Original research article
UDC 821.581.09:221.3
DOI 10.21618/fil2633051b
COBISS.RS-ID 144480513

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TREATING A BIRD AS A BIRD: ANIMAL ETHICS AND THE LIMITS OF INTERVENTION IN *THE ZHUANGZI*

Abstract: *Although nonhuman animals appear frequently in the premodern Chinese text* Zhuangzi*, they are often interpreted allegorically, leaving their ethical significance largely unexplored. This paper shifts from metaphorical readings to a literal engagement with Zhuangzi's animal narratives to reconstruct a distinctive framework of animal ethics. I argue that Zhuangzi's approach is grounded in epistemic humility and non-interference, emerging from a cosmocentric ontology and perspectival epistemology. Unlike contemporary anthropocentric or utilitarian frameworks, which focus on how humans ought to act toward animals, Zhuangzi questions whether humans are epistemically entitled to intervene at all.*

The argument proceeds in three interconnected stages: an ontological one, which situates all beings within a continuum of qi and challenges assumptions of human exceptionalism; an epistemological one, which emphasizes the partial and situated nature of human knowledge; and an ethical one, which grounds a norm of non-action and restrained intervention. Close readings of animal narratives, such as the Fighting Cock, the Seabird allegory, and Bo Le's horses, show that even well-intentioned intervention can disrupt species-specific flourishing, in which ethical harm arises from epistemic misjudgment rather than malice. By decentering the human standpoint and highlighting relational and cosmocentric dimensions of ethics, Zhuangzi offers a model of ethical engagement grounded in attentiveness, restraint, and recognition of nonhuman autonomy.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi, animal ethics, anthropocentrism, non-intervention, epistemice humility, epistemic restraint, cosmocentrism.*

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1. Introduction[2]

Animals—both real and imaginary—occupy a prominent place in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, a foundational text of early Chinese philosophy attributed to Master Zhuang (late fourth century BCE). While existing scholarship (Sterckx, 2002; Moeller, 2006; Lynn, 2019; D'Ambrosio, 2021; Özbey, 2023) has extensively analyzed the allegorical and metaphorical functions of animals in the text, their ethical status—and how humans ought to relate to them—remains comparatively underexplored (Meijer, 2024:p.204.)[3] This neglect stems largely from an interpretive consensus according to which animals primarily illuminate human concerns rather than articulate claims about animal life as such. For example, D'Ambrosio notes that "anti-anthropocentric and animalistic perspectives can be philosophized within the *Zhuangzi*," yet he emphasizes that the text itself "is not overly concerned with these subjects" (D'Ambrosio, 2021:p.1).[4] Similarly, Yong Huang argues that although animals frequently appear as victims or objects of comparison, their function is not to advocate for animal rights but to illuminate how humans ought to treat one another (Yong Huang, 2022:p.473).

Without denying the allegorical and metaphorical richness of the text, this paper asks what follows if Zhuangzi's animal narratives are read literally rather than primarily figuratively. On such a reading, what ethical standing do animals possess, and under what conditions—if any—are humans justified in intervening in their lives? Methodologically, I treat Zhuangzi's animal narratives as *philosophical case studies* of cross-species relations. This methodological shift may find its justification in Zhuangzi's cosmocentric ontology, which denies hierarchical human exceptionalism. Indeed, if humans have no ontological privilege, then interpreting animals solely as symbolic instruments presumes authority that cannot be justified. Such readings risk reinstating the anthropocentrism the text seeks to challenge,

[2] This paper was written as part of the institutional research project "Theoretical Examination of Contemporary Challenges in the Moral, Political and Legal Asymmetry within the Sustainable Biotic Community" at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

[3] Scholarship on animal ethics in Daoism remains relatively limited; notable exceptions include Komjathy (2022), Kemmerer (2009), Meijer (2024), and Jia (2025).

[4] J. D' Ambrosio argues that the non-human animals in the text *Zhuangzi* are mainly used allegorically or metaphorically, allowing the *Zhuangzi* to: 1) make broadly applicable arguments; 2) playfully discuss ideas that may be unappealing at first glance; 3) create a distance that allows the text to resist ossification. (D'Ambrosio, 2022:p.1).

because they treat human perspectives as epistemically authoritative over nonhuman modes of existence.

