" (Lai 9-10). Adapting to his bodily form, Shushan lives much more freely than others of greater physical health. He knows that there need not be a norm, so he knows that the possibilities of existence are not shackled to a singular standard. In a similar fashion, Huizi's stories illuminate the benefits of adaptation.

When Huizi encounters the gourd and the tree that he deems to be worthless, he is demonstrating a lack of adaptive qualities that could enable him to find usefulness in those objects. In *Adapting: A Chinese Philosophy of Action*, Valmisa argues that Huizi's example implies that, "Adapting precisely consists in not adhering to any particular standard of action and learning from context and situation which course would temporarily work best… The key lies in the capacity to acknowledge that all patterns of action can be useful at certain times and contexts. The efficacy of human actions lies with knowing how to situationally decide the best course

possible given certain structural goals" (Valmisa *Adapting* 30). Thus, Huizi teaches us that by way of adaptation we can take action that is situationally dependent and useful. Social convention spawns a universal understanding of the world that consistently encounters limitations and barriers, but adaptation offers the opportunity to dispense with a unilateral approach to situations for the discovery of freedom of thought, behavior, and action.

As a final note, it is clear that ideal humanity as represented by the *Zhuangzi* is not a stable or stagnant state of being. Given the discussions in this chapter, it can be concluded that the freedom of ideal humanity is not only about transcending and moving beyond social convention or about acting with complete autonomy. Ideal humanity in the text is also deeply connected to an understanding of uncontrollable circumstance. Through spontaneity, awareness, and adaptation, the consummate person can distinguish between uncontrollable circumstance and social convention, they can immerse themselves in environments and realities outside of their control to open new paths of action, and they can continually adapt themselves to avoid the restrictions and limitations of convention. Thus, the possibility of mourning in a unique manner at a funeral, occupying a new nature after a disability, or finding the utility in a seemingly useless object becomes a more easily actualized reality.

Regardless of the methodology, the individual who can transcend boundaries and conventions is capable of living a life attuned to an open embrace of the potentialities of existence. This individual – this consummate person – has no difficulty adapting to new situations, discovering novelty in habit, and existing unbounded by exclusionary dependencies. The ideal humanity outlined in the *Zhuangzi* shares similar connotations with that which is developed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, but the method for approaching it between the texts is distinct.

Chapter Two: The Disorganized Body

Similar to the *Zhuangzi*, *A Thousand Plateaus*[4] recognizes the dilemma that social conventions pose to the individual: they can be simultaneously productive and destructive. In pursuit of ideal humanity, of a life full of creativity and receptivity, social conventions can continuously obscure opportunities for personal growth, closing doors before us that might offer a journey down a lazy river that rejuvenates our spirit or a new conception of death that settles our sorrow. They can be frustrating and tiresome, limiting our thought and behavior even when we feel a profound dissatisfaction with the status quo. They can be cruel, proving the existence of channels of being that were narrowed before we had a chance to explore them. But conventions can also be positive. At birth, we enter a world shaped by the trials and errors of our predecessors that allow us to continue developing without the need to start over. In theory, conventions eliminate the need to ceaselessly renegotiate the societal importance of fundamental values such as kindness and peace by giving form to individuals in accordance with the successes of past generations. A world devoid of convention is a world chaotically reborn every second. In this chapter, I will examine the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari to show that a neglect of the tension between the productive and destructive aspects of social convention can produce ruinous consequences for the individual but that a careful and shrewd mediation of these aspects yields a path towards ideal humanity that can be compared to the *Zhuangzi* in chapter 3.

Beginning with an analysis of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari present a conception of a "Body Without Organs" (BwO) that can help us to further understand the complexity of conventions. With the BwO, Deleuze and Guattari are offering a metaphorical

[4] *A Thousand Plateaus* is full of a multiplicity of concepts and philosophical arguments. While this essay focuses on some in particular, they should not be mistaken as the ultimate purpose or goal of Deleuze and Guattari's work (the book contains 15 chapters each with their own unique and characteristic assertions).

construction of organs as akin to perceived stable boundaries. For our purposes, we might relate these stable boundaries to social convention. In other words, the body's organs can be understood as the forces that mediate and organize one's life. Just as organs have specific life-sustaining functions, behavioral, physical, and cognitive conventions can also preserve and direct an individual. However, Deleuze and Guattari want to push beyond the conventions which they see to be fantasies by discovering a "Body Without Organs" or a disorganized body. It is a method of conceptualizing oneself that moves away from a stable body image towards the constant becoming of potentialities within the body. "*The body is the body. Alone it stands. And in no need of organs. Organism it never is. Organisms are the enemies of the body*. The BwO is not opposed to the organs; rather, the BwO and its 'true organs,' which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of the organs" (Deleuze and Guattari 158). The body's limits and boundaries are constantly changing and must not be understood as fixed positions. An organism is an attempt at the realization of a durable and steady body that demonstrates a singularly cohesive construction of the self. That is to say, the organism is born when a strict purpose and configuration is grafted upon the organs.[5] Organs themselves do not constitute an organism because an organism is simply a subjective construction agreed upon writ large by society. No one organ or collection of organs makes the human because the notion of the human, itself, merely functions as a means of categorization. To understand the role of the BwO in dismantling the organism more adequately, we can turn to Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of a machine.

[5] If the construction of the organism exists as the undesirable object of an assemblage of organs, then why not refer to this philosophy as the "Body Without Organism"? The "human organism" is by no means inevitable and can be deconstructed, but as long organs are viewed as constitutive of a larger arrangement, the possibility for the creation of new organisms continues to exist.

According to philosopher Daniel Smith, a machine is often understood as a mechanism built to achieve a singular purpose, but for Deleuze and Guattari, a machine is not static. “For them, a machine does not have a ‘purpose’ prior to its being actually used to carry one out. Their machines always have a multiplicity of functions, which do not depend on the intentions of their creator but on their relations with other machines, and hence cannot be exhaustively enumerated in advance” (Smith 100). Contrary to a primary conception of its purpose, Deleuze and Guattari assert that the function of any given machine is not determined until it is directed at a task. In other words, the function of a machine arises secondarily when it is used for a specific reason. If we reduce this conception to simpler terms, then we can say that the hammer in my garage has no singular function. It might be the case that I often use it to hit nails, but I might also make use of the hammer to open a package, to hold down papers on my desk, or to scratch my back. Although we have a common understanding of the purpose of this simple machine, the hammer’s function is not actually defined until it is used in relation to other machines or people (Smith 101). Applying this discussion of machines to the body, we now have two ways of conceptualizing the human organism.

