

Perfecting Judgment or Releasing It: Two Paths to Transcendence in Stoic Philosophy and Zhuangzi's Daoist Account

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ABSTRACT

Ancient philosophical traditions propose that human beings possess the capacity to realise their highest nature, yet they diverge on how this is achieved. This paper argues that the contrast between Epictetus's Stoic and Zhuangzi's Daoist accounts of meaningful existence reflects deeper cultural-philosophical assumptions about whether wisdom requires perfecting discriminating judgment or releasing attachment to it.

For the Stoic thinker Epictetus, humans are "offshoots of God" whose nature manifests through rational capacity. The meaningful life consists in perfecting prohairesis, a term that literally means "to choose one thing before another." Through years of examining impressions and ranking them hierarchically according to rational criteria, practitioners achieve transcendence by becoming increasingly skilled at making correct distinctions, separating true impressions from false ones, good from bad, what lies within our control from what does not. The sage embodies perfected discrimination.

For Zhuangzi, humans possess innate attunement to the Dao that becomes obscured through discriminating judgment itself. The meaningful life consists in suspending the compulsive imposition of binary categories, such as this versus that, right versus wrong, useful versus useless, that obscure the complementary relations among perspectives. Transcendence is achieved not by refining discrimination but by releasing the compulsion to discriminate. From a vantage point beyond fixed polarities, apparently opposed perspectives reveal themselves as complementary, and the sage responds to each situation with spontaneous responsiveness not confined by rigid conceptual frameworks. The sage embodies impartial receptivity.

The paper demonstrates that this divergence reflects distinct cultural-philosophical orientations. Epictetus's Stoicism, influenced by Socratic dialectic and Aristotelian categorisation, treats language as

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capable of capturing stable universal truths through precise definition. In his account, wisdom emerges through argumentative refinement and systematic judgment. Zhuangzi's Daoist thought privileges practical knowing and treats linguistically articulated principles as insufficient for navigating the particularity of concrete situations. For Zhuangzi, wisdom emerges through embodied responsiveness to particular circumstances.

The analysis reveals that disagreement about the meaningful life extends beyond surface-level differences in practice to deeper assumptions about whether human flourishing requires making better distinctions or releasing the grip of distinction-making itself.

Keywords: Stoicism, Daoism, Sagehood, Transcendence, Spiritual Cultivation, Epictetus, Zhuangzi, Comparative Philosophy, Meaning of Life, Eudiamonia

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Introduction

What makes a human life meaningful, and how might a person transcend ordinary existence to realise the highest capacities inherent in human nature? These questions have occupied philosophical and spiritual traditions across cultures for millennia. The concept of sagehood represents not merely an intellectual ideal but a lived answer to existential questions about human purpose and transcendence. This paper examines how Zhuangzi and Epictetus, two philosophers separated by vast cultural and temporal distances, respond to these enduring questions. The *Zhuangzi* was compiled during the Warring States period in fourth-century BCE China, whereas Epictetus lectured in Rome and Nicopolis during the first and second centuries CE. Despite emerging from different philosophical frameworks, both thinkers identify habitual, erroneous judgment as the primary obstacle to human perfection and propose the suspension of judgment as the necessary initial step toward cultivating wisdom. Ultimately, however, their conceptions of human perfection diverge. For Epictetus, suspending judgment creates space for rational mastery and disciplined self-control; for Zhuangzi, suspension frees the sage from confinement to any single perspective, opening the way to a spontaneous, responsive way of being in the world. These divergent paths illuminate questions about whether wisdom requires perfecting discriminating judgment or releasing attachment to it, a divergence that reflects deeper cultural-philosophical assumptions about language, reason, and the accessibility of truth.

The paper proceeds in four parts. Part 1 clarifies how each thinker conceptualizes sagehood and identifies the principal obstacles to its realization. Part 2 examines their shared endorsement of suspension of judgment and asks whether, and in what sense, each philosopher might be considered a philosophical skeptic. Part 3 analyzes their respective accounts of sagely perfection, focusing on the kinds of cultivated capacities that define the perfected state. Part 4 explores how the two models of sagehood reflect deeper Greek and Zhuangzian Daoist assumptions about reason, language, and knowledge, and concludes by assessing what these ideals reveal about the nature of wisdom and its cultivation.

Defining Sagehood

Epictetus and Zhuangzi each envision the sage as one who fully realises the highest potential inherent in human nature, yet they differ in what this realisation entails. This section examines how each thinker defines sagehood and identifies the principal obstacles to its realisation.

1. Epictetus's Sage

For the Stoics, the sage represents the telos of spiritual and philosophical practice (Stephens, 2007). In Stoic texts, the sage is described as one who acts correctly in all circumstances, whose judgments are infallible, and whose character is fully consistent with nature. While achieving sagehood remains theoretically possible, later Stoics

acknowledged its extreme rarity. Seneca suggests that sages appear only once in five hundred years (Epistles, 42.1), and he takes Cato the Younger as a historical exemplar approaching this ideal (On the Constancy of the Sage, 7.1). In Epictetus's teaching, Socrates, Zeno, and Cleanthes (Discourses, 3.23.32) are considered models of Stoic wisdom, with Socrates most frequently cited as the paragon (Discourses, 3.5.14–19; 4.5.1–4). Epictetus explicitly instructs his students to follow Socrates' path: "You may not yet be Socrates, but you ought to live as someone who wants to be Socrates" (Enchiridion, 51.3). Though he acknowledges the formidable difficulty of achieving complete sagehood, he considers it sufficient if his students are progressing toward that state (Discourses, 2.19.25). His position aligns with the broader Stoic teaching expressed through the archery metaphor: what matters is not always hitting the target but doing everything one can to shoot straight, even when external factors determine whether the arrow strikes true (Klein, 2014). The focus of his philosophy is therefore on developing the practitioner's capacities through sustained spiritual cultivation rather than on attaining a fixed endpoint.