My central thesis is that the *Zhuangzi* advances a coherent, though implicit, framework for animal ethics grounded in two core premises: First, ontological premise: All beings participate equally in a dynamic continuum, undermining metaphysical claims of human superiority. Second, epistemic premise: Human understanding of other forms of life is necessarily partial and perspectival, rendering claims of authoritative knowledge about animal flourishing epistemically unjustified.

From these premises, a distinctive ethical conclusion follows: moral agency requires epistemic humility and restraint. Ethical failure arises not primarily from malice but from epistemic overreach—specifically, from treating situated human judgments as universally authoritative. The appropriate ethical orientation is expressed through *wu wei* 無為, understood as non-coercive, attuned responsiveness that allows beings to realize their own nature *xing* 性.

This framework shifts the central ethical question from *how* humans ought to intervene to *whether* they are epistemically entitled to intervene at all. In doing so, the *Zhuangzi* challenges anthropocentric and utilitarian models that presuppose human authority to define flourishing across species.

The argument proceeds in three stages. First, I reconstruct the ontological basis of Zhuangzi's cosmocentrism, emphasizing continuity among beings and rejecting human exceptionalism. Second, I analyze Zhuangzi's perspectival epistemology, showing how epistemic overreach—imposing human evaluative schemes without attunement—generates ethical harm. Third, I articulate an ethics of epistemically informed restraint grounded in *wu wei*, relational sensitivity, and respect for species-specific flourishing.

Throughout, close readings of key animal narratives—including the Fighting Cock, the Seabird, and Bo Le's horses—function not merely as illustrations but as philosophical evidence. These cases concretely demonstrate how ontological recognition and epistemic humility shape morally salient outcomes. By foregrounding the ethical implications of Zhuangzi's cosmocentric and perspectival commitments, this paper recovers a model of moral agency grounded in epistemic humility, non-intervention, and respect for nonhuman autonomy.

2. Ontological Premise: Cosmocentrism, *Qi*, and the Dissolution of Species

Understanding Zhuangzi's ontology requires situating it within a cosmological vision. In early Chinese thought, reality is not a collection of discrete substances but an ongoing process of generation and transformation (*hua* 化), structured by the circulation of *qi* 氣. All beings—human, animal, plant, and inanimate—are constituted by, and continuously transformed within, a single dynamic field of *qi*. No being is composed of a distinct substance or originates from a separate ground. Zhuangzi expresses this perspective explicitly: "Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one".[5]

This *premise of ontological continuity* carries several important implications. First, it entails the absence of intrinsic hierarchy: because all beings share the same ontological basis, differences among them reflect variations in configuration, temporal trajectory, or functional expression—not differences in metaphysical rank or inherent worth. Birds, fish, and humans differ not in essence but in the particular ways they participate in and manifest the Dao 道.

Second, this ontological framework reconceives the boundaries between humans and animals and, consequently, the notion of species. On this view, species are not fixed natural kinds but contingent formations arising from specific configurations of *qi*; their boundaries are fluid and cosmologically derivative rather than fundamental. As Michael Nylan observes, "the boundaries between humans and animals were porous" (Nylan, 2019:p.1) — a porosity that Roel Sterckx explains by showing that distinctions among beings reflect variations in configuration and developmental trajectory rather than differences in essence or hierarchical status (Sterckx, 2002:p.39). This perspective affirms diversity without invoking hierarchical evaluation (Jia, 2025) each being follows a particular path of transformation (*hua*) according to its unique configuration and circumstances. All beings are equally grounded in the Dao, yet none serves as a normative standard for the others.

Third, this framework reshapes the ontological status of humans. If all beings emerge from a shared cosmological ground—differing not in kind but in patterns of transformation—then humans occupy no ontologically privileged position. Historical claims to human authority over nonhuman beings have often relied on the assumption that humans occupy a distinct and superior order of being. If this assumption is false, one principal justification for such authority is undermined.

[5] 天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。(*ICS Zhuangzi* 2/5/21)

Formally reconstructed, Zhuangzi's ontological position can be presented as follows:

1. Premise of ontological continuity: All beings are constituted by and continuously transformed within a single, dynamic field of *qi*. No being possesses a distinct substance or separate ontological ground.
2. Premise of no intrinsic hierarchy: Because all beings share the same ontological basis, differences among them are differences of configuration, trajectory, or functional expression—not differences in ontological rank.
3. Implication for human exceptionalism: Human claims to authority grounded in ontological superiority are therefore unwarranted.