On the one hand, the human organism can be understood as an isolated machine designed through years of evolution to achieve specific functions. From this perspective, the body is a self-contained organism that exhibits an inherent purpose that is independent from its relation to other objects, organisms, and machines in the world. For Deleuze and Guattari, this conception of the body is exceptionally rigid and essentialist (Smith 102). Because the human organism is ascribed certain functions before considering its relation to the world, we can be led to believe that these functions will not be changed by the unique situations that it encounters. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari assert that we can use the example of the organism to produce a

cognitive recognition of the variability of our being. It is not necessarily wrong to assert that humans exhibit aspects of isolated maintenance through their internal processes, but the principle of a self-contained organism is incomplete. Rather than understand the constituent organs of our bodies as working together to produce the unique human organism, we can focus our attention on the fact that certain organs are shared among many species of animals. Smith explains this conceptual difference as a contrast between analogy and homology. "An analogy between different organs presupposes that each organ has one single purpose, given in advance; a homology, by contrast, does not presuppose any preexisting purpose, and allows organs to have an unlimited variety of different functions" (Smith 104). The principle of homology allows us to see beyond the isolationist notion of the human organism and comprehend how the function and purpose of any body is entirely dependent on the circumstances in which it exists.

It is important to clarify that the goal of the BwO is not to convince the reader that the human organism does not exist or that it is indistinguishable from a pig or a bat but that our knowledge regarding our own being is principally tethered to the idea of an autonomous and independent body. The BwO "does not describe 'a body deprived of organs,' as the term seems to indicate, but rather 'an assemblage of organs freed from the supposedly 'natural' or 'instinctual' organization that makes it an organism'" (Smith 106). In *A Thousand Plateaus,* the BwO acts as a discursive embodiment of openness to the world and is employed not to refute the function of organs but to present a method of conceptualizing our body and our being as interdependent and cooperatively constituted by the world around us. Our shared organs, the complex connectedness of our genealogies, and the plethora of foreign agents and bacteria that inhabit our bodies confirm Deleuze and Guattari's suspicion about the organism: there is no need

nor justification for an isolated, fixed, and universal interpretation of our body. That is to say, the BwO changes our perception of being.

To finalize the overarching depiction of the BwO that I present in this paper, I want to turn to Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on assemblages throughout *A Thousand Plateaus* as a means of more specifically revealing how the BwO expresses our ability to deviate from the stringent categorization of organism and develop our ability to generate new directions, purposes, and functions in life. According to scholar Paul Patton, an assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus* is "a multiplicity of heterogenous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together" (Patton 158). For Deleuze and Guattari, the body as an organism is comprised of an assemblage of forces – some physical like organs and others immaterial or mental like categories of normal. To be more specific, we can consider a deformed body (like the ones presented in the *Zhuangzi*) to exist in an assemblage that couples physical differences with interpretative biases to produce a body that is abnormal. While these assemblages can be extraordinarily deterministic with regard to how we view the world, they also offer lines of flight with which we can transform our conceptions. "We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body" (Deleuze and Guattari 257). Contrary to the principles of a categorical construction of the organism, there is nothing unchanging or permanent about the body because it exists in an assemblage. The body is undefined before it is situated within an assemblage of its physical elements and societal assumptions about normalcy and acceptability. Thus, the BwO as an interpretative tool for acknowledging assemblages works to reconceptualize the body not

according to its form but according to how it affects and is affected by other bodies, objects, and circumstances in the world. The BwO creates the possibility of noticing new connections between the body and the world that can transform the assemblage wherein the body exists. I will discuss this process of transformation more fully at the end of the chapter, but first, I want to return to a discussion of social convention to show how different iterations of the BwO in *A Thousand Plateaus* endeavor to follow lines of flight in search of new assemblages.

Because they give definition to our body and, consequently, our being, assemblages are quite unavoidable, and social conventions constitute many of the forces that exist in them. Social convention is the mechanism through which conceptions of the body are achieved. Two eyes, two arms, two legs, one nose, one brain, and one heart – among other things – have been understood as the template for a human, but there is nothing about these organs that is innately or objectively human. As I outlined earlier, the human body is built upon a conventional foundation that dictates its function and its limits, but this phenomenon is not only relegated to the body. Standards of acceptable desire, normative behavior, tolerable thought, and common appearance are all conventions that exist in the assemblage we understand as the human organism. So, when we speak about the organism, we are implicitly referencing social convention. Limits imposed on the body are limits imposed on the mind, and comparable to the goals of the consummate person, Deleuze and Guattari want to use the BwO to achieve a type of ideal humanity that they understand to be a destratification of those limits. “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and signifiances and subjectifications as a whole. Psychoanalysis does the opposite: it translates everything into phantasies, it converts everything into phantasy, it retains the phantasy. It royally botches the real, because it botches the BwO” (Deleuze and Guattari 151). Here, psychoanalysis operates as

an inquiry into the sensible and senseless components in the mind in order to achieve existential organization and understanding – it operates to stratify and delimit the world according to specious constructions such as the human organism, but the BwO shows us that these constructions are not immutable.

The goal of the BwO is to realize a body without imposed organization and to accomplish a detachment from the conventions that limit pure experience.