Like most Stoics, Epictetus subscribes to a pantheistic theology (Baltzly, 2003). Throughout his teaching, he uses "God," "Zeus," "Logos," and "Nature" as near-synonyms (Brouwer, 2014; Long, 2002). The Stoic cosmos is pervaded by Logos, the rational principle that orders all things, and perfecting one's judgment is ultimately a matter of bringing one's individual reason into alignment with this cosmic rationality (Long, 1986). For him, the divine does not exist as a separate, transcendent being wholly distinct from creation but rather permeates all beings, including humans. "You carry God around, and yet, poor fool that you are, you don't know it" (Discourses, 2.8.12–13). Human minds are not separate from the divine mind but are "offshoots" of God (Graver, 2025; Long, 2002, p. 163). The basis for this shared essence is the Stoic doctrine that the cosmos is a single living rational organism; everything within it, including human minds, is composed of the same intelligent substance, *pneuma*, so that human rationality is not merely analogous to divine rationality but is a portion of the same cosmic Logos (Long, 2002). In Discourses 2.14.13, Epictetus draws a direct parallel between divine and human nature: "If the gods are trustworthy, he must be trustworthy too; if free, he must be free too; if benevolent, he must be benevolent too." This suggests that Epictetus attributes to humans a capacity that collapses the essential distinction between the perfected human and God (Long, 2002). The crucial difference is that while Zeus possesses this nature eternally, humans must realize it through spiritual and philosophical practice. Thus, sagehood remains an aspirational goal for the sincere Stoic practitioner.

For Epictetus, the defining characteristic distinguishing the sage from the ordinary person is the infallibility of judgment, understood in Stoic terms as perfected *synkatathesis* (assent). The sage never grants assent to false impressions and never withholds it from true ones (Brennan, 2005; Long, 2002). Perfected assent is not an end in itself; it leads to *eudaimonia* (flourishing) and *apatheia* (freedom from destructive passions), because one who judges correctly about what is genuinely good, bad, and indifferent is never disturbed by what lies outside one's control (Stephens, 2007). While ordinary people oscillate

between true and false impressions, the sage maintains perfected judgment at all times (Hensley, 2018; Stephens, 2007). Judgment determines character because character emerges from actions, and all actions arise from judgments: "If you're asking me how you'll fare, what I have to say to you is that you'll do well if your judgments are sound and badly if they're not. Because every action that we take is always caused by a judgment" (Discourses, 3.9.2). He goes further, asserting that judgment governs the very purity of the soul: "uncleanliness of the soul consists in bad judgments... and a clean soul is one that has the right kind of judgments" (Discourses, 4.11.8).

Epictetus identifies the primary obstacle to sagehood as the misapplication of preconceptions (*prolēpseis*). When general concepts like "good," "bad," or "harmful" are applied to particular events without rational scrutiny, the resulting judgments become unreliable and prone to error. For the foolish, what Epictetus regards as the rational fragment within becomes obscured by judgments formed through cultural conditioning, emotional attachments, and uncritical acceptance of appearances. These false judgments accumulate over a lifetime, forming layers of mistaken belief that increasingly distance the person from their inherent rational nature and highest capacities. Epictetus challenges his students: "We all talk about 'good' and 'bad'... because we have preconceptions covering each of these terms. So the question is: have we elucidated our preconceptions?" (Discourses, 2.17.10). Given this diagnosis, Epictetus emphasizes the necessity of suspending unreflective judgments as a precondition for progress. The purpose of this discipline is also to prevent what amounts to *akrasia*, the condition of acting against one's own rational interests; in the Stoic framework, all action follows from assent to impressions, so one who acts badly has not knowingly chosen wrongly but has assented to a false impression without adequate scrutiny (Brennan, 2005). The possibility of such failure does not contradict the Stoic claim that human essence is *Logos*, because what appears as irrational behaviour is not the product of a non-rational faculty overriding reason but the malfunctioning of reason itself; the rational capacity that constitutes human nature can operate defectively when distorted by habitual false judgment, just as an eye retains its nature as an organ of sight even when disease impairs its functioning (Long, 2002). Training in the discipline of assent is therefore designed to interrupt the habitual, unreflective assent that produces actions the practitioner would not endorse upon careful and discerning Stoic reflection. "Before embarking on philosophical theory," Epictetus warns, "we should lose the presumption of thinking that we know anything worthwhile" (Discourses, 2.17.39–40). Suspension, in his system, functions to clear away automatic judgments and create the space for the rational examination that genuine philosophical progress requires.

2. Zhuangzi's Perfect Person

Epictetus and Zhuangzi each envision the sage as one who fully realises the highest potential inherent in human nature, yet they differ in what this realisation entails. For Epictetus, the basis for this potential is explicitly theological: the Stoic framework holds that human minds are fragments of God's rational nature, and sagehood consists in

recovering that divine rationality through practice. For Zhuangzi, the potential is better understood as natural and spiritual rather than theistic; it consists in the full expression of the Dao as it manifests in each particular being.