From these premises, the burden of justification shifts: authority cannot be presumed on ontological grounds but must instead be warranted through other considerations, such as epistemic access, relational dependence, or situational necessity. Several features of this argument merit emphasis. First, it is negative or debunking: Zhuangzi does not derive positive ethical rules from cosmology and does not commit the naturalistic fallacy. Rather, his ontology functions to remove the conceptual scaffolding that has historically supported anthropocentric hierarchies. Humans are not entitled, merely by virtue of being human, to determine the status, role, or trajectory of other beings. Questions of authority and intervention must therefore be addressed on grounds other than ontology, paving the way for the epistemological analysis that follows.

3. Epistemological Premise: Perspectival Knowledge and the Limits of Human Authority

Building on its ontological framework, Zhuangzi's thought carries significant epistemological implications. By situating humans and nonhumans within a shared ontological continuum of *qi*, it destabilizes the assumption that human cognition is universally valid or epistemically privileged. Human knowledge, like all forms of life, is a particular modulation of *qi*—irreducibly conditioned by species-specific bodily capacities, environmental relations, and practical orientations (Connolly, 2011).

Knowledge is therefore fundamentally perspectival (Sturgeon, 2015; Connolly, 2011; Tan, 2023; Singh, 2023; Danesh, 2023): coherent within a given form of life, yet potentially incommensurable across radically different modes of existence. There is no neutral or metaperspective from which competing perspectives can be finally adjudicated. The human standpoint is one perspective among many. To conflate it with universal truth is to commit epistemic overreach—extending one's judgments

beyond their legitimate bounds and assuming evaluative authority over what is valid, credible, or worthwhile. Such overreach often manifests in unwarranted certainty or misplaced claims to authority. In the *Zhuangzi*, this tendency is captured in the notions of the "completed" or "predetermined" heart-mind (*cheng xin* 成心) (*ICS Zhuangzi:* 2/4/9) and "taking the heart-mind as master" (*shi xin* 師心) *(ICS Zhuangzi:* 4/9/26), both of which name the reification of a contingent standpoint into a normative standard.

Epistemic overreach in the domain of human/animal relations occurs when humans project their species-specific frameworks onto other beings, assuming that concepts intelligible within human life—such as comfort, harm, benefit, or flourishing—apply uniformly across distinct forms of existence. Actions guided by such projections produce predictable distortions, even when motivated by care or benevolent intention. The problem is not primarily moral but epistemological: fragmentary understanding is mistaken for comprehensive knowledge, and partial perspective is treated as authoritative. Intervention grounded in this error disregards the irreducible perspectival limits within which all beings operate.

Because human knowledge is structurally perspectival, and because no metaperspective is available to validate judgments across radically different forms of life, any presumption of epistemic authority over other beings is unwarranted. Intervention is therefore presumptively problematic—not absolutely forbidden, but constrained. Humans cannot assume that acting "*on behalf of*" another being is justified, since their understanding of that being's mode of existence is necessarily limited and partial. This constraint does not entail that action is impossible; rather, it situates action within an awareness of its inherent risk.

Recognizing epistemic limitation does not lead to skepticism or paralysis. Humans can observe, attend, respond, and learn; indeed, such cultivated attentiveness is central to appropriate engagement with other forms of life. Observation and responsiveness, however, differ from intervention grounded in presumed mastery. The former acknowledges the limits of perspective; the latter presumes its transcendence. Acting as though one possesses universally valid knowledge constitutes overreach, whereas attentiveness respects the situated character of understanding.

The animal narratives examined in the following section function as philosophical exempla of these epistemic dynamics. Each dramatizes the consequences of projection and perspectival overreach, illustrating what follows when one standpoint is absolutized. By foregrounding the plurality and incommensurability of perspectives, Zhuangzi undermines the epistemic foundations of human authority and prepares the ground for the ethical reflections that conclude this study.

4. Narrative Evidence: Illustrating the Ethical Imperative

Building on this epistemological foundation, Zhuangzi shows that assuming universal human knowledge has immediate and severe ethical consequences. When humans presume their knowledge to be universally valid, intervention, domination, and instrumentalization—manifestations of anthropocentrism—become logical extensions (Callicott, 1984:p.299). In other words, *epistemic overreach* directly enables *ethical harm*. This connection is vividly illustrated through narrative exemplars in which human interference in animal life produces ironic or destructive outcomes.