> Under such conditions that the body without organs has replaced the organism and experimentation has replaced all interpretation, for which it no longer has any use. Flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation, microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject. Becomings, becomings-animal, becomings-molecular, have replaced history, individual or general… It is no longer an organism that functions but a BwO that is constructed. No longer are there acts to explain, dreams or phantasies to interpret, childhood memories to recall, words to make signify; instead, there are colors and sounds, becomings and intensities (and when you become-dog, don't ask if the dog you are playing with is a dream or a reality, if it is "your goddam mother" or something else entirely). There is no longer a Self [Moi] that feels, acts, and recalls; there is "a glowing fog, a dark yellow mist" that has affects and experiences movements, speeds. (Deleuze and Guattari 162)

The BwO is an attempt at recognizing how we filter our experiences through a framework of convention or through codified relations of independence and motivates us to be open to the world not only as an “I” but as one experiential entity among many others. The way in which we interact with the world has been bound by conceptions of ownership and categorizations of organisms. Before the BwO, I might say that my body is entirely my own, but such an inflexible principle of ownership operates reciprocally; I own my body, but it also owns me. Let me pursue a line of reasoning, here, that may be able to clarify this for us. I am an independent and autonomous agent living in the world, and my body is solely my own. My brain is also my own, and by extension, so are my thoughts and my words and even this essay. I have control over these things because they are my own, and I am convinced that I like it that way because I get to make decisions about myself and for myself. But there is another side to my ownership. My body

requires food so I must eat. It requires exercise and rest so I must run and sleep. These are all very natural demands that we can all agree are of no cause for concern. However, my independent ownership also means that I am responsible for the exigencies of the social conventions that I refuse to acknowledge as a part of the assemblage that constitutes my body. Therefore, I must eat, exercise, and sleep, but I also need to be normal, beautiful, and healthy. If I unequivocally believe in my independence, then I can unknowingly fool myself into believing that my self-doubt, my anxiety, or my pain is a product of my own failure to meet conventional standards. I become owned and shaped by the very forces that I assumed I had complete control over! In an instance of less severity, I might be consumed by this essay as it continually demands more of my time and attention to finish. In a more alarming manner, the expectations derived from conventions of beauty, for example, could have me living my whole life trying to be taller, skinnier, tanner, etc. Assemblages and the conventions engrained in them are not stagnant, but they demand actions and thoughts that can be poisonous over time. Instead of remaining ignorant about the consequences of absolute ownership, the BwO pushes us to let go of the conventions that force us to forget the interdependence and transience of existence. We do not need to yield all agency and autonomy over our bodies, but by acknowledging our co-creation in assemblages, we can surrender our desire for ownership over the conventions that attenuate our being. Nonetheless, the pursuit of the BwO does not come without its own risks.

Deleuze and Guattari outline three types of the BwO: cancerous, empty, and full. The cancerous BwO is the body that, in an attempt to escape from restrictive societal conventions, has been engrained deeper in them. As is the case for the extreme acceptance approach in the *Zhuangzi*, the cancerous body does not achieve freedom from convention but operates within it. Imagine a person who desires pure freedom of movement and action, so they pursue large

amounts of money. This individual has entrenched themselves in standardized behavior in hopes of being freed from its demands. Unfortunately, this method will only lead to a body that is, "Ready to gnaw, proliferate, cover, and invade the entire social field, entering into relations of violence and rivalry as well as alliance and complicity. A BwO of money (inflation), but also a BwO of the State, army, factory, city, Party, etc." (Deleuze and Guattari 163). Similarly to how we can become owned by the objects and forces around us, the cancerous body pours its being into achieving certain exigencies of convention and becomes twisted in the process. To continue with the example above, the conventional importance of money might tempt us into acquiring an excess of it, and in this way, we might hope to meet the demands of the convention and be freed from it. Fundamentally, this temptation operates on the principle of desire as a lack, which is the basis of a cancerous body. Philosopher Jihai Gao notes that Deleuze never conceived of desire as simply a tool to satisfy a need (Gao 406). Rather, Deleuze understood desire as something that could be cultivated through practice. The important difference is that the cancerous body that desires due to a "lack of" will never be satiated. Even if the cancerous body has achieved wealth and material possessions, they have developed an interpretive approach to the world that constantly searches for what is missing. They become owned by their possessions and are unable to escape from their sense of desire. Thus, the reinforcement of conventions in an endless cycle of violence is characteristic of a cancerous body, but a complete abandonment of convention and attachment is not effective either.

An empty body is one which has attempted to shed any and all entanglements with the world, giving itself to utter experience all at once. The empty body shares similarities with the extreme detachment approach in the *Zhuangzi* – as it can be characterized by a complete abandonment of the self – but Deleuze and Guattari visualize the empty body as that of a drug

addict.[6] Having lost all connection with the world, the drug addict throws themself into the experiences and sensations that created their BwO in the first place. “The masochist is looking for a type of BwO that only pain can fill, or travel over, due to the very conditions under which that BwO was constituted…The same goes for the drugged body and intensities of cold, refrigerator waves… The masochist and the drug user court these ever-present dangers that empty their BwO’s instead of filling them” (Deleuze and Guattari 152). A complete detachment from the world is not fulfilling or beneficial. Such a body – while it is disorganized – has lost sight of the openness and freedom that it once pursued. In the case of an empty body, desire becomes haphazard in search of the need for mere pleasure. Put simply, the assemblage of forces that constitutes an individual’s being has become so restrictive that they believe there is simply no value in convention, so they give themselves entirely to the need for pleasure.

Ultimately, the most complex and baffling part about the BwO is that in both the cancerous and empty bodies there is a fundamental desire for freedom from restrictive convention. Deleuze and Guattari even go so far as to say that “The BwO is desire… Even when it falls into the void of too-sudden destratification, or into the proliferation of a cancerous stratum, it is still desire. Desire stretches that far: desiring one's own annihilation, or desiring the power to annihilate… There is desire whenever there is the constitution of a BwO under one relation or another” (Deleuze and Guattari 165). It is clear that any attempt to achieve a BwO is necessarily an attempt to act upon the desire for freedom, but it is also clear that such a desire – if it is not tightly regulated and monitored – can result in the total destruction of an individual.

[6] The personal and societal complexities of drug addiction are not a focus of this paper, but it should be noted that the depiction of a drug addict in this work and in Deleuze and Guattari does not function as wholly indicative of reality. That is to say, the conception of a drug addict is being employed on a theoretical basis without regard to the specific nuance and intricacy of addiction. As such, this depiction cannot operate to characterize or otherwise shame drug addiction.

