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'The Usefulness of the Useless': Rethinking Disability through Classical Daoist Thought

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Introduction

What can the early Daoist texts teach us about disability? Studying Daoism with the hope of gaining insight into contemporary discussions of disability might appear to be misguided. The two canonical texts of classical Daoism, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, do not explicitly discuss disability as an object of theory or offer a model of it; however, these texts do provide resources and concepts that can enrich contemporary discussions of disability. Two particular ideas are discussed here. Daoist thinking about the body undermines normative assumptions about it that attributions of disabled are often dependent upon; and Daoism warns against the premature inferential leap from perceived and pronounced incapacity to a more general judgment of 'useless'. In general, Daoism's skepticism and particularistic approach to experience suggest caution about the value of appealing to models of disability. To appreciate this contribution, it is helpful to articulate something of the worldview and sensibility conveyed by the Daoist tradition.

The Daoist tradition is diverse and defies simple definition. When understood as a religious tradition, it encompasses multiple deities, studies in alchemy, quests for elixirs for eternal life, and various health manuals. Daoism is perhaps most simply understood, however, as the ideas expressed in two foundational texts, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. These were the basis for later, more diverse schools of Daoist thought, and will be the focus here. The most

widely known text in the Daoist canon, the *Daodejing*, is traditionally attributed to the shadowy figure of Laozi (sometimes written Laotsu or Laotze) and thought to be a settled text by the fourth century B.C.E, though authorship of the received text's 81 concise and poetic passages is uncertain. The second canonical text of classical Daoism is the *Zhuangzi*. Consisting of 33 chapters, it is named after its supposed author, Zhuang Zhou or Zhuangzi (c. 370-290 B.C.E.). Scholarly consensus has the historical Zhuangzi writing the first seven chapters of the text, known as the Inner Chapters. Later disciples or like-minded scholars wrote additional chapters embellishing the themes of the original chapters.

Daoist Metaphysics: Holism and Transformation

What unites these texts and makes possible the label of a Daoist school of thought is a shared worldview and corresponding sensibility. At its simplest, this worldview emphasizes holism and unity (*yi* —, also translated as “oneness,” “one,” or “singular”). As a metaphysical account of what the world most fundamentally is, holism is the view that the objects or entities cannot be individuated—separated from the background that gives rise to them—even if they might be nominally differentiated. The characteristics of any object, including persons, remain ineluctably linked with the network of background conditions that give rise to and are implicated in them.¹ The *dao* consists of an ineffable mass of interacting forces and particles that form a single great unity and give rise to the phenomena and events of the world.

In contrast to a world of discrete objects, the early Daoist texts see the world as made up of constantly shifting forces that interact and congeal to give rise to objects (including people) and then dissipate at some future point. These imperceptible and unarticulated forces that influence life and human affairs is one meaning of *dao* (道), from which Daoism takes its name.

This world is always in flux, even if some objects persist for a relatively long time when a stable and balanced configuration of forces arise. The importance of change to the Daoist worldview is clear in the number of words for change found in the classical texts, and in the fine-grained distinctions in different aspects of change that each term denotes. Transience and transformation are primary. Within this stream of ongoing transformations, attempts to individuate objects within such a fluid web are provisional, yielding at best contingent and temporary results. Given this, the essence or defining characteristics of an object or event are not sought, and no attempt is made to locate them within broader categories and identify the laws governing their behavior.

However, the world is not so full of change and transformation that it is chaotic and unknowable. There can be regularity or consistency (*chang* or *tong*) within this broader framework of transformations. For example, while still being part of process and transformation, day and night reliably follow each other, as do the cyclical seasons, and human forms persist for some time. There is, however, much change within these broader contexts of continuity.

One simple image that captures this worldview is mentioned several times in the *Zhuangzi*:² mushrooms. Consider a grassy field initially devoid of mushrooms. Given the presence of certain elements and forces, such as nutrients in the soil and the relevant temperature and humidity as conditions shift imperceptibly during the night, dawn breaks to reveal a collection of freshly-sprouted mushrooms. They emerge only because conditions in the environment come together in a timely way. But within a few hours or days the mushrooms wither and disappear, reabsorbed into the environment that gave rise to them.

The *Zhuangzi* tells us that a human life is somewhat like the mushroom. Unseen and unknown “cosmic” forces of various kinds cohere and give rise to a human form, which persists for a while (the duration of that particular life) and then dissolves as those forces move apart:

“The human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with, just something stumbled into, but those who have become human take delight in it nonetheless. Now the human form in its time undergoes ten thousand transformations, never stopping for an instant...” (Ziporyn 43).

This, *Zhuangzi* tells us, is why excessive human grief at the death of a loved one is often misplaced.³ It is to misunderstand the source and nature of human life, and to demand a human form from constitutive forces that bring no intrinsic guarantee or disposition towards such form. This account also makes clear that the Daoist worldview does not place explanatory weight on a powerful creator being who oversees worldly events.⁴ Even more removed is the idea of a creator with a special interest in the welfare of humanity. Humans are, the *Daodejing* tells us, like straw dogs used in a ritual sacrifice (ch. 5)—used when needed and then discarded, tossed on the fire or trampled underfoot when their allotted role has been fulfilled. The world (*tiandi*) is indifferent to human concerns. In contrast to the spirit of scientific inquiry, what lies behind the ceaseless transformations of the natural world and human life is left open. What matters is whether one can come to terms with the events that transpire within them.

Within this worldview, the human predicament is the challenge to find a *way* or a *course* through these changes and transformations, so as to fulfill our natural span and avoid an early demise (*quanming* 全命). This is a second meaning of *dao* and includes the social goal of finding a way to preserve the larger social order.⁵ This requires accommodating or yielding to the forces implicit in each situation while also making the most of them, nudging them in our favor or taking advantage of opportunity as it arises.

Daoist Metaphysics: qi (Vapor, Energy, Psycho-physical Force)

The Daoist view of the world as endless process and transformation derives from a metaphysics founded on *qi* 氣. The character *qi* is sometimes glossed as the character for vapor above the character for rice, suggesting the image of steam billowing above boiling rice. Other accounts explain it as mist forming in clouds. *Qi* is typically understood as a kind of psycho-physical force or energy, which straddles the divide between matter and energy, and includes different forms of energy. The forces or manifestations of *qi* are further divided into *yin* and *yang qi* (or phases of *qi*), suggesting mutually opposing bilateral forces that interact dialectically and give rise to change. For example, anything hot contains within it a movement towards cold since it loses heat to cooler surroundings; similarly, the depth of night is the point at which there is a turn towards daylight.