4.1. The Fighting Cock: The Collapse of Instrumental Identity

The story of Master Jixingzi and the fighting cock (ch. 19) exemplifies the ethical consequences of epistemic overreach. Tasked by the king to raise a victorious bird, Master Jixingzi trains it for forty days. However, by the end, instead of being ready for fight, the bird appears as if "carved from wood" (*mu ji* 木雞): unreactive, still, and unmoved even by other roosters' challenges:

> "Ji Xing-zi was rearing a fighting-cock for the king. Being asked after ten days if the bird were ready, he said, 'Not yet; he is still vain and quarrelsome, and relies on his own vigour.' Being asked the same after other ten days, he said, 'Not yet; he still responds to the crow and the appearance of another bird.' After ten days more, he replied, 'Not yet. He still looks angrily, and is full of spirit.' When a fourth ten days had passed, he replied to the question, 'Nearly so. Though another cock crows, it makes no change in him. To look at him, you would say he was a cock of wood. His quality is complete. No other cock will dare to meet him, but will run from him."[6]

According to Louis Komjathy ("Animals and Daoism"), this story undermines the logic of training itself. Human efforts to cultivate the bird's capacities extinguish aggression, competitiveness, and reactive vigor—the very traits that define a fighting cock within the imposed human framework. The process does not enhance the animal's capacities but dismantles the conceptual category through which it was initially understood.

[6] 紀渻子為王養鬥雞。十日而問：「雞已乎？」曰：「未也。方虛憍而恃氣。」十日又問。曰：「未也。猶應嚮景。」十日又問。曰：「未也。猶疾視而盛氣。」十日又問。曰：「幾矣。雞雖有鳴者，已無變矣，望之似木雞矣，其德全矣，異雞無敢應者，反走矣. *ICS Zhuangzi* 19/51/22-25

In doing so, the narrative stages a broader critique of anthropogenic intervention. First, it exposes the irony of human attempts to perfect the cock: efforts to cultivate its capacities deform its mode of being, producing something fundamentally other than intended. Second, it reveals the objectification inherent in such intervention: the cock becomes a human project rather than a being allowed to exist according to its own nature. Its final stillness signals the collapse of an imposed identity and the failure of human frameworks to apprehend animal life.

From an epistemic perspective, Zhuangzi challenges the assumption that animals can be fully known, categorized, or perfected through interventionist techniques. Contemporary animal studies resonate with this insight: as Cary Wolfe in his book *Before the Law* (2012) argues, animals are rendered governable through categories of use and function that erase their specificity. The fighting cock resists epistemic capture not through rebellion but through withdrawal—ceasing to respond in ways that confirm the imposed category.

Importantly, the narrative offers no prescriptive alternative for managing or knowing animal life. Instead, it destabilizes the confidence that such frameworks presuppose. The cock's "perfection" is paradoxical: it consists precisely in undoing the category through which humans sought to define, control, and perfect it.

4.2. The Seabird: Between Benevolence and Violence

The story of the seabird in the chapter "Perfect Enjoyment" (Zhi Yue 至樂) (ch. 18) foregrounds a problem that extends beyond ethical error or epistemic limitation: it questions the very possibility of determining what counts as ethical action toward nonhuman life. When a rare seabird lands near the state of Lu, the marquis welcomes it with elaborate hospitality—ritual music, sumptuous food, and ceremonial attention—carefully calibrated according to human standards of honor and pleasure. Despite these benevolent intentions, the bird dies after three days.

Often read allegorically and classified among Zhuangzi's "kill stories narratives" (Moeller, 2023:p.397) — in which ritual, morality, or governance inadvertently destroy living beings — the episode does not merely illustrate a misapplied ethical framework. It exposes the danger of the ethical method itself. Treating the bird as he would a noble guest, the marquis assumes that human norms of enjoyment provide a reliable guide to nonhuman flourishing. Zhuangzi names this error precisely: the marquis "nourishes the bird as if he were nourishing himself" (*yi ji yang niao* ji 以己養養鳥) rather than "nourishing the bird as a bird" *(yi niao yang yang niao* 以鳥養養鳥) (*ICS Zhuangzi* 18/49/6). The text offers no positive account of what

"nourishing the bird as a bird" would entail; the distinction functions less as a prescriptive method than as a negation of methodological certainty itself.