Now that we have accounted for the organism, for the assemblage of conventions that define it, for the cancerous and empty BwO's that attempt to transform those assemblages, and for the importance of desire in determining that transformation's success or failure, we are finally in a position to address the contradictory power of creation and annihilation inherent to social convention using Deleuze and Guattari's third notion of the BwO.

A true and healthy BwO is what Deleuze and Guattari call a full body, and it is most comparable with the middle-ground approach in the *Zhuangzi* to generate an adaptive-self. The full body maintains the perfect balance of selfhood. It does not completely detach from the world so as to preserve an identity that prevents it from becoming lost while making changes, opening itself to possibilities, or embracing experiences. The full body asks one to embrace an attitude that is antithetical to selfhood and to boundaries while at the same time demanding that one maintain a connection to the relational social system that the BwO attempts to subvert. "You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of significance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it… and you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality" (Deleuze and Guattari 160). Unlike the cancerous and empty BwO's, the full body is not a complete rejection or acceptance of the entanglements that define the self but a meticulously crafted relation to convention that allows for adaptability. Additionally, the full body demonstrates a careful recognition and application of desire.

Earlier I showed that Deleuze and Guattari believe desire to be ingrained in any attempt to realize a destratification of convention with the BwO, and now I will explain how the full body can prevent that desire from delivering us to ruin. First, the full body investigates its desires

in order to discern between ones that will cause a cancerous reassertion or an empty rejection of conventions and ones that can produce a healthy relation to restrictions. Second, the full body acts upon the latter desires with incredible caution and finesse. Returning to the work of Jihai Gao, he asserts that desire for Deleuze and Guattari must be motivated and sustained by vital impulses, and says that a "Vital impulse is virtual, pre-individual and impersonal. But it can be actualised in matter" (Gao 415). Vital impulses exist before an individual has complete awareness of them, which makes them virtual, but they can still be realized by the individual in the physical world. The distinction between desire that is motivated by vital impulse and desire that is born from a lack or need is that the former is not initially shaped by social conventions or assemblages. In becoming a cancerous body, a desire for money can be formed by the bills that need to be paid to keep a house, by the friends who post pictures of their vacation on social media that cause jealousy, or by the advertisements that deceptively advance the need for a new computer. In becoming an empty body, a desire for pleasure can be produced by the loneliness and isolation that can accompany not being "normal" or by the anxiety that can follow from feeling trapped in an unhappy job. In all of these circumstances, the desire to escape convention and gain freedom – although justifiable – has been molded by the conventions themselves. Because assumptions about what is possible, beneficial, and acceptable already exist within social convention, many of the desires derived from it will only reinscribe the assemblage, not transform it. Conversely, vital impulses exist on a pre-individual level and are, therefore, less likely to be crippled by convention.

To help contextualize vital impulses and understand how they are influenced less by convention, we can imagine a child walking down a dirt road. As they walk along the path to their destination, they see a tree branch lying on the side of the road. They alter their course very

slightly, pick up the branch, and begin to drag it in the dirt to create patterns as they walk. In a similarly uneventful fashion, the child eventually drops the branch and continues their journey. This example, which will surely resonate with some of us as an action that we have performed ourselves, typifies desire that is supported by vital impulse. The child did not necessarily have a need for the branch, nor did they leave the house thinking about how they lacked one, but in an instant of coalescence, the child had a vital impulse and engaged with the branch. This example presents the kind of desire that can yield the full body, a desire that is situationally beneficial and that does not need to endure. Deleuze and Guattari do not advocate for acting on every impulse but indicate that we can cultivate a type of desire that offers contentment and freedom in a given situation without feeling the need to maintain that desire once the moment has passed. Just as the child does not feel the need to carry the branch forever, we do not need to invariably pursue money or pleasure.

Regardless of our actions, we will always find ourselves encountering an assemblage of conventions. The goal is not to be steadfast in our desire to dismantle convention but to continually find new opportunities within the assemblage for freedom. Our vital impulses will not stay constant, and at times, we will have to yield to convention and let go of certain desires to maintain the possibility of discovering new ones. Although the actions and impulses of the full body might appear to be inconsequential when faced with a litany of harmful restrictions, this delicate approach helps us to balance the productive and destructive aspects of convention by experimenting with small moments of transformation. In other words, we can use vital impulses to transform an assemblage by deterritorializing its influence on our bodies, on our being. Speaking to the power of experimentation with convention, philosopher Eugene Holland claims that, “Deterritorialization becomes *absolute* and *positive* only when the search for meaning is

abandoned in favor of experimentation, and when such experimentation intersects and connects with the experiments of others" (Holland 62). If we pursue a BwO in the hope of reaching normative conclusions about what constitutes positive conventions and what constitutes negatives ones, then we will always fall prey to the cancerous or empty body because we will always be rigid in our efforts for transformation.

The full BwO does not consistently and permanently deterritorialize certain conventions in the body because that kind of action would only be beneficial if universal truths existed about the importance or meaninglessness of specific social conventions, but for Deleuze and Guattari, such truths are a mere fantasy (Holland 59). If we want to realize ideal humanity through the full body, then we must slowly experiment with changes to our behavior, our perceptions, our desires, our needs, our thoughts, our clothing, our friends, our food, our cosmetics, our ideologies, our emotions, and more. We can test these changes incrementally, and we can recognize when deterritorialization is helpful and when we must reterritorialize or realign ourselves with convention to avoid a catastrophic collapse of our relationships with others and with the world. Philosopher Brian Schroeder describes it well when he relates the process of deterritorialization to the nature of a wolf. "While remaining intact, their individuality constantly shifts with regard to their role in the pack – that is, to others – through the continual deterritorialization or lines of flight of the pack's movement" (Schroeder 263). The wolf does not lose its individuality, she adapts it. In this way, an assemblage can be gradually transformed from a rigid structure beyond our control to a dynamic and plastic amalgam of conventions that can be applied, discarded, and reapplied when favorable.

As a final note, transformation may be the aim of a BwO, but it is not something that can be accomplished quickly, if ever. Deleuze and Guattari say, "You don't do it with a

sledgehammer, you use a very fine file. You invent self-destructions that have nothing to do with the death drive. Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds… with the craft of a surveyor" (Deleuze and Guattari 160). In this way, an individual can achieve flexibility and receptiveness without engendering the dangers of a cancerous or empty body. Still, the paradox that arises from the productive and destructive aspects of convention and that exists as the motivation for the full BwO and for the consummate person is yet better understood by comparing *A Thousand Plateaus* and the *Zhuangzi*.