Zhuangzi envisions sagehood as the actualization of an inherent spiritual capacity, though how this actualization relates to active cultivation remains a subject of scholarly debate. The opening parable of "Wandering Far and Unfettered" describes the transformation of Kun, an enormous fish, into Peng, a giant bird that ascends ninety thousand miles into the sky. Creatures like the cicada and the dove mock Peng's grand journey, questioning why anyone would need to fly so high (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 4). Guo Xiang's (1961) commentary on this parable recognises that the Dao manifests itself differently in individual beings, each with their own distinct natural capacities. For Guo Xiang, each being can achieve sagehood by acting in accordance with what its own nature allows and what it is willing to do (Chiu, 2023). The quail and the Peng differ in their external reach, but neither is barred from internal realisation on that account. Other scholars emphasise a complementary dimension of the parable: that the Kun's submersion in the deep ocean represents a period of preparation and accumulation before transformation becomes possible, suggesting that spiritual development involves active cultivation and not only acceptance of one's given nature (Chen & Jiang, 2012; Chiu, 2023). These two readings illuminate aspects of Zhuangzi's account of what the path toward sagehood involves. Guo Xiang captures the sense in which each being's particular manifestation of the Dao is already complete in itself, while the cultivation reading captures the process by which a being comes to fully realise that completeness through sustained practice. The artisan parables elsewhere in the text support this emphasis on cultivation: Cook Ding's butchering of the ox (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 26), the hunchback cicada-catcher (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 151), and the woodworker Celebrant (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 154) all depict how years of dedicated engagement enable a form of sagely attunement.

Unlike Confucian sagehood, which is achieved through moral virtues and social ritual, Zhuangzian sagehood is not moralistic but eudaimonistic (Fraser, 2014). It concerns transforming one's way of being in the world to flourish in accordance with nature. To reach this state, a person must overcome the primary obstacle: discriminating judgment that channels experience into rigid conceptual divisions. The *Qiwulun* chapter diagnoses the root of this compulsion explicitly: humans habitually evaluate experience through binary judgments of "this versus that" (shi/bi 是/彼) and "right versus wrong" (shi/fei 是/非) (Fraser, 2015; Roth, 2000). Zhuangzi repeatedly demonstrates how such judgment limits understanding: the demand to distinguish dream from waking, or usefulness from uselessness, imposes conceptual boundaries that obscure how such categories participate in the Dao. While categorical thinking is ubiquitous in ordinary cognition, it obstructs the situated, spontaneous responsiveness of the sage. To address this, Zhuangzi's spiritual practice is about suspending habitual judgments and emptying oneself of predetermined categories. The text emphasizes how the Utmost Person "uses his mind like a mirror,

rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing" (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 72). The Zhuangzian sage who transcends discriminating judgment is free to respond to each situation as it presents itself.

Both philosophers thus arrive at a shared diagnosis: erroneous judgment obstructs the actualization of what is already present within human nature, and suspension of judgment offers the necessary remedy. Yet as the following section will demonstrate, they ultimately aim toward divergent ends.

Suspension of Judgment and Skepticism

Both philosophers prescribe suspension of judgment as the initial step toward sagehood. Suspension of judgment is also the defining practice of skeptical philosophy; for the skeptic, suspension itself produces tranquility (*ataraxia*), which is the philosophy's ultimate goal. Given this parallel, this section examines how Epictetus and Zhuangzi each relate to skeptical philosophy. I argue that while both thinkers employ skeptical methods, neither accepts skeptical conclusions.

1. Epictetus: Suspension and Assent

For Epictetus, suspending the urge to make unreflective judgments is the first step toward philosophical progress and the mastery of the discipline of assent. The Stoic psychology of action recognises three interrelated disciplines, each governing a distinct dimension of the soul's engagement with the world (Sellars, 2003). The first concerns desire and aversion (*orexis* and *ekklisis*): the practitioner must learn to desire only what lies within one's control and to be averse only to what lies within one's control, so that attachment to externals such as health, wealth, or reputation does not become a source of disturbance. The second concerns impulse and restraint (*hormē* and *aphormē*): the practitioner must ensure that impulses to act are appropriate to one's roles and circumstances. The third, which is most central to Epictetus's teaching, concerns assent (*synkatathesis*): the practitioner must evaluate impressions before endorsing them as true. Epictetus regards this third discipline as the most important because the other two depend on it: one cannot desire correctly or act appropriately without first judging correctly what is good, bad, and indifferent. The Stoics draw a crucial distinction between *phantasiai*, impressions one receives from the outside world, and the beliefs formed about them. Impressions do not, in themselves, constitute beliefs or judgments; they remain raw cognitive presentations that the rational faculty evaluates (Brennan, 2005; Brittain, 2014; Long, 2002). What transforms an impression into a belief is assent (*synkatathesis*), the act of rational endorsement given by the Stoic practitioner. Within this framework, a key part of Epictetus's Stoic epistemology concerns which impressions should be endorsed as true and allowed to guide belief and action. By withholding assent from impressions that have not been properly examined, the practitioner creates the epistemic space necessary for correct judgment.

The Stoics and Skeptics maintained a famously heated philosophical rivalry. From the skeptical perspective, the Stoics are paradigmatic dogmatists because Stoicism presupposes certain doctrines about how one should live (Sellars, 2003). The central disagreement concerns whether true impressions can be reliably distinguished from false ones. The Skeptics argue that no reliable criterion exists; they therefore claim that ongoing suspension of judgment is the only feasible response. Epictetus disagrees and uses his account of kataleptic impressions (*phantasia kataleptikē*) to refute this claim. According to Epictetus, kataleptic impressions are those so clear and distinct that they compel assent. He sets out three necessary conditions: they must arise from what actually exists, accurately represent that reality, and bear such a distinctive phenomenological stamp that they could not possibly arise from any other source (Braicovich, 2012; Hankinson, 2003; Hensley, 2018). Such impressions can then serve as the foundation for rational action and belief. While Epictetus acknowledges Academic skeptical concerns, he maintains that under typical conditions, when sense organs function properly and no interfering factors are present, kataleptic impressions offer the clarity needed for making good judgments.