From this perspective, ethical failure is inseparable from the desire for epistemic security. The marquis acts on the assumption that ethical action must proceed from prior knowledge—knowledge of what the bird is, what it values, and how it ought to live. Zhuangzi's critique suggests that this very demand for determinate knowledge precipitates harm. Benevolence becomes violent not because it is insufficiently informed, but because it insists on acting from the standpoint of knowing in advance. The seabird's death exemplifies ethical violence that arises from methodological overdetermination rather than from epistemic limitation per se.

Viewed in this light, the episode aligns with a strand of methodological negativism found in contemporary environmental and posthumanist thought: skepticism toward frameworks that promise reliable access to nonhuman worlds through conceptual mastery, representation, or projection. Zhuangzi does not replace anthropocentric ethics with a more inclusive or ecologically sensitive method; rather, he undermines the assumption that ethical relations to radically other beings can be secured through method at all. The guiding question remains deliberately destabilizing: how should humans determine what counts as ethical action toward nonhuman life, given the limits and situatedness of human knowledge? What if ethical responsibility begins not with refining methods, but with suspending the very impulse to know, categorize, and manage other forms of being?

Read alongside the fighting cock story, the seabird story underscores a central Zhuangzian insight: intervention—even when motivated by care, expertise, or moral concern—can be ethically destructive when grounded in epistemic overreach. Whereas the fighting cock narrative exposes the reduction of a being into instrumental categories, the seabird story reveals the lethal consequences of projecting human values onto nonhuman life. Together, they illustrate that ethical action toward animals requires not improvement, or even kindness, but epistemic humility and restraint (refraining from seeking knowledge) (Manson 2012:p.239): responsiveness to the other's mode of being rather than attempts to master, reshape, or perfect it.

4.3. Horses under Bo Le

Among Zhuangzi's most sustained critiques of human interference is the account of Bo Le's management of horses in chapter 9. The narrative begins by depicting horses according to their "true nature" (*zhen xing* 真性) prior to human intervention:

> "Horses have hoofs to carry them over frost and snow, and hair to protect them from wind and cold. They eat grass and drink water, and fling up their heels and gallop. Such is the true nature of horses." (Watson, 2013:p.104.)[7]

Horses roam freely, feed naturally, endure frost and snow, and engage in minimal, uncoerced social interaction. This baseline is not an idealized pastoral scene; rather, it establishes an ethical point of reference against which human intervention can be evaluated.

The narrative shifts when Bo Le declares that he knows how to manage horses, inaugurating a systematic regime of domestication:

> "He proceeded to singe and mark them, to clip their hair, to pare their hoofs, to halter their heads, to bridle them and hobble them, and to confine them in stables and corrals. When subjected to this treatment, two or three in every ten of them died. He proceeded further to subject them to hunger and thirst, to gallop them and race them, and to make them go together in regular order. In front were the evils of the bit and ornamented breastbands, and behind were the terrors of the whip and switch. When so treated, more than half of them died."[8]

The consequences are devastating: many horses perish, while survivors exhibit behaviors such as stealing, resisting the reins, and acting deceptively. Zhuangzi is explicit that these behaviors are not intrinsic to the horses.

As Lisa Raphals pointed out, this story offers a sharp contrast, "the hapiness and freedom of wild horses with the misery and bad behaviour of captive ones." (Raphals, 2006:p.277).

From an animal-ethics perspective, the Bo Le episode exposes a foundational epistemic error underlying human domination of nonhuman animals: the assumption that animals can be fully known, classified, and reshaped to serve human purposes. The harm inflicted is not limited to physical coercion; it also arises from epistemic overreach—the unexamined confidence that humans can access and control the inner nature of animals. Bo Le's claim to knowledge ("I know how to manage horses") (Wo shan zhi ma 我善治馬!) (*ICS Zhuangzi* 9/23/19) exemplifies this overreach, illustrating how moral and practical authority can be illegitimately grounded in presumptive understanding.

[7] 馬，蹄可以踶霜雪，毛可以禦風寒，齕草飲水，翹足而陸。此馬之真性也。*ICS Zhuangzi* 9/23/18

[8] 燒之剔之，刻之雒之，連之以羈曶，編之以皁棧，馬之死者十二三矣；飢之渴之，馳之驟之，整之齊之，前有橛飾之患，而後有鞭筴之威，而馬之死者已過半矣。*ICS Zhuangzi* 9/23/18-9/23/21

The ethical problem is not merely instrumental. Reducing horses to objects of management and training violates their *xing*, eliciting resistance. More fundamentally, it rests on a mistaken ontological assumption: that nonhuman animals exist to be made legible and governable according to human frameworks. By imposing human classificatory and evaluative schemes onto beings with distinct capacities and modes of existence, epistemic overreach transforms limited human insight into claims of mastery. The normative error, therefore, is grounded in conflating human knowledge with universal validity—a projection of human perspective that obscures the autonomy of nonhuman subjects.