Qi refers to the environment and to atmospheric forces, such as wind and rain,⁶ and to the various fluid systems that, according to the Daoist, constitute the human body. These include the “flow” of the nervous system, the circulatory system or blood, the breath, and reproductive fluids. The concept of *qi* also describes both physical and mental aspects of the person. As *Daodejing* notes: “In carrying about your more spiritual and physical aspects and embracing their oneness, are you able to keep them from separating” (ch.10)? Healthy *qi* refers to both a strong pulse (physical) and feelings of vigor and motivation (mental). Recognizing the role of fluid *qi* systems in bodily health yields an initial comment on the meaning of disability. On this view, disability is the impediment of the flow of *qi*, where blockage leads to detrimental effects on the body. Traditional Chinese medicines, such as acupuncture, aim to remove these blockages and restore a healthy circulation of forces.

Within the body, *qi* energy is to be conserved.⁷ To over exert and thereby use up *qi* is dangerous (*Daodejing* ch. 52, 55). Put simply, people can wear themselves out by living in

ignorance of the way forces unfold around them and wasting energy by acting against these forces. In the *Daodejing*, one ideal manifestation or configuration of *qi* in human life is that found in an infant (*Daodejing* 10). The ideal *qi* here is described as pliant or soft (*rou*). The image of the baby tells us much about how the Daoist thinks people should approach the world. It suggests flexibility of the body and a mind not filled with knowledge, potency or power (screaming all day without becoming hoarse). and fear (*Daodejing* ch. 55). Further, the baby lacks the apparatus or inclination to impose and be guided by conceptual or linguistic distinctions of the world. The absence of familiarity with conventions, the freedom from habitual mental associations and ways of seeing the world, are valuable because they allow greater responsiveness to transformations in *qi* forces and the surrounding environment.

Qi also provides a reliable basis for action. The world is constituted by shifting *qi* vapors and forces, which coalesce to form discernible objects before dissolving and reforming. Subsequently, the capacity of human language to track such change is limited. Discrete objects can be identified and labeled, but out of expediency rather than as a reflection of a basic reality. Words and names applied to an ever-changing world of transformation could be misunderstood as picking out enduring objects or natural kinds, leading to error. Given suitable preparation, it is better for people to “listen with their *qi*” and act accordingly.

Given this worldview and *qi* metaphysics, what kind of ideal behavior is implied? Human conduct for the Daoist should be informed by both forgetting and knowing. The Daoist texts call for a forgetting of the social doctrines, especially those of the classical Confucians (*Daodejing* ch. 38, *Zhuangzi* ch. 4). Conventional social rules, rituals, and methods of social control are insufficiently sensitive to the nuances and subtle changes in the forces shaping most situations.

Similarly, too much reliance on logic and argumentative debate leads to overly abstract distinctions that lack relevance in everyday interactions.⁸ The world is too complex to model.

Ideal Daoist conduct might also be described as a know-how or confidence that, by removing doctrines and allowing cultivated internal (*qi*) forces and intuitive skills to express themselves, actions will be appropriate to context. “You will come to hear with the vital energies (*qi*) rather than with the mind” (*Zhuangzi* ch. 4.9). The Daoist ideas of spontaneity (*ziran*) and effortless action (*wuwei*) express this idea,⁹ as do the many skill or “knack” stories in the *Zhuangzi*.¹⁰ The important form of knowledge is thus a knowing how to act or what to do, even if the reasons for and origins of the action remains unknown.

Daoism and Disability

Having sketched the worldview and the way of being human presented in the two Daoist classics, how this outlook contributes to the understanding of disability can begin. The texts contain several ideas that are relevant. First, the emphasis on holism, a unity of all constitutive elements that make up the world and where each has a place, means that the distinction between able and disabled is greatly muted. Several *Daodejing* passages exhort the reader to treat the inept (*bushan*) or weak (*ruo*) as being on a par with the able or strong (ch. 27, 62).

Similarly, wariness about conceptual categories that divide the world and invite dispute (*Daodejing* ch. 2) compels restraint in dividing people into the “able” (*shan*) and its correlate the “un-able” (*bushan*). Singling out the worthy and promoting them to public office, for example, invites people to label those not deemed worthy as inept. The Daoists seem to believe that thinking in dichotomous categories has such intuitive appeal that, once an initial distinction is

made, people cannot resist identifying its opposite and thinking in terms of mutually opposed and divisive categories.¹¹

Relying on such categories also creates problems for the worthy. Mimicking the *Zhuangzi*'s playful style, an excess of ability can be seen as “disabling,” since those of outstanding merit who become public figures also become targets of envy, abuse, or violence and are less likely to live out their natural term. It is much better, suggest the Daoists, to recognize the dependency of the esteemed on what gives rise to them but is not so valued, i.e., the indeterminate background conditions (*wu*) (*Daodejing* ch. 11, 40, 64). Better still is to avoid all social discourse that relies on mutually opposed terms and whose fit with a fluid reality is tenuous.

Rejecting elaborate structures of knowledge and dichotomous categories, the Daoist sage dwells at the hinge point: “Where neither ‘this’ nor ‘that’ has an opposite is called the hinge of the course (*dao*)” (Ames, *Dao* 119). Finding the hinge point means remaining in the eye of the whirlwind or the stable center of the potter’s wheel (Ziporyn 14) while still aware of the transformations going on around and able to respond without distortion or doctrine. The Daoist way or path through life is one that is constantly unfolding and lacks clear articulation or definition; but this, as Schumm and Stoltzfus point out, also describes the disabled person’s experience in an environment constructed according to the categories of “normal” human beings and the able bodied (143).

Several of these themes might be developed further, but two Daoist ideas in particular hint at novel ways of approaching disability. These are Daoist thinking about the body, and the Daoist defense of the usefulness of the useless. There is a conception of body in the texts, which

identifies a more expansive and collective entity than the single physical body. Understanding this higher level collectivity or identity has consequences for how disability is understood, especially when it is premised on the idea of a normal human body. The usefulness of the useless suggests that people who appear to lack capacity or function are not only useful but can even exert an influence on those around. This idea suggests that disability itself can be a form of usefulness, and relieves the need for the disabled to meet standards for usefulness imposed by the non-disabled.