Beyond epistemological objections, Epictetus also poses a practical objection against skepticism through the *apraxia* argument: if skeptics truly suspend assent to all impressions, they would be unable to act at all (Aikin, 2020). Since action presupposes belief, and belief arises through assent to impressions, the complete suspension of assent would make practical engagement with life impossible. The sage's perfection, therefore, consists not in refusing all assent but in effectively discriminating which impressions warrant assent.

Epictetus does acknowledge that not all situations present kataleptic clarity. When opposing impressions present themselves with equal plausibility, the rational response is to withhold assent until clarity emerges. Ultimately, the crucial divergence between Stoic and Skeptic lies in the purpose suspension serves. For Epictetus, suspension is merely a temporary step, after which one should move toward assenting to certain impressions and forming virtuous beliefs. For the skeptic, however, suspension itself is the destination. Because Epictetus maintains that the sage can attain secure, rational knowledge of what is true, good, and how to live virtuously, he is decisively not a skeptic. The Stoic sage's task, then, is not to abandon judgment altogether and perpetually, but to perfect it. In addressing whether such perfected judgment can change, a crucial distinction must be made between the sage and the *prokoptōn* (the student making progress). While the *prokoptōn* remains in a fragile state requiring constant, effortful vigilance to avoid assenting to false impressions, the sage has achieved a stable and irreversible disposition (*hexis*). For the sage, the right use of impressions is no longer a struggle against the self but is the spontaneous and consistent operation of a reason that has been fully returned to its natural state. Thus, while the *prokoptōn* is defined by the process of vigilance, the sage is defined by the perfection of *prohairesis*, where error becomes a psychological impossibility.

2. Zhuangzi: Suspension and Openness

Like Epictetus, Zhuangzi prescribes suspension of judgment as a beginning step toward sagehood, though there are nuanced differences in the object of suspension. Where Epictetus targets judgments formed from misapplied preconceptions, Zhuangzi targets the discriminating mind's tendency to impose rigid categorical distinctions onto reality. For Zhuangzi, the sage must suspend categorical thinking and empty the mind of predetermined conceptual frameworks, especially binary categories such as good or bad, right or wrong. Where ordinary people encounter experience already filtered through linguistic and conceptual categories, the sage embodies a way of being that remains receptive without being governed by rigid prior categories (Han, 2023). Zhuangzian spiritual and philosophical cultivation requires actively letting go of the discriminating mind's compulsive need to classify, evaluate, and judge, and resting in an openness wherein one responds to circumstances directly and spontaneously.

Zhuangzi's emphasis on suspending discriminating judgment has generated considerable scholarly debate about his relationship to skeptical philosophy. Hansen's (1992, 2003) influential interpretation characterizes Zhuangzi as a radical skeptic. Later readings, however, suggest that Zhuangzi's critique of linguistic knowledge does not necessarily entail the complete rejection of knowledge as such. The key to understanding Zhuangzi's position lies in recognizing that he distinguishes between two modes of knowing and that he suspends judgment about one form while affirming another. Essentially, Zhuangzi critiques the limitations of linguistic, propositional knowledge while emphasizing the value of tacit, skill-based knowledge. This distinction is often framed as the difference between "knowing-that" and "knowing-how," or between propositional knowledge and ability-based knowledge (Fraser, 2024; Ivanhoe, 1993; Raphals, 1994). For Zhuangzi, the sage embodies knowing-how: a fluid, responsive wisdom that cannot be captured in words. Linguistic-conceptual knowledge imposes rigid categories and propositional structures onto a reality that is itself dynamic and responsive to multiple perspectives. Practical knowing is embodied as "dynamic, responsive, and improvisatory, providing access to a natural world that is similarly dynamic and free of fixed rules" (Eno, 1996, p. 127). In Chapter 2, Zhuangzi questions whether human speech differs from bird chirping: "...what [human speech] refers to is peculiarly unfixed. So is there really anything it refers to? Or has nothing ever been referred to?" (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 13). Here, Zhuangzi challenges the assumption that language captures experience in any stable or objective manner. For him, sagehood means freedom from teleological and linear narratives (Han, 2023), as the sage simply allows meanings and directions to emerge situationally. For Zhuangzi, then, sagehood is manifested not through words or doctrines, but through the art of living.

However, Zhuangzi's suspension of linguistic judgment does not extend to all value propositions. The text clearly suggests Zhuangzi "would like to see a greater appreciation of uselessness, less fear of death and poverty, less dogmatism, less ambition, less devotion to the state" (Schwitzgebel, 1996, p. 88). If Zhuangzi were a radical skeptic, he would be

unable to advocate any particular way of life (Sturgeon, 2015; Wong, 2005). Yet what appear as value claims in Zhuangzi are not prescriptive moral rules but pragmatic orientations toward preserving vitality and remaining responsive. He does not impose fixed standards of right and wrong; instead, he points toward ways of being that harmonize with circumstances and preserve vitality. His skepticism functions only to the extent that it loosens the hold of rigid cognitive frameworks and argumentative positions.