What appears as skill or mastery from a human-centered standpoint is revealed, from a cosmocentric perspective, as a failure of attunement. Ethical intervention, Zhuangzi suggests, is justified only when it responds to the inherent capacities and tendencies (*xing*) of beings, rather than imposing external norms. The Dao is realized not through control or optimization but through accommodation and responsiveness. In this way, Zhuangzi anticipates a critique of instrumental rationality that resonates with contemporary concerns about the moral limits of animal training, behavioral modification, and captivity.

4.4.Tigers: The Illusion of Managed Coexistence

Chapter 12's discussion of tiger-keeping examines a subtler form of human intervention—one that is neither domestication for practical use nor outright violence, but the containment of an animal for display or prestige. In this story, Zhuangzi describes a tiger keeper who attempts to curb the tiger's natural aggression by neither feeding it live prey nor providing whole carcasses. Despite these precautions, the keeper is ultimately killed by the tigers. Zhuangzi explains that this outcome occurs because the keeper has acted against (*ni* 逆) the animal's nature (*ICS Zhuangzi* 4/11/17).

The narrative illustrates the limits of technical knowledge in managing nonhuman life. The keeper understands how to prevent immediate aggression, yet his interventions contradict the tiger's intrinsic tendencies. Human safety depends on continual suppression of the animals' wildness, making the relationship inherently artificial. The keeper's death results from acting against the tiger's *xing*, not from ignorance of procedural technique.

The episode highlights an epistemic error: the assumption that technical skill can override a being's inherent nature. Lacking attunement to the tiger's irreducible *xing*, the keeper treats the animal as an object of control rather than as a participant

in the Dao. Zhuangzi thus demonstrates the instability of interventions that contravene a being's intrinsic capacities and underscores the ethical and epistemic limits of managed coexistence.

4.5. The Ox with the Branded Nose

In the story of the Xi niu 牺牛 (ch. 32) in the *Zhuangzi,* Zhuangzi recounts the fate of an ox bred and raised for sacrifice: "Have you seen, Sir, a sacrificial ox? It is robed with ornamental embroidery, and feasted on fresh grass and beans".[9]

The animal is adorned in embroidered cloth and nourished with the finest provisions. Yet these apparent privileges—careful maintenance—are rendered sinister by the certainty of a predetermined, violent end. What would ordinarily signify benevolent domestication becomes, in this context, the very mechanism of existential harm. The ox's luxurious treatment does not mitigate its fate; it prepares it. Care is revealed as a technology of control.

Zhuangzi thus exposes the paradox of "kind" domination: the imposition of comfort functions as a form of deception. In contemporary terms, this passage anticipates critiques of welfare-oriented or "humane" systems that soften the appearance of exploitation without altering its structure. A life can be meticulously managed, physically secure, and materially abundant, yet remain fundamentally coercive when its trajectory is fixed by external purposes.

The sacrificial ox therefore exemplifies a cruelty deeper than physical violence. It is not merely used; it is cultivated for use. Its entire existence is orchestrated according to human ritual ends, from birth to death. Zhuangzi suggests that such totalizing control intensifies suffering precisely because it entwines care with inevitability. The harm lies not only in the knife but in the structure of a life shaped toward it.

4.6. The Sacrificial Pig

The ethical distortions of domestication are perhaps most starkly revealed in the story of the sacrificial pig (*jiang shi* 将豕) (ch. 19), where Zhuangzi writes:

> "The officer of Prayer in his dark and squarecut robes goes to the pig-pen, and thus counsels the pigs, 'Why should you shrink from dying? I will for three months feed you on grain. Then for ten days I will fast, and keep vigil for three days, after which I will put down the mats of white grass, and lay your shoulders

[9] 子見夫犧牛乎？衣以文繡，食以芻叔，及其牽而入於太廟，雖欲為孤犢，其可得乎 (*ICS Zhuangzi* 32/971-2)