1. The body in Daoism

The Daoist texts, especially the *Zhuangzi*, react against what they perceive as an exaggerated belief in the separateness of the individual body from the circumstances in which it is embedded. According to this view, the body is a self-contained unit with its own particular form or structure. This mistaken belief leads to normative connotations being attached to the normal and intact human body, and this in turn generates an opposite and inferior category—the incomplete or disabled body. The Daoists reject the ideal of a normal body and the normative judgments derived from it. Discussions and presentations of the body are only one aspect of disability, but are important nonetheless. People can and do react to others on the basis of how their bodies differ from what is perceived to be the standard type.

This rejection of the normal human body takes several forms. Perhaps the simplest is the rejection of the attachment of social prestige to a wholly intact physical body. The Confucians in particular valued the maintenance and preservation of the body bequeathed by parents, exemplified by being a good son.¹² But failure to keep the physical body intact was not merely an insult to family or ancestors; it was often a sign of criminality. Amputation was a common

punishment in the classical period. An incomplete body was thus not only a physical disablement, it was also a shameful failure to uphold the honor of parents and an explicit sign of transgression of communal norms and reduced social status.¹³

The *Zhuangzi* rejects the prevailing social attitudes towards the body. In a critical repost to conservative elements of Confucian thought, several stories feature amputees and cripples who are also popular and influential sages and teachers. The story of Wang Tai begins chapter five:

In the state of Lu [Confucius' home state], there was a man called Wang Tai, whose foot had been chopped off as a punishment. Yet somehow he has as many followers as Confucius himself. Chang Ji questioned Confucius about it. "Wang Tai is a one footed ex-con, and yet his followers divide the state of Lu with you, Master. When he stands he offers no instructions, and when sits he gives no opinions. And yet they go to him empty and return filled....What kind of man is he?" Confucius said, "That man, my master, is a sage. Only procrastination has kept me from going to follow him myself. If he is master even to me, how much more should he be so to you. I shall bring not only the state of Lu but all the world to follow him!" (32.2)

Wang Tai is a "one footed ex-con" yet his influence is equal to or greater than Confucius. The author has us believe that Confucius himself becomes a follower. Wang Tai's body is incomplete but his clarity (*ming*) of mind (*xin*) about the world (its processual and transforming way) constitutes a form of influence or power. Others are drawn to him. In the Daoist sage, the physical body is rendered tangential to social influence and prestige.¹⁴

But the Daoist rejection of the normal body is not limited to the rejection of conventional social judgments of its importance. It prizes a particular kind of attitude or personal response towards a body that deviates from physical norms. Daoist stories of sickness and deformity reveal sufferers whose attitude is not one of suffering, and do not call for a pitying response. Rather, their attitude blends curiosity, awe, and acceptance. One *Zhuangzi* story features four friends, Ziji, Ziyu, Zili and Zilai, of whom Ziyu falls ill.¹⁵ When Ziji goes to visit him, Ziyu's attitude is striking:

Ziyu said, "How great is the Creator of Things, making me all tangled up like this!" For his chin was tucked into his navel, his shoulders towered over the crown of his head ... his five internal organs at the top of him, his thigh bones taking the place of his ribs, and his yin and yang energies in chaos. But his mind was relaxed and unbothered. He hobbled over to the well to get a look at his reflection. "Wow!" he said. "The Creator of things has really gone and tangled me up!"

Ziji said, "Do you dislike it?"

Ziyu said, "Not at all. What is there to dislike?" (44)

Ziyu is unconcerned with the loss of his normal or healthy form. His case is distinguished by a sense of awe and fascination at the transformations his body is undergoing, and even curiosity at what will come next. Ziyu's next words highlight this wonder:

Perhaps he [the creator of things] will transform my left arm into a rooster, thereby I'll be announcing the dawn. Perhaps he'll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet, thereby I'll be seeking out an owl to roast. Perhaps he will

transform my ass into wheels and my spirit into a horse; thereby I'll be riding along – will I need any other vehicle?" (45)

His attitude to the changes is movingly pragmatic. He is determined to understand these bodily changes in a way that renders them as enabling, as bringing new opportunities rather than regret at the loss of familiar human form and its usual function.¹⁶ Through invention and resilience, disability should be integrated into everyday life. Of equal importance, however, is the story's didactic force and implicit normative demand; this attitude of pragmatic coping toward disability should be the norm, adopted by the able-bodied as well as the disabled.

The story of Ziyu also offers a deeper comment on the place of the physical body in Daoism. This is the rejection of the ideal of the human body as a natural kind; ideally all human bodies are to be understood by reference to a natural template and knowledge of this generic human form informs understanding of any human. The ideal of an intact and normal human body does not feature in the thoughts and actions of Ziyu. He has no attachment to any conception of what his body should be like and therefore no anxiety or revulsion as his body transforms into novel configurations. More important to an accurate understanding of the body are the transformative forces that shape it and its integration into a larger whole.

Why is this significant for disability studies? Arguably, the basic categories through which the world is parsed provide the basis for, and thus influence, value judgments. They are central to questions of whether something is an X (a human, etc.), including the positive or negative associations attached to that identification (respect directed at a human), whether something is a good example of an X (a good human being). Part of the discriminatory force associated with disability is the underlying belief that a human body, in some ideal sense, has a certain structure or composition, which is responsible for familiar human capacities and

characteristics. Although subtle, such implicit assumptions can lead to a mild degree of shock when encountering a body lacking these familiar specifications. This is sometimes described as a kind of revulsion due to the incongruence between the normal body ingrained in thought and the presented incomplete body, which resists ready categorization.¹⁷ Such an abnormal body is thus deprived of the faint feelings of approbation and the useful conceptual associations that recognition of the familiar engenders. However, as the *Zhuangzi* story suggests, when there is no attachment to a natural kind, there cannot be a failure to identify an object in terms of its natural kind, nor a negative and discriminatory reaction when such failure arises.

The question then arises: why doesn't the *Zhuangzi* place value on the ideal of a normal physical body? The answer is because it recognizes another conception of body more important than the intact human physical form. Recognizing this alternative body is integral to understanding the basic processes constituting the world and human experience. To understand this alternative conception of body, we should first understand the diversity of ways in which the human body is conceptualized in the early Chinese texts. These extend far beyond the ideal of the human body as a generic physical form.