Chapter Three: A Cooperative Analysis of Ideal Humanity and Social Convention

With a broader understanding of the *Zhuangzi* and of *A Thousand Plateaus,* it becomes clear that ideal humanity is situated within a fundamental conflict: the quest for freedom amid a world of undesirable entanglements. In this final chapter, I want to consider how the conception of the adaptive-self in the *Zhuangzi* and of the full BwO in *A Thousand Plateaus* can be compared to generate further insight with regard to the conflict between a dependency on social convention and a pursuit of humanity that strives for a liberation from certain aspects of it. Dissecting the nuance of this tension, we have seen that not all of the social conventions that we encounter should be understood as negative. In fact, we have learned that both the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* conceptualize being as a dependent phenomenon, as something constituted by entanglements and assemblages. For both texts, being dependent on unique situations and circumstances is an inexorable condition, a sine qua non of all entities in this world. Here, it is advantageous to return to the start of this essay and to the shared relational ontology between both works to adequately understand this point. In such an ontology, relationships and entanglements help to define entities, and existence should not be understood as independent or isolated. All objects and ideas are primarily constructed through their interdependency and relations with other entities. For example, a dinner table assumes its identity through its use and interaction with a family or individual. Isolated, that same dinner table is merely a collection of material and matter. Being bounded, dependent, and entangled in the world is not inherently negative. However, it has also been established that when some of these identity-constituting entanglements become reified in rigid conventions they can be harmfully restrictive and that our attempts to free ourselves from these conventions can be disastrous.

The problem is not that we are bounded but that the approach we take to acknowledge those boundaries can easily lead us to ruin (the happy slave, the empty body, the cancerous body, etc.). The first two chapters of this thesis show that our navigation of this nuance is an incredibly delicate process. Both the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* recognize the allure of a complete detachment from social convention and of a complete acceptance of it, but both texts also demonstrate how those paths towards ideal humanity quickly become trodden with insurmountable risks. Given these similarities, I have three goals for this chapter. First, I want to establish that the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* can be used jointly in an analysis of one another, as this will encourage a cooperative comprehension of the philosophical intricacies being explored. Second, I want to broaden this analysis by constructing a cooperative approach to ideal humanity that uses components from both texts. And third, I want to end this essay with a reformulation of the tension between convention and ideal humanity.

To begin with the first goal of a supplemental analysis of the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, we can examine the works to understand how notions of social convention and ideal humanity in one text can be complemented by the other. Primarily, the *Zhuangzi* can provide a mode of careful boundary deconstruction for the BwO and a framework for varied approaches to unique situations, whereas *A Thousand Plateaus* offers a reformulation of a body with purpose for the consummate person. To understand how the *Zhuangzi* can aid in the conception of the BwO with regard to boundaries, Margus Ott's examination of actualization and counter-actualization is helpful. In daily life, an individual will encounter societal conventions that have already been actualized and embedded within their own behavior and worldly perceptions, so achieving the BwO is a process that requires the dismantling of restrictive preconceptions. Ott's work applies this Deleuzian notion to the *Zhuangzi* and reframes certain textual examples as

indicative of counter-actualization. Specifically, the story of Yan Hui, who sits and forgets, is understood as a story of counter-actualization. Yan Hui forgets about his limbs, about his morals, and about his humaneness as a technique of deconstructing all that he previously held to be true and righteous. "Yan Hui in his counter-actualization first discards the culturally central forms… and then sloughs off his limbs and trunk, departs from his form and leaves knowledge behind. This is the part of disarticulation that occurs in making oneself a body without organs. Thus he attains the ontological level of the pure intensities, the 'Great Interpenetration' (*datong* 大通)" (Ott 325). Yan Hui can be interpreted as a template for the achievement of a BwO. But perhaps what is most important about this story, is that he is able to forget without completely losing himself. In other words, what he loses is not *himself* or his identity but his "I-perspective", and in this way, he can embody other perspectives as if they were his own, as if they were a part of his identity.

Instead of succumbing to physical vices like the drug addict or mental stimulation like the masochist, Yan Hui separates himself from actualized convention without the risks of bodily damage. In other words, he is an example of someone who achieves a full body in the Deleuzian sense. "He retains 'a little bit' of the organism and knowledge. He does not literally mutilate himself or become crazy, but simply is able to distance himself from the actualized forms of body and mind, and to experience the pure intensities. In this way those free intensities can be productive, and not destructive" (Ott 325). In accordance with the *Zhuangzi*, the full BwO can be accomplished through cognitive counter-actualization and the confrontation of predispositions. Similar to our discussion of methods for achieving ideal humanity in Chapter 1, Yan Hui becomes a mirror for reality, reflecting circumstances without imposing interpretations or value judgements on them. Through the act of forgetting, Yan Hui is able to separate himself from

previously established norms and turn his awareness to the reality before him. By "forgetting", he does not need to respond to a certain situation according to how he has reacted in the past, and he does not need to create a pattern for future responses based on his current one. To put it in simpler terms, we must forget about the traditional uses of a gourd if we want to turn the unusually large one into a raft, but we must also forget about how we used the large gourd as a raft lest we never find new uses for it. The BwO attempts to transcend boundaries through deliberate experimentation, but in the abstract, it can be difficult to imagine what those boundaries might be. The *Zhuangzi* not only offers examples of convention that we can use to help contextualize the aim of a BwO, but it also provides an important condition for achieving that aim. In this case, we can look to the *Zhuangzi* to know that we must avoid reinforcing convention if we want to be capable of using the BwO to explore new avenues of behavior and thought. The BwO represents the belief that we can change our relation to convention through experimentation, but such an ambition is not possible if we do not consider our patterns of behavior. If we fail to "forget" about how we typically respond to a situation, then we will be incapable of forging new paths in the future that are not beholden to the past. Thus, the *Zhuangzi* presents this necessary qualification for the BwO that can augment its efficacy. Additionally, the *Zhuangzi's* textual adaptability offers lessons regarding the necessary variability of a BwO.