Zhuangzi's skepticism functions therapeutically rather than destructively. His goal is to heal dogmatic thinking and open new possibilities for understanding, not to tear down all knowledge claims. On close examination, Zhuangzi's philosophy lacks the "ardent doubt" (Nelson, 2008, p. 9) characteristic of Western skepticism. He does not establish doubt as a fixed standpoint. Instead, he employs multiple, shifting perspectives without privileging any single view, including skepticism itself. His skeptical strategies serve to liberate practitioners from rigid thinking patterns rather than to entrench doubt as a philosophical position (Nelson, 2008). In Zhuangzi's approach, suspension of judgment is neither an end in itself, as for the Pyrrhonian skeptic, nor preparation for grasping universal rational truths, as it is for Epictetus. Epistemic humility, cultivated through Zhuangzi's methods, opens up space for receptiveness to new situations and perspectives. It frees practitioners from rigid thinking to find the "axis of the Dao" (dao shu) (Gauley, 2019; Mou, 2015), a centre point from which apparently opposed perspectives reveal themselves as complementary rather than contradictory. Each finite perspective captures a genuine aspect of the thing it addresses, but from within that single perspective, other perspectives can appear incompatible; the sage, standing at the axis, sees that these aspects depend on one another and together constitute the whole. From this centre, like the centre of a wheel, one can respond to endless change without being confined to any single perspective. The goal is the cultivation of a disposition well suited to navigating a boundless world (Griffith, 2017). By standing at the axis of the Dao, the sage does not reject individual perspectives but recognizes their partiality. The sage's transcendence, therefore, is not a move toward a "view from nowhere," but a move toward a centered position that acknowledges how various "this" and "that" aspects ontologically depend on one another. Where Epictetus suspends false judgments to make space for true ones, Zhuangzi loosens confidence in linguistic categories to engage more responsively and spontaneously.

The Sage's Perfection

1. Epictetus: Perfection as the Right Use of Impressions

For Epictetus, the sage's wisdom should take the form of embodied mastery rather than mere theory or endless epistemological debate. Like Zhuangzi, he rejects book learning severed from lived practice. In a chapter titled "What Is the Rule of Life?" (Discourses 1.26), Epictetus insists that philosophy is primarily expressed in the way one lives, as a practical skill exercised and refined through daily training. A tension runs through Epictetus's account of spiritual training: reason already constitutes the essential

nature of every human being, yet sustained practice is required to bring that nature to its full expression. The resolution lies in the Stoic recognition that in most people, rational nature exists in a corrupted or undeveloped state, obscured by the accumulated false judgments that cultural conditioning, emotional habit, and unreflective assent have layered over it. What appears as "irrational" behaviour is, in the Stoic view, the malfunctioning of reason itself, not the product of a non-rational faculty overriding it (Long, 2002). The practice of suspending unreflective assent clears away distortions so that reason can operate as it was always constituted to operate; it is designed to recover rational nature rather than to introduce it. Sagely perfection, for Epictetus, is manifested as mastery of a specific capacity: the ability to evaluate impressions correctly and thereby judge well. He instructs his students, "Just as we train ourselves to deal with sophistical arguments, so we should also make it our daily practice to train ourselves to deal with impressions" (Discourses 3.8.1).

The capacity to evaluate impressions effectively is realized through what Epictetus identifies as *prohairesis*, the uniquely human faculty of rational volition (Long, 2002; Scalenghe, 2018). *Prohairesis* occupies a central place in his thought. Where other Stoics typically use the term "governing faculty" (*hēgemonikon*), Epictetus deliberately focuses on *prohairesis* because it isolates what is genuinely within our control: the internal acts of assent, refusal, and judgment themselves, untouched by external circumstances (Dobbin, 1991; Long, 2002; Scalenghe, 2018). The distinction carries a significant philosophical implication. The *hēgemonikon*, or "governing faculty," refers to the commanding centre of the soul and applies to animals as well as humans; it encompasses not only rational capacities but also the mind's capacity to receive impressions, which simply befall us from outside and are therefore not fully within our control. *Prohairesis*, by contrast, is confined to humans and God, and refers specifically to the rational, self-scrutinizing faculty of judgment, assent, and volition (Long, 2002). By identifying the true self with *prohairesis* rather than *hēgemonikon*, Epictetus isolates only those capacities that are entirely "up to us," drawing the sharpest possible boundary between self and world (Dobbin, 1991; Long, 2002). This is the only thing that is truly "ours," free from hindrance and compulsion. Since Epictetus's philosophy is organized around what lies wholly within the agent, the sage's task is to perfect this faculty.

The Stoic framework recognizes three categories of status regarding the degree to which one has attained sagehood (Long, 2002; Sellars, 2003; Stephens, 2007). The vast majority of humanity remains in the state of foolishness (*aphrosunē*), vulnerable to being swayed by incoming impressions and passions without exercising rational discernment. At the opposite extreme stands the rare sage, who has achieved perfect virtue and rationality. Epictetus addresses his teaching primarily to a third group that sits between these two poles: those who are "making progress" (*prokoptontes*; Sellars, 2003, p. 63), the philosophical practitioners working toward the ideal of sagehood. For these practitioners, Epictetus prescribes a rigorous discipline of assent, whereby one must actively resist the immediate force of impressions rather than passively receiving them.

In Discourses 2.18.23–24, he instructs: "If you counter the impression with these reminders, you'll overpower it and it won't make off with you." The practitioner must actively hold impressions at a distance, examining them before granting assent, rather than being swept along by their initial persuasive force.