As Deborah Sommer points out, there are several different terms for body in the classical texts, each associated with a distinct cluster of ideas. While the conceptual distinctions between them are not always clear, the terms give rise to a range of informative heuristics for thinking about the body. The classical texts also contain a term for the body as a structure (*xing*, 形). *Xing* can refer both to the structure of the body ("skeleton" 形骸) and to its superficial appearance or surface form ("a person's appearance" 外形), but it is *wuxing* (無形, literally "no body") or formlessness that appears more often in the Daoist texts. There, *xing* is often a temporary form, assumed against the background of formlessness or inchoateness. The elemental forces flow into

or congeal as a body but disperse in time. The human form is temporary and contingent, and its value should not be overstated. Returning to Ziyu, he offers a poignant analogy to illustrate this view (*italics added*):

Now suppose a great master smith were casting metal. If the metal jumped up and said, “I insist on being nothing but an Excalibur!” the smith would surely consider it to be an inauspicious chunk of metal. Now, if I, having happened to *stumble into human form*, should insist, “Only a human! Only a human!” Creation-Transformation would certainly consider me an inauspicious chunk of person. So now I look upon all heaven and earth as a great furnace, and Creation-Transformation as a great blacksmith – where could I go that would not be right?
(46)

The prioritizing of *wuxing* over *xing* can be understood as a commitment to uncover the metaphysical assumptions that create the very idea of bodily disability.

Another term for the body is *shen* (身). While this has several meanings, *shen* often refers to the social status of the body—a person’s standing in the eyes of others. For the Confucians in particular, *shen* is the public manifestation of the degree of self-cultivation and can, as it were, be read off the “surface” of the body by others. Amputation diminishes the *shen* body’s social standing, while graceful movement and comportment enhance it, conveying cultivation and refinement.¹⁸ The *shen* body thus marks the point at which the inner world of self-cultivation meets the public realm of family and state, and its status is a comment on the successfulness of this integration into social life. Here, the physical form of the body is less important than how well the cultivated body integrates.

This conception of the body also suggests a novel conception of disability. For the *shen* body, disability is the uncultivated body, which proceeds vulgarly or clumsily through public space and social interactions. In fact, there is another dedicated word for such a body: *qu* (軀). The disabled *qu* body lacks refinement and learning. Those who are typically regarded as able-bodied can still be disabled in body, insofar as they lurch from social interaction to social interaction without shame, acting inappropriately, inciting resentment, etc. Failing to integrate socially, they are a disruptive influence.

The Daoists deny the importance of the body as it is defined through social practices and accrued status. But *shen* has a meaning relevant to the Daoist account—the identification of the body by reference to an extended framework, which extends beyond the boundaries of the individual body. In Confucian thought, that from which the body derives its identity is an extended web of social roles and relationships, as illustrated by the Confucian five cardinal relationships: ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, younger-older, and friends. For the Daoists, the larger corpus into which the individual person is integrated is the *ti* (體) body.

What is the *ti* body? Sommer describes it as “a corpus of indefinite boundaries, which might encompass multiple persons” (324). As this vague definition suggests, the *ti* body is not a clearly defined or bounded entity like the biological human body. It is broader and more capacious, extending spatially or temporally beyond the individual body. It indicates a fuzzy composite, the unity formed by the person’s physical body and a larger whole.

The *ti* body is recognized in several schools, and the Daoist account of the *ti* body follows the Daoist worldview, and *qi* metaphysics in particular. This body is conceptualized as the unity formed between the individual biological body and the surrounding environment. The

body is constantly transforming, but these transformations are in harmony and integrated with the larger entity. This is vividly illustrated in the story of crippled ex-con Wang Tai. When asked to explain Wang Tai's influence, Confucius compares Wang Tai to:

[A] man who takes heaven and earth as his own bodily organs, and the ten thousand things [all phenomena and events] as his own guts, a man who is merely lodging for the moment in his particular limbs and trunk and head, a man who regards even his own eyes and ears as mere semblances. He takes all that his consciousness knows and unifies it into a singularity, so his mind always gets through unslaughtered. (34)

The claim that the sage forms one body with an extended field of beings or forces is repeated several times in the *Zhuangzi*.¹⁹ The figures are sages because they understand the unity of their physical bodies with the broader forces and energies that give rise to them. We are told that "he could see the singularity" (6.37), "I am the same as the transforming openness" (6.54), and "the sage gets through to the intertwining of things, so that everything forms a single body around him" (108). The *Daodejing* also takes awareness of unity as crucial to conduct: "The sage grasps the oneness" (ch. 22); "*Dao* is the flowing together of all things" (ch. 62).²⁰

Anthropologist Brian Knaft's study of the body in Melanesian culture is helpful in clarifying the idea of the *ti* body. In agrarian Melanesian culture, the collectively constituted body begins at birth and is expressed through the medium of food or the food chain. The unborn baby is nourished by food provided by family members, and the growing child is formed by this food. The food is the product of their physical labor, and their labor is also exchanged for food with other members of the community. This generates a series of connections which are symbolic yet can be traced through various related processes. The energy of physical labor,

including economic transactions with others in the community, and the nutrients in the ground transform into food stuffs; in turn, the food transforms into the body of the growing child. In this way there is a sense of body that unites a group of people through tangible connections. As Knauft notes, “those whose food you consume are those whose labor, land and essence constitute your own being. Most Melanesians concretely appreciate the physical energy used in subsistence cultivation, and the way this is converted into bodily substance to maintain health and well-being” (Sommer 318). Here we see a heightened consciousness of the powerful link between labor, food, and life, and of a corpus or body that emerges from this way of seeing the world.

An analogous case exists in the Daoist worldview, albeit one that extends beyond the food cycle and recognizes a wider range of constitutive forces. This shifting between mediums or modalities while maintaining identity and continuity aptly expresses the *qi* metaphysics and cosmology described earlier. The *ti* body can be identified with *qi*. Here, *qi* refers to forces or energy that are not restricted to a single medium, but can pass between superficially different substances or modalities—from the kinetic energy of labor, to the chemical energy of foodstuffs, and even to the feeling of vigor or motivation experienced by a person. *qi* is not confined within a single physical body, but circulates among, and in some sense demarcates, a *ti* body.