At this point, I ask us to recall that the *Zhuangzi* can be interpreted to produce multiple approaches to becoming the consummate person. In Chapter 1, I was purposeful in emphasizing the risks of the complete detachment and radical acceptance approaches to convention presented in the *Zhuangzi* and in affirming the value of the middle-ground approach, but the very existence of competing interpretations in the *Zhuangzi* teaches a valuable lesson in the variability of the path towards ideal humanity. As we saw in Chapter 2, the full BwO walks a fine line between

maintaining attachment and escaping convention, which means a singular approach to boundary deconstruction applied consistently to all situations will fail. In other words, a full BwO must understand when to forget and when to remember and must be adaptable to new circumstances unless it desires its own destruction. And variability of this nature lies at the center of the *Zhuangzi*.

In "A Ragbag of Odds and Ends," Wim De Reu challenges the pervasive notion that the inner, outer, and miscellaneous chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are separated by coherence, originality, and preeminence, and we can use his work to demonstrate the importance of variability. The chapters believed to be written by Zhuangzi himself are sometimes held to be indicative of the true philosophy presented in the work, and the other chapters can be seen as mere additions. However, Wim De Reu provides an alternative interpretation that can guide us to understand the text's amalgam of authors and philosophies as symbolic of its teachings of openness and flexibility. Similarly, we can hold the distinct approaches to the consummate person – an individual who abandons, accepts, or recognizes entanglements – as suggestive of the same principle. "*Bi*: to regard a correlation observed among certain phenomena as holding invariably across a variety of situations… One should not regard and deal with the world—typically the social world—around one in such a *bi* manner. This is the central message" (De Reu 32). Uniform action and thought are the very subjects of deconstruction for the consummate person and for the BwO, so it is clear that it would be unhelpful to use a homogenous approach while in pursuit of ideal humanity. The structure of the *Zhuangzi* and the multiple approaches to convention teach us that the BwO ought not be static. It is easy for us to be captivated by a sense of relative simplicity when considering the BwO - there are three types, two bad and one good. But the reality of the full BwO is that it lacks a singular form or definition. In Chapter 2 we saw

how wildly complex the pursuit of the full BwO could be, and we saw that its pursuit can vary for everyone. An analysis of *A Thousand Plateaus* in tandem with the *Zhuangzi* reminds us that we should be weary of a uniform conception of the BwO and that we should not immediately disregard certain approaches to ideal humanity (cancerous/empty BwO) because they can educate us about the risks of experimenting with convention.

It is clear that the *Zhuangzi* affords analytical insights with respect to the counter-actualization and variability of the BwO, but we can see the same degree of supportive contributions in the theoretical assertions of *A Thousand Plateaus*. To begin, Deleuze and Guattari's work supplements the required navigation between the different notions of the consummate person by drawing attention towards the purposeful body. Whether entanglements should be completely abandoned or not may be a matter of personal interpretation, but regardless of the final outcome, the BwO ought to be purposeful during every step of its processual becoming. "Staying stratified—organized, signified, subjected— is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse… Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them" (Deleuze and Guattari 161). If, as Deleuze and Guattari suppose, we should maintain a purposeful pursuit of the BwO, then the distinct approaches to the consummate person can be analyzed on that very basis. It seems that an embrace of supreme awareness and its ability to allow for the purposeful determination of action would be most aligned with Deleuze and Guattari's prescriptions. In other words, we can understand *A Thousand Plateaus* as presenting a method for mediating between different types of ideal humanity in the *Zhuangzi* through purposeful action. We might see a complete detachment from or a total acceptance of social

conventions as a quick way to achieve freedom according to the *Zhuangzi*, but if we investigate the purpose behind those approaches, we might also realize that we are drawn to them by a sense of expediency and not by a desire for healthy and lasting change.[7] In this sense, the BwO helps us to contextualize our motivations for pursuing ideal humanity. The final judgement regarding the best method of achieving ideal humanity in the *Zhuangzi* is born from a personal calculus, but nonetheless, *A Thousand Plateaus* can help us navigate such considerations.

Now that we have seen some ways in which a supplemental analysis of the texts can help us to reach a richer understanding of their concepts, I want to move to the second goal of this chapter and attempt to formulate a cooperative approach to ideal humanity using aspects from both. Until this point, we have worked with the texts separately. We have seen how they conceive of social conventions, how they recommend transforming them, and how those recommendations can be applied to one another. But now it is time to complicate things by accounting for and tracking the connections and interplay between the works. Imagine, if you will, that we have taken each text and carefully identified and isolated – to the best of our ability – key features of ideal humanity. Like a skilled watchmaker attempting to clean an incredibly intricate timepiece, we have attentively plucked out certain gears to focus on them individually. We have cleaned and placed them in a specific order and made sure to separate the components from each other. The gears on the table before us represent the watch, but we cannot truly understand how they function to tell the time unless we put them back together. Now, it is time to reassemble our work, to become lost in the dizzying interrelation and interplay between the works, and to (hopefully) catch a glimpse of the ceaselessly complex connections between the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. Taking inspiration from the flexibility of the philosophies, I

[7] That is not to say the *Zhuangzi* itself advocates for expediency over living a good or happy or healthy life but that interpretations of the text can infuse the importance of quick and easily achieved efficacy.

will attempt to weave between notions of ideal humanity to develop a cooperatively constituted avenue for the realization of a healthy relationship with convention. I will be bouncing and shifting from one text to the other in the hope of manifesting adaptivity both discursively (with the structure of writing itself) and intuitively (with the philosophical conclusions that stem from the writing). My objective is not to outline a method for transforming convention that is better than that which is presented in either text but to celebrate the striking similarities between the works through an explanation of how I believe they intertwine at the nexus of ideal humanity.

To begin this task, we must recall that spontaneity and awareness are important components of the adaptive-self in the *Zhuangzi* and that deterritorialization and vital desire are core elements of the full BwO in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Separately, these aspects help to contextualize a healthy relationship with social convention for their respective authors, but when examined together, we can use them to identify a productive method for navigating convention. More specifically, we can highlight the connections between these aspects to show how awareness and deterritorialization can lead to a variable sense of self, how vital desire and spontaneity can engender a process of reterritorialization, and how that sense of self and that process of reterritorialization can lead to a state of becoming that is characteristic of ideal humanity. Although it might appear to be overwhelmingly complicated, we are about to see how similarities between the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* can be emphasized to create a cooperative approach to ideal humanity.