Epictetus recognizes that students initially waver in their ability to exercise rational judgment. Yet as they repeatedly practise, their prohairesis becomes progressively more reliable and efficient. Epictetus highlights the cumulative power of this training through an athletic metaphor: "And if you make this exercise your regular practice, you'll see how your shoulders develop, and your muscles and sinews" (Discourses 2.18.26). Just as physical training strengthens the body's structure over time, repeated philosophical practice steadily fortifies the soul's capacity for correct discernment.

Ultimately, the goal of philosophical practice for Epictetus is not simply to identify which specific impressions are kataleptic in isolated moments, but to develop a settled disposition, a *hexis*, of the soul that responds appropriately to impressions as a matter of character (Long, 2002). The emphasis on *hexis* echoes Aristotle's ethical teaching, where virtue is a stable disposition acquired through practice rather than a matter of isolated right actions (Nicomachean Ethics II.1). In fact, even though the correct handling of impressions is central to his conceptualization of sagehood, Epictetus rarely mentions kataleptic impressions directly; he mentions them only twice in all the Discourses (Taylor, 2022). Instead, he repeatedly emphasizes habit-building and consistency as the mark of proper judgment. Responding well to impressions becomes, through sustained practice, a defining feature of one's character. Since we cannot directly control which impressions strike us, what lies entirely within our power is the cultivation of prohairesis itself (Long, 2002). Through years of disciplined practice, the sage achieves the perfected character, possessing the lived capacity to make ideally flawless use of impressions in every situation.

2. Zhuangzi: Perfection as Responsive Attunement

Where Epictetus defines sagely perfection as the capacity to make correct judgment at all times, Zhuangzi has a different view. His concern is not with establishing fixed criteria for epistemic discrimination but with loosening one's attachment to rigid distinctions.

Zhuangzi's wind-and-hollows metaphor illustrates his emphasis on responsive attunement. When the same wind blows through ten thousand different hollows in the earth, each hollow produces its own distinctive sound; some roar, some whistle, some sigh. The wind stays the same, but each hollow has its own unique structure. As Zhuangzi concludes: "It is the gusting through all the ten thousand differences that yet causes all of them to come only from themselves" (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 12). Just as each hollow "picks out" its own response from the wind according to its particular shape, each being responds to reality according to its particular constitution. A legitimate plurality of perspectives and values emerges when different beings with different natures encounter

that reality (Barrett, 2011; Yearley, 1996). The sage, like the hollows, responds to reality according to the situation rather than imposing a single predetermined framework.

Epistemologically, Zhuangzi challenges the assumption that objective understanding exists independent of the experiencer (Ames, 1998). Understanding always arises from and remains embedded within the immediate conditions of experiencing, rather than being achieved by a detached observer standing outside those conditions (Ames, 1998). In his view, perspectives are phenomenologically constitutive (Nelson, 2008): each perspective discloses genuine features of reality relative to the structure and capacities of the perceiver, yet no single perspective exhausts what can be grasped. Closely aligned with this stance is the idea of "omnicentric holism," where "all things are determined solely by their relations to other things" and "any part (of the whole) is the whole itself" (Ziporyn, 2003, pp. 35, 46). Because everything is defined by its relations, any point can serve as the center from which the whole is understood. The philosophy repeatedly emphasizes that different beings with different structures produce different "truths" when the same reality is filtered through their individual lenses. Understanding remains inherently situational, interpretive, and reflexive. Given this epistemological framework, within each specific context, there is a course of action that best fits that particular being's nature and situation (Kjellberg, 1996, p. 14). What is good for one creature in one situation may not be good for another; what is right for a fish is not right for a human, and what is right for a person from Handan is not right for someone from Shouling (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 141). The sage's perfection, therefore, consists precisely in discerning what aligns with nature in each specific context.

Like Epictetus, Zhuangzi sees spiritual practice and cultivation as essential to achieving sagely perfection. Cook Ding describes his progression through three distinct stages: at first, he saw only the whole ox; after three years of practice, he ceased to see the ox as a unified object and instead perceived its constituent parts; eventually he no longer relies primarily on visual perception, encountering the ox "with spirit rather than scrutinizing it with my eyes" (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 26). Through sustained engagement with their craft, characters like Ding develop tacit sensitivity no longer dependent on explicit deliberation. Skill becomes so thoroughly integrated into the practitioner's being that action and awareness merge into seamless responsiveness. The mind achieves a state of "forgetting" (wang 忘), a transcendence of self-conscious deliberation. In Zhuangzi's philosophy, forgetting represents a cultivated emptiness in which ordinary distinctions between self and world lose their rigidity (Wang, 2022). The process involves active unlearning of habitual conceptual frameworks. Yan Hui describes his progression to Confucius in this way: first, he forgot benevolence and righteousness, then he forgot ritual and music, and finally, he achieved "sitting and forgetting," which he describes as "a dropping away of my limbs and torso, a chasing off of my sensory acuity, dispersing my physical form and ousting my understanding" (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 62). For Zhuangzi, what follows suspension is the cultivation of responsive attunement through embodied spiritual practice.

Ultimately, while both philosophers agree that the sage's perfection is an embodied skill rather than theoretical knowledge, the nature of that skill differs. Epictetus's wisdom mainly concerns the correct use of impressions. Through the discipline of assent, the Stoic sage builds a rational faculty so fortified that it remains unshakeable regardless of external circumstances. Wisdom ensures stability and consistency. Conversely, Zhuangzi's wisdom is navigational: through emptying consciousness of preconceptions, the Daoist sage arrives at a broader vantage from which the rigid structures of the self give way to seamless movement with the transformations of things. Wisdom, according to Zhuangzi, possesses the qualities of fluidity, flexibility, and ease of responsiveness. The sage's responsiveness is grounded in the perspectivist insight that each situation discloses genuine aspects of reality requiring attention to what the sage's broader vantage makes visible, rather than the application of predetermined categories.