To explain the *ti* body in this way is not to offer a clear and concise definition of it.²¹ This vagueness, however, is consistent with the Daoist wariness about attempts to impose a rigid conceptual structure on reality.²² Even without conceptual clarity, it is clear that the recognition of a larger collective body has normative, action-guiding significance in the Daoist texts. In the *Zhuangzi* in particular, the sense of body most relevant to action is not the individual physical unit or body. Those who truly understand the forces at play in the world are guided by awareness

of this larger corporate entity. Returning to the Wang Tai passage, Confucius describes the benefits of recognizing the *ti* body (italics added).

Looked at from the point of view of their differences, even your own liver and gallbladder are as distant as Chu in the south and Yue in the north. But looked at from the point of view of sameness, *all things are one*. If you take the latter view, you become free of all preconceptions about which particular objects might suit the eyes and ears ... Seeing what is one and the same to all things, nothing is ever felt to be lost. (33)

People habitually think of themselves as individual entities with determinate form, but this is a mistake. Grasping the processual and transformational nature of reality means recognizing the unity of one's body with a larger whole, the relative unimportance of a normal body within that whole, and the porosity of the boundaries of the human form.

If one identifies with the larger unity, then nothing can be lost;²³ lacking a limb or some other diminution of the individual body is not regarded as a deficiency. Since the Daoist does not regard the individual physical body as normative, the basis for ascriptions of disability predicated on the normal body lose is lost. Viewing the world as a unity or a whole invites an attitude of seeing things in terms of sameness and dispels such exclusionary judgments of difference.²⁴ The Daoist view of the body presented here might be summarized as the belief that diverse forms of human embodiment can be integrated into a mutually complementary whole. This is one of the ideals of modern disability studies (Tremain 2002 1-24).

The *Zhuangzi* gives us one final image to express this guiding ideal: the tally. Chapter five of the *Zhuangzi* is titled *De cheng fu* (德成符, translated as "Markers of Full Virtuosity" by

Ziporyn) or "The Signs of Fullness of Power" by A.C. Graham, 1981). *Fu* 符, here translated as "marker" or "sign", originally meant "tally." In ancient China, a tally was an official seal or disc that was broken into matching but irregular halves and carried by the envoy to guarantee his authenticity or that of an official command. Each half of the tally formed an irregular shape not easily categorized or replicated. Yet it also formed a perfect whole when matched with its complementary half.

In the *Zhuangzi* chapter, the broken tally symbolizes the irregular or "broken" bodies of cripples or amputees. But the tally image suggests that although these bodies do not fit into the conventional mold of the normal body, they nevertheless integrate into and form a unity, one body, with some larger whole—in this case the surrounding environment.

A discriminatory sense of disability comes from taking only a partial view of things. Focusing on a broken piece of jade (a jagged half of the tally) and failing to appreciate the whole renders it useless. Further, its irregularity also suggests its uselessness, especially to those ignorant of tallies.²⁵ Yet, the beauty of the tally metaphor is that not only does the half tally find its counterpart, but it is precisely this irregularity that is the source of its usefulness and bestows upon it a form of power. This is the power possessed by the cripple Wang Tai and other figures. They fit themselves into the world and somehow make it fit around them. This usefulness of the superficially useless is the second contribution of Daoism to disability debates.

2. The use of the useless

A reoccurring theme of the *Zhuangzi* is the usefulness of the useless (無用之用 *wu yong zhi yong*). A story featuring *Zhuangzi*'s friend and opponent, the dialectician Hui Shi (Huizi), illustrates the idea:

Huizi said to *Zhuangzi*, “The King of Wei gave me the seed of a great gourd. I planted it and when it matured it weighed over a hundred pounds. I filled it with liquid, but it was not firm enough to lift. I cut it in half to make a dipper, but it was too large to scoop into anything. It was big and all, but because it was so useless, I finally just smashed it to pieces.”

Zhuangzi said, “You certainly are stupid when it comes to using big things ... How is it that you never thought of making it into an enormous vessel for yourself and floating [*you*] through the lakes and rivers in it? Instead, you worried that it was too big to scoop into anything, which I guess means our greatly esteemed master here still has a lot of tangled weeds clogging up his mind!” (1.14)

Gourds were often used as water containers and ladles, and Huizi acquires an unusually large one. Unable to think otherwise, he acts on that conventional view of gourds and finds his giant container useless. *Zhuangzi* points out how a little more imagination would have presented Huizi with a great opportunity: roaming freely (*you* 遊) around the realm. Huizi simply needed to reconceptualize the relationship between the gourd and water, and his conclusion of useless was premature.

There are several similar stories in the *Zhuangzi*, many featuring a tree initially condemned as useless but later revealed to be useful in some sense.²⁶ In these, a tree does not meet the standards applied to trees by society—useful for building materials, producing fruit, coffins, etc.—and is deemed useless. But in its alterity, the tree finds a use and exerts an influence, i.e., people are drawn to it because it provides shade. Since being perceived as less

useful or, in extremis, useless is a concern in disability discourse, the *Zhuangzi* stories offer various responses to this unsympathetic perception. In the gourd story, this is a warning against thoughtlessly applying familiar categories, failing to see the potential of what is in front of us, and arriving at hasty judgments. The tree stories highlight how people habitually take their own interests as adequate standards to evaluate objects, but without adequate understanding of the object. The carpenter judges the tree useless, but his limited and highly selective understanding of trees is no basis for a fair judgment of the tree.

Several other useful ideas can be derived from these stories. One is the practical advantage of being deemed useless. In the *Zhuangzi*, the classic statement of this is the greatly deformed Shu the Discombobulated. When the authorities called for troops, he simply presented himself along with the able-bodied, flailed his arms, and was immediately safe from the draft. Then when the time came to “take on any great labors” (public works), Shu’s condition also exempted him. He was thus “able to live out his natural span.” In the right context, incapacity becomes an advantage. Shu is disabled if warfare is valued, but not if a long-life is valued and the norm (31).

This advantage accrues in several ways. One is the liberation from social rules. In Shu’s exemption from the draft, rules that would have brought unwanted burden are not applied. There is also a sense in which disability can be skillfully used by the disabled to create advantage. Shu makes the most of what he has; his dramatic performance before the authorities spares him the draft, and when the authorities “handed out rations to the disabled” he got “three large measures of grain” (31). From a contemporary perspective, however, such use of disability is a double-edged sword. It appears to be a case of relying on a disability to secure charity or help, but this

threatens to undermine the sense of empowerment that recent developments such as the Americans with Disabilities Act sought to provide.