> and rumps on the carved stand; will not this suit you?' If he had spoken from the standpoint of the pigs, he would have said, 'The better plan will be to feed us with our bran and chaff, and leave us in our pen.' When consulting for himself, he preferred to enjoy, while he lived, his carriage and cap of office, and after death to be borne to the grave on the ornamented carriage, with the canopy over his coffin. Consulting for the pigs, he did not think of these things, but for himself he would have chosen them. Why did he think so differently (for himself and) for the pigs?" (*ICS Zhuangzi:* 19/51/5-8)[10]

In this story, the pig is subjected to a paradigm of humane treatment—fine food, comfort, attentiveness—solely to optimize its sacrificial value. Its fear, the text implies, exposes a profound misalignment between the caretaker's notion of "care" and the animal's own experience. The episode lays bare a performative contradiction: acts of kindness inseparable from a terminal human purpose. Welfare does not mitigate violence; it refines it.

What the story exposes is the logic of care within an unchanged structure of instrumentalization. For Zhuangzi, the ethical problem is not merely the degree of suffering but the legitimacy of the coercive relationship itself—a relation that subordinates an animal to a higher human goal. Any intervention, however gentle or well-intentioned, remains ethically suspect if its ultimate aim is the use of the animal's body or life against its nature.

By ventriloquizing the animal's perspective, Zhuangzi exposes the hypocrisy of benevolence that serves domination. The narrative anticipates modern debates over "humane" farming or enriched captivity: within a domestication paradigm, even the kindest practices remain ethically unjustifiable. Care tethered to instrumental ends does not redeem violence—it merely renders it more palatable.

5. Narratives as Philosophical Instruments

Zhuangzi's animal narratives are not mere illustrative tales; rather, they function as philosophical instruments that reveal the entanglement of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Across these stories, a consistent pattern emerges: humans transform situated, species-specific knowledge into universal judgment, impose human categories as standards, and interpret animal resistance as pathology. Although the narratives differ

[10] 祝宗人玄端以臨牢筴，說彘曰：「汝奚惡死？吾將三月豢汝，十日戒，三日齊，藉白茅，加汝肩尻乎彫俎之上，則汝為之乎？」為彘謀曰：「不如食以糠糟，而錯之牢筴之中。」自為謀，則苟生有軒冕之尊，死得於腞、楯之上，聚僂之中，則為之。為彘謀則去之，自為謀則取之，所異彘者何也？

in style, they share a central assumption—that humans may legitimately intervene in the lives of animals. Such intervention, however, presumes determinate ideas of what an animal is, what it ought to become, and how it should inhabit the world. In doing so, Zhuangzi exposes this confidence as epistemic overreach: acts intended to secure animal well-being instead reveal the limits of human authority over other forms of life. Thus, the lesson is not merely about error in action but a deeper insight: attempts to govern others according to human norms tell us more about the fragility of human knowledge than about the lives we seek to shape.

Importantly, these stories do not offer corrective techniques or suggest that ethical problems can be solved through expertise. Rather, ethical failure arises not from ignorance but from the presumption that human understanding suffices to determine how others ought to live. Specifically, humans project their own evaluative frameworks—usefulness, comfort, improvement—onto radically different forms of existence, treating partial, perspectival knowledge as universally authoritative. This epistemic inflation converts limited insight into claims of mastery. Consequently, harm arises not from malice but from acting on unjustified confidence. By dramatizing the consequences—disruption, suffering, and the collapse of imposed frameworks—Zhuangzi reframes ethics as a practice of restraint rather than control.

The narratives also perform ontological work. They depict a world in which beings are differentiated by their *xing* 性, yet equally participate in the unfolding of the Dao. Each animal inhabits a coherent mode of existence that cannot be reduced to human evaluative schemes. Therefore, attempts to train, reform, or "nourish" animals according to human standards conflict with the structure of reality itself. The resulting suffering is not incidental but predictable: it flows from imposing alien norms on autonomous trajectories of becoming.

To "nourish a bird as a bird" or allow a horse to live according to its xing does not require privileged access to animal subjectivity. Instead, it requires relinquishing the demand to know in advance. Zhuangzi does not advocate replacing one form of expertise with another; rather, he calls for epistemic humility—acknowledging the limits of human cognition and the ethical risks of acting as if those limits did not exist. Ultimately, ethical insight emerges not through domination or conceptual control, but through attentive responsiveness to how beings actually unfold.

The stories operate on three interrelated levels:

1. Ontological demonstrations**:** they reveal a fluid, interdependent cosmos in which each being possesses its own *xing*, exposing the limits of anthropocentric assumptions.