Comparative Analysis

1. Hierarchical Judgment and Natural Response

Where Epictetus builds his philosophy around perfecting judgment, Zhuangzi builds his around loosening attachment to rigid and exclusive judgments. Etymologically, *prohairesis*, the core concept of Epictetus's philosophy, derives from two Greek roots: *pro* (πρό), meaning "before," and *hairesis* (αἵρεσις), meaning "choice." The term literally means "to choose one thing before another." The term's roots thus imply ranking, evaluation, and hierarchical judgment (Smolak, 2018). For Epictetus, the sage's perfection lies in mastering this faculty of discriminating judgment, perfecting the capacity to rank impressions and choose correctly among them.

In contrast, the Zhuangzian sage's wisdom does not depend on ranking impressions or drawing fixed categorical boundaries. As Nelson (2020) observes, Zhuangzian spontaneous responsiveness "does not grasp or reject, pick or discard. It is not a deliberate or purposive choice made between action and inaction, assertion and withdrawal, willing and not willing" (p. 15). Where the Stoic sage establishes hierarchies through rational evaluation, the Zhuangzian sage loosens such hierarchies and refrains from choosing between polarities. The very act of treating categorical boundaries as exhaustive, of asserting "this is X and not Y" while excluding all other aspects, constitutes for Zhuangzi the moment at which the Dao becomes obscured. The sagely state does not involve taking sides, as any preference for one alternative already excludes the other; instead, the aim is to embrace all things without exclusion. As Graham (1992) notes, the Daoist art of living "is a supremely intelligent responsiveness which would be undermined by analyzing and choosing" (p. 186). By aligning with the immanent Dao that pervades all beings rather than clinging to any single viewpoint, the sage achieves an expansive mode of existence. The gigantic figures in Zhuangzi's tales, such as Kun and Peng, metaphorically illustrate this through their exaggerated scale, achieving "de-differentiation and un-bounding" (Han, 2023, p. 15). Ultimately, where Epictetus achieves perfection through mastering

the art of discrimination, Zhuangzi achieves it through a process of unlearning, de-differentiating, and unbounding.

2. Effortful Vigilance and Effortless Responsiveness

This divergence also manifests in their views on how sagehood is cultivated. For Epictetus, the path toward sagehood is essentially one of unrelenting watchfulness over one's judgments, a path that requires intense discipline and effort. The *prokoptōn* is in a precarious position because the capacity for correct judgment remains incompletely developed (Stephens, 2007). The rational faculty is in such a fragile state that the practitioner must remain constantly on guard, as even momentary inattention can cause false judgments that undermine philosophical progress. Epictetus emphasizes the danger of judgment lapses through a medical analogy. In Discourses 2.18.10–11, he warns:

A person who had a fever, for instance, and then got better isn't in the same condition as he was before the fever, unless he's completely cured. The same goes also for the passions that afflict the soul. It retains certain traces and weals, and if they're not thoroughly erased...

He argues that each lapse in judgment leaves lasting damage that renders the practitioner vulnerable to repeated failure. Epictetus also compares the process to sailors navigating a storm (Discourses 2.18.28): just as sailors must remain vigilant, the *prokoptōn* must sustain constant attention against false judgments. He emphasizes that progress is only possible through perpetual vigilance: one must strive to "never relax our attention" (Discourses 4.12.19).

By contrast, in Daoist thought, water typically represents adaptability and natural flow rather than danger to be overcome. The Daoist sage does not conquer from a fixed standpoint but remains fluid and receptive, "snuggling up" to circumstances (Han, 2023, p. 69) rather than imposing predetermined frameworks. Where the Stoic practitioner exercises rational control to master circumstances, the Daoist practitioner cultivates receptive attunement to participate in nature's patterns.

Where Epictetus's path builds rational structure through accumulating correct judgments, Zhuangzi's practitioners progressively unlearn habitual conceptual frameworks until responsiveness flows without deliberate calculation. Zhuangzi repeatedly advocates action guided by embodied responsiveness rather than deliberative reasoning through his parables (Lai, 2019). Cook Ding, after years of practice, operates such that his skill has become second nature. He no longer consciously attends to the ox's anatomy; his knife moves through natural spaces without deliberate calculation. Zhuangzi presents the butchering as "simply happening ... as if all by itself" (Han, 2023, p. 80). Likewise, the swimmer in the whirlpool at Lüliang, when asked how he navigates the treacherous waters, responds that he simply enters with the inflow and emerges with the outflow, following the way of the water (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 154). Wheelwright Bian cannot articulate the knowledge embedded in his craft with words: "I cannot explain this with my mouth, and yet there is a certain knack to the procedure. I cannot even get my own son to grasp it" (Zhuangzi, 2009, p. 116). These exemplars suggest that for Zhuangzi,

knowledge emerges not from mental effort or cognitive vigilance but through bodily and sensorimotor capacities exercised in direct engagement with what is called for by the circumstances.

3. The Treatment of Contradiction

The two philosophers also differ markedly in how they understand contradiction. For Epictetus, contradiction itself is a symptom of error. Every rational soul, he claims, is by nature averse to contradiction (Discourses 2.26.3). Rationality inherently seeks consistency because contradiction indicates that at least one judgment must be false. Once a person recognizes an inconsistency in their judgments, rational nature itself compels them toward resolution:

If he does notice it, however, he'll find himself under considerable pressure to abandon and avoid the contradiction, just as he is sharply forced to withhold assent from a falsehood once he realizes that it is a falsehood (Discourses 2.26.3).