But disability can create advantage without recurrence to pity or charity. Shu, for example, by washing, sewing, and “pounding the divination sticks and exuding an aura of mystic power” could “make enough to feed ten men.” Advantage can also result directly from the disability itself. In ancient China, for example, the blind were considered to have a particularly refined sense of hearing, and many famous music masters were blind.²⁷

There is another distinctively Daoist sense in which disability can be a useful advantage. This is when it creates a particular kind of freedom from both the expectations of others and the self-given pressures of desire and ambition. The *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* promote being oblivious to social standards and conventional norms, are unbothered by peer pressures, and are impervious to categories of beautiful, rich, etc., and the negative correlates they generate. In the *Daodejing*, the uncarved block (*pu*) is a metaphor for Daoist living. Unrefined wood is regarded more highly than carved and sculpted wood. Lacking refined tastes or far-reaching ambitions, someone who is like an uncarved block is immune to the frustrations that accompany them. Lacking sophisticated tastes and thoughts, there is little about daily life that can disappoint. This constitutes a kind of freedom; at the very least it’s a liberation from familiar and substantial worries about what others think of oneself, what one thinks about oneself, and how one measures up to others. This state of indifference can be the (beneficial) result of disability.

Sam Crane’s account of life with his severely disabled son, Aidan, in his book *Aidan’s Way* illustrates this. Aidan is born with severe physical and cognitive impairments and is liable to frequent brain seizures. He requires constant assistance and, in a sense, lives suspended in

infancy. Yet the infant is one of the models of Daoist living—free from preconceptions and the indoctrination.²⁸ Crane writes of his son:

Is my life better than his? Is his somehow less than mine?

...I am also caught up in the frenetic workaday world. Although I can point to an array of achievements—a PhD, a good job, publications—I often wonder if I really am getting anywhere. At times I feel enslaved to the demands of the economy and society.... And there lies Aidan, completely disconnected from such worries. There is so much he cannot do, but also so much he does not have to do. He does nothing but nothing is left undone. (Crane 189-90)²⁹

The absence of pressures, both from outside and those placed upon oneself by ambition, shame, doubt, etc., is a feature of Aidan's life that might be regarded as "useful." However, to claim too much for impairment might appear to romanticize disability, suggesting that it is really not so bad while overlooking the realities of disability. While blind music makers might be excellent musicians, few people would prefer their children to be blind instead of sighted. In his account of coming to terms with Aidan's disabilities, Crane also acknowledges this worry (190).

Perhaps the best response is to avoid sweeping judgments of the comparative worth of different lives and instead develop two lines of response. The first is an account of the nuanced freedom that accompanies disability despite the apparent loss of freedom; the second concerns how disability can still exert a form of power or influence at the local level despite its superficial uselessness. Further, developing these responses by focusing on cases of cognitive impairment will complement earlier discussions of the body and demonstrate a further dimension of disability studies to which Daoism might contribute.

One kind of freedom, the loss of which is associated with disability, is that of organizing a life according to a personal conception of how it should be. A person forms a life plan or develops projects and then instrumentally reasons towards them, directing the objects of the external world accordingly.³⁰ Intellectual impairment means the loss of this freedom. This form of freedom, in which autonomy and individual choice are crucial, is highly valued in liberal consumer societies.

The Daoist worldview, however, presents a different picture; outcomes are subject to forces that the individual cannot control, but can only react to and enjoy, accepting and also opportunistically making use of circumstance. Insisting that a life take a particular form is somewhat like the metal leaping up at the blacksmith and declaring “Only an Excalibur!” But since this kind of freedom is not prized in Daoist thought, its loss cannot be a significant impairment. Instead, a second kind of freedom can result from the loss of this freedom to organize a life plan. To see this, consider the following self-narrated story of Jan, a woman with early dementia, taken from Stephen Post’s study of Alzheimer disease:

Things began to happen that I just couldn’t understand. There were times I addressed friends by the wrong name. Comprehending conversations seemed almost impossible. My attention span became quite short....

One day, while out for a walk on my usual path in a city in which I had resided for eleven years, nothing looked familiar. It was as if I was lost in a foreign land, yet I had the sense to ask for directions home....

She was a strong and independent woman. She always tried so hard to be a loving wife, a good mother, a caring friend, and a dedicated employee. She had

self-confidence and enjoyed life. She had never imagined that by the age of 41 she would be forced into retirement....

Then one day as I fumbled around the kitchen to prepare a pot of coffee, something caught my eye through the window. It had snowed and I had truly forgotten what a beautiful sight a soft, gentle snowfall could be.... As I bent down to gather a mass of those radiantly white flakes on my shovel, it seemed as though I could do nothing but marvel at their beauty. Needless to say [my son] did not share in my enthusiasm; to him [shoveling] was a job, but to me it was an experience....

I am still here, I thought, and there will be wonders to be held in each new day; they are just different now.

Quality of life is different to me now from the way it was before. I am very loved, in the early stages, and now my husband and sons give back in love what I gave them. I am blessed because I am loved.... Now my quality of life is feeding the dogs, looking at flowers. My husband says I am more content now than ever before! (18-20)

This account shows the movement from one kind of freedom to another, which accommodates the cognitive impairment. It is one that consists of the ability to enjoy the moving present and experience delight and wonder at the ordinary objects encountered there. This does not require locating those objects within practical projects or life goals. This freedom is similar to Ziyu's attitude to the transformations of his physical body. A worthwhile life is re-conceived and now consists of a series of rolling encounters with everyday scenes and objects, each of

which is delightful on its own terms. Collectively these serial experiences amount to a worthwhile life, especially because they are shared with others, who can also participate in them.