The best way to exemplify this approach is to imagine that we want to take the analysis presented in this essay and apply it to our own life, to cultivate ideal humanity without falling victim to the risks of rejecting or accepting convention. To launch this transformation, we can start with the development of a sense of Zhuangzian awareness. Earlier, I showed that

forgetfulness is necessary to prevent the creation and reinforcement of patterns of behavior and thought, but this process is more complex than it appears. The *Zhuangzi* says, "The Consummate Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing: responding but not storing" (*Zhuangzi* 54). By reflecting the reality before us as if we were a mirror, we attempt to understand a situation in its entirety without clouding it with predispositions and biases. And by engaging situations with a fresh perspective, we hope to avoid repeating behavior or convention that is harmful or that restricts our ability to access novel responses. The problem, however, is that even though the text encourages us to act as a mirror it does not assume that we can prevent interpretation altogether. "Whenever we want to see something outside of us, we have to let something in, we have to allow something to modify our senses, and we have to interpret what we see. Whatever we see is always already interpreted. A mirror does not do anything of this kind" (Wenzel 121). Although the first step in our cultivation of ideal humanity must be a recognition of habitual conventions and patterns, we are forced to immerse ourselves in that recognition using an interpretative framework. We will never be free from interpretation because such a freedom would require the existence of objective and universal truths that could help us transcend the realm of subjectivity, and as we have seen in previous chapters, neither the *Zhuangzi* nor *A Thousand Plateaus* believes such things exist. So, we are left to wonder how we could act as a mirror if we are unable to escape interpretation.

Instead of understanding the consummate person as someone who has reached ideal humanity through an objective reflection of reality, we ought to consider the mirror metaphor as a lesson in nurturing an awareness of our interpretative frameworks. It may be impossible to interact with the world without interpreting the phenomena around us, but it is possible to become conscious of modes of perception. Awareness is an action that includes "interpretation

and reflection, reflection not only of what is outside, as does a mirror, but also of our inner states; reflection not without interpretation, as, again, does the mirror, but reflection essentially with interpretation, reflection on, not merely of, states, outer and inner. All this allows us to extend the notion of awareness to the realm of ideas and ideals" (Wenzel 122). Striving for this kind of awareness, we are not a mirror of objectivity but of the subjective elements that comprise our interpretations. What we hope to accomplish is not a neutral view of the world but a robust appreciation for the intricate patterns and conventions that motivate our actions. Once we have such an awareness of subjectivity, we can begin to incorporate elements of deterritorialization.

At this point in our pursuit of ideal humanity, we have hypothetically refined the awareness of our interpretative framework, and because Deleuze and Guattari's notion of deterritorialization shares many similarities with this style of perception, we can continue our journey with *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deterritorialization is not far removed from the awareness we just spoke about in that it attempts to highlight the fluctuation of subjective modes of interpretation and show how they can be replaced. For example, Deleuze and Guattari claim that "the club is a deterritorialized branch" (Deleuze and Guattari 172). Depending on the circumstances surrounding our interaction with a piece of wood (whether we are in the middle of a riot or taking a stroll through the woods), we might produce entirely distinct conceptions of it. Just as awareness allows us to identify our interpretative modes and ideals, philosopher Brent Adkins claims that, "Deterritorialization is the selection or extraction of some set of intensities in order to compose them or place them in a different relation to one another" (Adkins 49). The practice of deterritorialization prompts us to move between perceptions and recognize our ability to alter subjective translations of phenomena. If we are taking a hike, this might afford us the

opportunity to see every branch as a potential club. But if we apply it to convention, deterritorialization indicates that our thought and behavior is also susceptible to change.

Combining awareness and deterritorialization, we now have the ability to reflect on our subjectivity and change elements of it, which can inspire a variable sense of self. To understand how these processes connect with convention and a sense of self, we can turn to the work of philosopher Matthew James Hamm, who claims, "The process of constructing an identity involves reifying one's transitory preferences, which likely result from specific circumstances, into an enduring identity that is understood as the sum total of those preferences" (Hamm 15). From the moment we were born, we are exposed to a host of conventions that help to craft our preferences. Conventions are dependent on social context, but because we have the tendency to craft an identity around the preferences they produce, we are unknowingly binding ourselves to those conventions indefinitely. For example, beauty standards can determine what we find attractive in a partner, and once we incorporate that preference into our identity, we also envelope the convention that will continue to make it difficult for us to alter our subjective judgements about others. "Reifying identity, therefore, not only curtails the potential growth of individual human beings by trapping them within repeated patterns of self-identification, but also inhibits their ability to understand other entities in the world" (Hamm 20). Through awareness and deterritorialization, we can recognize the link between preference and convention and realize that our subjective judgements are not an innate or permanent part of our being, allowing us to slowly modify our sense of self over time. While the practices involved in analyzing our personal embodiments of convention has been explained, we still need to determine how exactly we can discover new interpretations, preferences, or modes of subjectivity.