Epictetus's position on contradictions is saliently expressed in his critique of the Academic skeptic. The skeptic, who recognizes contradictions in his beliefs but refuses to resolve them through judgment, has allowed his faculty of reason to become "brutalized" (*apotethēriōtai*), and is "deader than a corpse" (Discourses 1.5.7–9). Since our rational nature consists precisely in our capacity for reason, and rationality as Epictetus understands it cannot accept known contradictions, someone who sees that their beliefs conflict yet refuses to resolve that conflict has, in his view, turned away from what makes them human. Because his *prohairesis* is perfected, the sage never assents to incompatible impressions; his judgments fit together without conflict.

Zhuangzi's view on contradiction proceeds from an entirely different epistemological standpoint. Rather than viewing contradictions as errors requiring resolution, what appears contradictory simply reflects reality seen from different perspectives. The sage holds this tension within a holistic whole, rather than seeking to choose one side above the other. For example, he does not demand a resolution of whether Zhuang Zhou dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreams of being Zhuang Zhou. In "Autumn Floods," when Zhuangzi and Huizi argue about whether the fish are happy, Huizi challenges: "You are not a fish—how do you know the fish are happy?" Zhuangzi responds: "You are not me, so how do you know I don't know what the fish enjoy?" The sage recognizes that "all those oppositions that define normal life occur as complementary interactions defined by and contained within a more comprehensive reality" (Yearley, 1996, p. 161). Where Epictetus views contradiction as a diagnostic failure demanding resolution through correct judgment, Zhuangzi views it as a natural feature of perspectival reality that the sage learns to inhabit without compulsion to resolve.

4. Cultural–Philosophical Roots

The two philosophers' divergent approaches to sagehood may reflect deeper cultural–philosophical orientations. For early Greek thinkers, wisdom meant grasping the natural world's underlying structure through rational inquiry (Eno, 1996). Within the

Greek philosophical tradition shaped by Socratic dialectic and Aristotelian categorisation, to which Stoicism belongs, Epictetus's insistence that kataleptic impressions bear self-evident marks recognisable to all rational minds reflects the Greek confidence in universal truths accessible to reason (Ames, 1998). Language is treated as capable of capturing stable truths through precise definition and logical analysis, and philosophy advances through argument, refutation, and the establishment of consistent doctrines that claim universal validity. Ultimately, his spiritual training aims to bring the aspiring sage's judgments into systematic coherence with a structured, orderly logos.

Zhuangzi's Daoist thought has a different philosophical orientation. Where Epictetus seeks to align individual reason with a rationally ordered cosmos through systematic judgment, Zhuangzi privileges practical knowing and sees linguistically articulated principles as insufficient for navigating the particularity of concrete situations (Eno, 1996). It is worth noting that this characterisation reflects Zhuangzi's philosophical commitments as one prominent orientation within classical Daoism, and should not be taken as representative of Chinese philosophical traditions as a whole. For Zhuangzi, valid knowledge is concerned less with abstract understanding of reality's structure than with effective responsiveness to the particularities of concrete situations, and he challenges the Confucian and Mohist confidence that linguistic categories can adequately capture the dynamic flow of experience. His artisan exemplars embody this conviction. The kind of knowing they exercise operates through direct engagement with particular situations, and their skill cannot be fully transmitted through words precisely because it is not reducible to linguistically articulated principles. His text accordingly resists systematisation, as he transmits wisdom through exemplars and parables rather than explicit instruction.

Conclusion

The comparisons show that Epictetus and Zhuangzi share a common starting point in the suspension of unexamined beliefs, yet beyond this, their paths diverge. For Epictetus, sagely perfection is judgment practiced flawlessly. For Zhuangzi, it is about moving through the world with attuned responsiveness. The sage who judges with rational infallibility and the sage who responds without relying on fixed judgments represent two contrasting visions of wisdom, each addressing different dimensions of what it means to live well.

Epictetus offers a compelling account of moral responsibility and rational agency, yet his demand for unrelenting vigilance over one's judgments risks tipping into rigidity and perfectionism. Zhuangzi's philosophy offers a pathway toward freedom and adaptability, though his text leaves the criteria for distinguishing genuine attunement from passive resignation largely unstated. Ultimately, Epictetus reminds us of the dignity and power of rational discipline; Zhuangzi reminds us of what such discipline may overlook when it privileges certainty and control over spontaneous responsiveness. This

analysis reveals that wisdom manifests differently depending on what one considers essential to human flourishing and the meaningful life: rational autonomy and moral accountability, or spontaneous responsiveness and adaptiveness.

Ancient philosophies continue to speak to contemporary debates about human agency, moral reasoning, and the nature of wisdom. In an era marked by information overload and rapid change, Epictetus's emphasis on disciplined discernment may offer tools for navigating competing truth claims, while Zhuangzi's adaptive responsiveness provides resources for embracing complexity. For those seeking meaningful existence, the comparison reveals that there is no single path to wisdom. Some may find meaning through the Stoic route of perfecting judgment, developing stable character through rigorous self-examination. Others may resonate with Zhuangzi's Daoist path of releasing attachment to fixed judgment and cultivating spontaneous attunement through embodied practice. Still others may recognize value in both approaches, discerning when each mode serves human flourishing. For those navigating questions about human purpose, value, and transcendence, these ancient paths continue to illuminate possibilities for what makes existence meaningful and how human beings might realise their highest nature.

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