The second use of disability is to appreciate how a cognitive impairment can influence events, and exert a certain power, in unexpected ways. Let us return to Aidan. Aidan is blind, unable to speak, and wheelchair bound. But he is still able to exert power (*de* 德) over those who come into contact with him. The first lesson that Aidan administers is one in the psychology of desire. As his father notes, interacting with Aidan has taught him much about how he structures expectations and the kinds of desires he allows himself to be influenced by:

Aidan's life was all about us letting go of expectations and desires. We had to let go, continually, of whatever image of him we held in our minds. As the typical became the impossible, we had to redefine his normal, our normal. (Crane 136)

Aidan's father learns to let go of existing desires and instead allows his desires to track the situations, to respond to and be limited by the possibilities present therein. Such sentiments are exactly those of the *Daodejing*. In chapter 41 we are told that the greatest image has no shape (*wuxing*), i.e., that the most important representations by which we live are constantly shifting. The Daoist ideal of *wuyu* is a response to such fluidity. One of the variants on the more familiar Daoist ideal of *wuwei* ("effortless action" or "acting-without-doing"), *wuyu* literally means "desireless action." But rather than the removal of desire, it actually recommends cultivating desires appropriate to context and the flow of events, which are less vulnerable to being thwarted. Contrast this stance on desires bound up with the realization of more complex projects and life goals, which are more liable to frustration and friction with circumstances.

The benefit of allowing desires to be reordered or restructured is the creation of delight in everyday interaction with Aidan. Enhanced attentiveness made possible by greater openness to outcomes and imagination enables his father to find meaning and delight in the subtlest of actions. One such example involves a baby jumper:

It was an odd-looking contraption that hung in a doorway: a long slender spring attached to a little seat, allowing a toddler, one not quite ready to walk to happily bounce up and down and swing to and fro.... Aidan never progressed to standing and striding, but he was able to use his ability to hop and twist in the jumper.... When properly positioned, he would push down with his legs and throw himself about with great abandon. This was one of our developmental milestones and we cherished the times he cheerfully bobbed about in the living room portal. (Crane 113)

From one perspective, Aidan's actions represent failure. He cannot walk, or even stand, when in the device intended to help him learn to walk. But the perception of uselessness only arises when the situation and objects are understood conventionally, as with Huizi and his gourd. There is clearly another experience of this event, one invisible to those with only a partial perspective of the situation and an understanding conditioned by conventional expectation, and it is a success story. His father knows that Aidan's happy bobbing is an achievement for Aidan, but he can only see this as such because he has discarded expectations of Aidan and early infancy that would otherwise have produced disappointment. Aidan's uselessness becomes a tiny ability.

A second way in which Aidan's incapacity constitutes a power is his ability to get those around him to do things, without any obvious effort or striving on his part. Aidan provides an example of the *wuwei* ideal of conduct—effortless action or doing without action. As he grows

older, Aidan begins attending school. He is integrated into a typical class with the aid of a personal assistant. One child in the class, Ricky, has a speech impediment and, as part of this therapy, is told that he must speak more to practice the relevant movements of jaw and tongue. However, because of his impairment, Ricky is wary about speaking with other children, scared that they will make fun of his irregular pronunciation. Things are different with Aidan.. He presents no such judgmental front, and Ricky is willing to speak freely with him, without fear of rejection. As Crane notes:

In Aidan, however, he had a friend, one who did not strain to understand his words or laugh when they came out garbled. Aidan did not judge or correct. He just sat silently, varying little in his countenance whatever Ricky might say. On more than one occasion when I was in the classroom, I noticed Ricky close to Aidan, happily chatting away, gaining the practice he needed to clarify his speech, sustained by the presence of an uncritical buddy. Aidan was yin to his yang, and able to help. (149-50)

It is the things that Aidan cannot do that enable another to achieve something useful and beneficial. Without Aidan's impairment the above interaction would presumably have been very different. When the impact of disability in highly particular and private contexts is recognized, then it's use becomes apparent. This is also seen in how Aidan effortlessly influenced his father's career path, directing him into local politics. Aidan's father joined the local school board and was heavily involved in education policy; but, as Crane admits, it is unlikely he would ever have considered such a path without Aidan's narrative to guide him.

We might summarize the usefulness of Aidan in general terms. Through close contact, those regarded as disabled can teach others about assumptions towards disability, facilitate the

actions and development of others, and even exert influence on others' actions, though not necessarily in obvious ways. In contrast to brief and superficial encounters, prolonged interaction enables a richer picture of the person to emerge, along with the contribution of the "useless" to the world around them.

Conclusion

In one sense, it is unclear to what extent the Daoist texts can engage directly with contemporary disability studies. Daoist thinking on disability wasn't able to definitively shape attitudes to disability in the larger population exposed to that tradition. Miles suggests the Daoist appreciation of the useless was confined to the educated classes (96).

Daoist thought does not yield a developed alternative model of disability. In its reluctance to theorize it prompts critical reflection on the use of such models. At the same time, the texts offer imaginative ways of seeing the world that might inspire novel approaches to familiar themes in contemporary debates, including body, freedom, and agency. The two texts invite us to question any claims about the normal human body, or the independence of that body from the surrounding environment. Similarly, appreciating the subtle ways that the impaired person can still influence events elevates the status of those regarded as deficient by conventional standards. In this way, Daoism contributes to a re-imagining of what normal is and highlights assumptions behind its ascription.

There are limitations as well as advantages to conceiving disability from a Daoist point of view. On the negative side, Daoist insights might have only indirect relevance to public policy. A feature of bureaucratically-managed mass society is the use of general rules applicable to large numbers of people, which includes the question of how to distribute limited resources among a

diverse population, and often disability discourse must struggle within this framework. But this contrasts sharply with the Daoist focus on particularity and change, suspicion of public office, and the rejection of social conventions. And while policy might be constantly contested and revised, there are advantages to such generality. A term such as disability can be useful in providing recognition of various populations and as a step towards reform and more informed debate. However, a current in Daoism seems to flow away from such fractious public debates.

Daoism can make a contribution. Public policy can be insufficiently sensitive to the experiences of people at a more local level, such as those with a disabled family member. It is perhaps in this realm, as resources applied in everyday personal experience, that the Daoist texts make their contribution. Through their images and metaphors the Daoist texts serve to create a site of resistance to, or critique of, public policy. In imaginatively presenting alternative realities, they help to make disability clearer when more abstract and general rules and conventions are failing to track the personal experiences of those who directly confront disability.

This personal viewpoint might be captured by one final metaphor from early China. Disability can be thought of as being like the patterning or striations in jade. Every community has its distinctive collection of human idiosyncrasies and particularities, which collectively constitute a distinctively patterned whole. What is thought of as disabled is simply a further set of features or characteristics within this community, characteristics that are perhaps statistically more unusual, including the magnitude of the impairment, but not of a different kind or type. They merely provide some of the patterning that, like jade, can increase the value of the whole. Daoist literature helps us see this.