In order to truly transform our relationship with convention, we must reterritorialize the destructive thoughts and behaviors that it produces using vital desire and spontaneity. It is as if we are gardeners that have removed the weeds from an area of land. It is not enough to say that we have cleared this section of soil; we must plant something new. But how can we be certain that we are replacing something destructive with something productive? If we participate in this process of transformation slowly and carefully, we can be guided by the beneficial aspects of vital desire and spontaneity. In Chapter 2, I discussed the importance of desire when pursuing the full BwO, and the same principles apply here. If the first step towards ideal humanity begins with the desire to change our relation to convention, the second step is understanding what we are wanting that change *for*. Someone might respond that they want to worry less about what people think of them, but such an answer is still convoluted. Maybe they want to free themselves of external judgement so that they can wear new clothes and experiment with new fashion styles, or maybe they do not want to feel the guilt associated with malicious behavior. In both cases, convention operates to restrict this individual, but in the instance of the latter desire, we might be glad it does. To navigate between these wants, we can use vital desire, which Deleuze and Guattari think is "never a strictly personal affair, but a tension between sub- and super-personal tendencies that intersect in the person" (Gao 410). Vital desire extends beyond personal considerations of wants and encompasses the conflict between the individual and the world around them. Thus, a vital desire cannot be something that benefits the individual at the expense of others. A vital desire is fluid and situational, and it does not seek permanence. As the relationship, needs, and tension between ourselves and others constantly evolve, so too do our vital desires. Alternatively, we can look to spontaneity as a similar concept.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, spontaneity in the *Zhuangzi* is a deliberate practice that can encompass self-caused action, and this understanding of spontaneity further bolsters our ability to navigate desire. In this essay, I used the story of the cicada catcher to show how attention to causation beyond the individual allows us to act within the uncertainty of the world, not against it. If we are attuned to the intricacies of causation outside of our own control, then we can act in accord with these phenomena, and what might seem spontaneous to others is actually the product of self-caused attentiveness. Although it might appear to be random, the cicada catcher does not succeed by haphazardly thrusting his stick into the air. Rather, he exemplifies a spontaneity that situates the individual as a force among others and provides him with a wider perspective. Referring to this type of self-cultivated through spontaneity, Bruya says that it "is never divorced from a wider, interactive context; it is always assumed to persist within an organic web of mutual influence, and because of this one cannot conceive of an egoistic or deviant form of Daoist self-causation" (Bruya 213). Just as vital desire pushes us to consider our wants in relation to others, spontaneity grounds the self amid interrelated influences. Not only are both concepts similar, but they demonstrate how we can navigate the process of reterritorialization. Spontaneity expands our awareness of forces of causation to dissuade us from being egotistical, and without that risk of being self-centered, vital desire motivates us to consider others when changing our relationship with convention.

Taking a broader view of our journey towards ideal humanity, we can see that we have cultivated a variable sense of self that allows us to deterritorialize convention and reterritorialize those spaces with healthier and more productive thoughts and behaviors. Returning to our example from earlier as a means of summarizing this process, we now know that in order to worry less about how we are perceived by our peers, we must cultivate an awareness of the

interpretative frameworks that generate standards of normalcy and that we use to perceive external judgements, we must work to deterritorialize those judgments in order to avoid measuring ourselves against the subjectivity of others, and we must locate our vital desires and practice spontaneity to create an experimental self that enjoys new hobbies or clothing or friends without doing harm. For one final account of this ideal humanity, we can look to the notion of becoming. In a collective work addressing the connection between Deleuze and Eastern philosophies, Ronald Bogue, Hanping Chiu, and Yu-lin Lee develop the similarities between notions of becoming in the *Zhuangzi* and in much of Deleuze's work. Most notably, they highlight the reconfiguration of philosophical focus in both texts. Rather than concentrating time and energy on the end product of a philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari fixate on its becoming. "Deleuze and Guattari's 'collaborative projects, and their single authored works, offer us a 'new image of thought,' one in which process and becoming, invention and creativity, are privileged over stasis, identity and recognition'" (Bogue et al. 3). In a similar fashion, ideal humanity exists as a constant process of evolution and adaptation. We deterritorialize and reterritorialize over and over again on a small scale, hoping to transform the destructive aspects of convention little by little. The final result of ideal humanity is unimportant compared to the necessary steps taken to understand it, and that same emphasis becoming can be leveraged to achieve the final goal of this essay: a reformulation of the tension between convention and ideal humanity.

When considering ideal humanity, it is hard not to be captivated by the seemingly ubiquitous tension throughout this essay. Conventions are productive and destructive. Identity is beneficial and restrictive. The pursuit of ideal humanity can cause growth and harm. An individual who outright rejects worldly entanglements and one who recognizes their inevitability seem to be mutually exclusive descriptions of the consummate person. A BwO that dismisses the

construction of the organism and one that maintains a calculated attachment to that construction seem to be opposite conceptions. However, we do not need to impose a distinction between these given realities if we understand them as processes of becoming. By focusing on the process of actualizing ideal humanity for ourselves rather than its complete realization, we do not need to resolve every instance of tension, we do not need every answer. That is not to say that I have not outlined – to the best of my ability – as many of the intricacies of convention and freedom as I could but that the fundamental adaptability afforded to us through the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* provide us with the template for navigating between the tension. Whether or not ideal humanity can ever be fully attained is necessarily unimportant so long as the course of pursuing it brings us valuable change. Whether or not the consummate person or the BwO is unentangled or removed from convention has no impact on the beneficial realizations we may produce while striving to accomplish such an existence. A focus on becoming – becoming consummate, becoming a BwO, becoming entangled, becoming unbounded, becoming an organism, becoming forgetful, etc. – erodes the obligation to resolve the conflict between convention and ideal humanity.

Conclusion

The differences and similarities between the works provide relevant points of analysis for the conceptions of convention and transformation. It is my belief that the disparate notions of the consummate person in the *Zhuangzi* offer the necessary variability to the full BwO in Deleuze and Guattari and that the BwO provides the purpose through which the consummate person can be appreciated. Moreover, both texts display significant analyses of creativity, of conventions, and of attachments that allow for a more illuminated understanding of ideal humanity and the path towards it. It is my hope to have used those analyses to not only make clear the notion of ideal humanity in each text but to also bring them together in a cooperative fashion. Moving forward, I think it is worth considering how the methodology of this essay could have obscured some elements of the examples in either text. I made it clear why I did not want to focus on the total acceptance, full detachment, cancerous body, and empty body approaches to ideal humanity, but perhaps a future work might highlight the potential insights to be gained from these paths towards freedom. Aside from being used to aid in my definition of ideal humanity, what might these approaches offer our understanding of convention and liberation?

I believe that the possibilities for connection between these texts is endless, and I hope that you have already generated ideas about them that I have yet to consider. At the very least, I hope this essay has demonstrated how a comparative work between the *Zhuangzi* and *A Thousand Plateaus* can achieve a deeper understanding of themes in both without engaging in a process of ideological reduction and without losing sight of the distinct and unique nature of both works.

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