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¹ "The events of the world arise from the determinate (you 有), And the determinate arises from the indeterminate (wu)." (Ames, *Dao* 139. All Daodejing quotes from this edition.)

²"The morning mushroom knows nothing of the noontime" (Ziporyn 4); also see 2.7.

³ For stories about death in the *Zhuangzi*, see Ziporyn 45-47, especially the death of Zhuangzi's wife in the received text (Graham 123-4).

⁴ There is some playful speculation about what might be behind the transformations. Zhuangzi talks in passing of the "creator of things" (*zao wu zhe*), but this appears to be a rhetorical flourish, and the question is never pursued.

⁵ The Chinese character *dao* 道 is composed of a head 首, i.e., a person, and a road or path 辶. The character thus suggests a person moving along a path. A third meaning of *dao* in the text is that of discourse or a guiding social code. In this sense, *dao* is used critically to refer to the Confucian fondness for fixed ritual and the upholding of normative hierarchical social roles, such as ruler-minister and father-son, but the Daoists do not reject such relationships per se. The *Zhuangzi*, for example, recognizes the father-son bond, but sees it as a natural (*tian*) phenomenon, not a relationship structured by social mores.

⁶ See the six *qi* 六氣 in *Zhuangzi* 1.8.

⁷ Techniques such as meditation, breathing exercises, and fasting are used to control *qi* (*Daodejing* 10, 56; *Zhuangzi* 4.9).

⁸ Zhuangzi's many debates with the logician Huizi frequently end with this conclusion (Ziporyn 38). Also note the skeptical arguments about language in chapter 2.

⁹ See, for example, *Daodejing* chapters 17, 56, 57 and passim.

¹⁰ Most famous of these is the story of Cook Ding carving an ox, and doing so with such intuitive precision that he finds the spaces between the joints and his knife has remained sharp for nineteen years (Ziporyn 22).

¹¹ A contemporary example would be the tendency to contrast healthy with unhealthy and abled with disabled, and then to unreflectively associate healthy with abled and unhealthy with disabled (Schumm 153).

¹² See Analects 8.3, and *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence, The Xiaojing*, section 1 (Ames, *Chinese* 105).

¹³ Caution is needed regarding the degree to which Daoist thinking opposed Confucian thought. It is not entirely clear how much the early Confucians were moved by social approbation. Confucius approves of his daughter marrying an ex-convict and insists that the scholar-apprentice not be afraid of poverty or anonymity. Further, retreat from a troubled world is discussed in the latter books of the Analects, a theme typically regarded as Daoist. Confucian and Daoist schools often present a range of opinions rather than a united front.

¹⁴ This subversion of the status of the normal human body is found in other parts of the text, and extends to the treatment of the dead body. The *Zhuangzi* mocks those who attach too much significance a lifeless form. See for example, 6.45.

¹⁵ Similar stories of acceptance of bodily transformation include 6.27 and 6.48.

¹⁶ Talk of transformations might be thought to apply only to a limited set of physical disabilities. But while congenital disablement is less easily captured by this framework, it is not entirely excluded, as even congenital issues can have distinctive patterns or ways of unfolding not captured by common knowledge. Regardless, creatively responding to transformations of the body has meaning when the able-bodied become physically disabled.

¹⁷ Miles describes how deformed facia and limbs, leprosy and bomb blast damage lead to people feeling unable to classify the person before them, and so experience discomfort or even revulsion. He notes that this problem is concealed to some degree in affluent countries, where medical resources enable the restoration of a semblance of human form (92-93).

¹⁸ Another related conception of body is relevant here: the *gong* (躬) body refers to the body that participates in ritualized interactions, behaving according to precedent or social expectation and fulfilling duties attaching to roles and rituals.

¹⁹ Unity, (*yi* 一), which might also be translated as one, oneness, wholeness or singularity is prominent in chapter 6, for example.

²⁰ Other references to unity include 6.29: "Emulating what ties all things together, on which depends even their slightest transformation, on which depends the total mass of transformation that they are". See also *DDJ* 49 and 58.

²¹ When treated as a metaphysical claim, such a view might seem implausible and difficult to accept. Indeed, some early Chinese schools are skeptical about this idea of a holistic unity within an extended body. For example, in Mencius 2A2 Gongsun Chou asks Mencius whether disciples of Confucius were of one body with the sage; Mencius dismisses the thought.

²² Furthermore, as A.C. Graham notes, the *Zhuangzi* never asserts that all things are one, but only that the sage looks upon them as one (56).

²³ Compare Zhuangzi 6.27: "If you hide the world in the world, so there is nowhere for anything to escape to, this is an arrangement, the vastest arrangement, that can sustain all things."

²⁴ The idea of yiti, or one body or a unified whole, explains the Daoist indifference to the popular distinction between life and death, since the death of the individual physical body does not entail the end of the larger ti body. In fact, death is, in some perverse sense, part of the ti body: "Who knows the single body (yiti) formed by life and death, existence and non-existence? I will be his friend" (45); "It is not life that produces death, and it is not death that brings life.... Both are parts of the same body, which confers on them their unity" (91). This one body encompasses the myriad forces that produce both life and death. The final move in this logic is for the sages to forget about the earthly coil entirely and to treat their human form (*xing*) as if it was something external to themselves (36).

²⁵ This view is reinforced by the only other use of tally in the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (4.9). There, the tally refers to the rigid and fixed conceptions through which people approach the world. Such people recognize only those experiences, objects, or values that "tally" or fit with their preconceived notions. This includes conventional social norms that prized an intact body, free from brandishing, tattooing, and amputation.

²⁶ See, for example, the stories on pages 8, 30, 31 and 32.

²⁷ Analects 15.42 describes an encounter between Confucius and a blind music master. On the place of blind musicians in Chinese society, see Miles 100-101.

²⁸ Passage 20, reads: "I alone am so impassive, revealing nothing at all. Like a babe that has yet to smile; So listless, as though nowhere to go." See also *DDJ* 28.

²⁹ Crane is responding here to a passage in the *Zhuangzi*: 'It's sad ,isn't it? We slave our lives away and never get anywhere, work ourselves ragged and never find our way home. How could it be anything but sorrow?... Life is total confusion. Or is it that I'm the only one that's confused? (Crane 187).

³⁰ For an account how such projects or character are necessary to the most basic human motivations to do anything, see Williams this needs a page number.