2. Epistemic lessons: they dramatize the dangers of treating human perspectives as universal, showing how epistemic overreach produces systematic misunderstanding.
3. Ethical exemplars: they illustrate how interventions—through training, ritual, or technical expertise—distort the natural flourishing of other beings.

Taken together, Zhuangzi's narratives integrate ontology, epistemology, and ethics into a single philosophical lesson. They show that all beings participate in the Dao (ontology), that human knowledge is irreducibly partial and perspectival (epistemology), and that ethical responsibility arises not from domination but from attentive, non-coercive engagement (ethics). Ethical failure stems not merely from ignorance but from epistemic overreach—the presumption that human understanding is sufficient to govern other lives. By contrast, ethical responsiveness requires epistemic humility: a willingness to refrain from mastery and to remain attuned to forms of life that exceed human comprehension.

In this way, narrative becomes philosophy. To "nourish a bird as a bird" exemplifies an ethically demanding practice of attentiveness and restraint, in which moral responsibility lies not in intervention but in responsive observation. The stories perform the epistemic limits they describe, showing that ethical insight emerges through interaction and humility rather than abstract reasoning or imposed norms. By inviting readers to confront the consequences of epistemic overreach, Zhuangzi prepares a reorientation of moral agency itself: when humans acknowledge the limits of their knowledge, ethics takes the form of restraint and attunement; when they deny those limits, domination and suffering follow. By dramatizing the consequences of epistemic overreach, Zhuangzi's narratives prepare an ethical reorientation in which humility, restraint, and attunement become the defining features of moral life.The narratives thus serve as a conceptual bridge between Zhuangzi's critique of epistemic arrogance and his ethic of non-coercive responsiveness.

6. Ethical Transition: From Epistemic Error to Ethical Harm

If Zhuangzi's animal narratives expose epistemic overreach as the source of ethical failure, a central question arises: what form of moral agency remains once claims to epistemic authority are relinquished? When human knowledge is acknowledged as partial and perspectival, lacking universal validity, the justificatory basis for intervention collapses. From this epistemic premise follows an ethical consequence: action can no longer proceed from assumptions of mastery, correction, or improvement.

Zhuangzi grounds responsible agency not in control but in epistemic humility and restraint. Ethical failure arises when humans attempt to reshape other beings according to alien norms—whether of utility, ritual, or moral enhancement. The injunction to "nourish a bird as a bird" crystallizes this principle: ethical engagement must follow a being's *xing* (Komjathy, "Animals and Daoism") rather than imposing human standards of flourishing.

Zhuangzi articulates this alternative model of agency through *wu wei*, *ying* 應, *jie xin* 解心 ("untangling the heart-mind"), and what Graham Parkes calls the "playing of perspectives" (Parkes, 2013:p.7). *Wu wei* does not denote passivity but, as Eric Nelson argues, "attuned, non-calculative responsiveness" (Nelson, 2021:p.61). Non-action and non-intervention can thus be understood as alternative modes of engagement—specifically, as responsive attunement (*ying*) and stirred movement—within the interdependent context of the spontaneous unfolding of innumerable things (Nelson,2021:p.63). *Jie xin*, according to Robin Wang, involves "aligning with the natural order rather than resisting it" (Wang, 2026:p.39). The "playing of perspectives" (Parkes, 2013:p.7) entails suspending one's singular standpoint in order to appreciate the diverse modes of existence of other beings. Together, these practices prioritize epistemic restraint over intervention.

When humans ignore the limits of their knowledge, ethical harm ensues; when they recognize these limits, moral agency becomes disciplined and responsive. Accordingly, the central ethical question shifts from *What should be done?* to *On what epistemic basis may action be taken?* Non-interference does not imply indifference. Rather, knowledge becomes a form of resonance rather than domination, and agency is exercised through responsiveness rather than imposition. Interventions motivated by convenience, preference, or instrumental ends violate ethical restraint. Ethical failure arises not from ignorance as such, but from mistaking partial knowledge for sufficient authority to govern how others ought to live.

Consequently, ethical responsibility consists in acting in accordance with the intrinsic tendencies (*xing*) of others rather than subordinating them to human ends. Moral agency is thus reconceived as a practice of epistemically informed restraint. To "nourish a bird as a bird," or to allow a horse to live according to its *xing*, exemplifies this approach: ethical insight is enacted through attentiveness and responsiveness, not imposed correction.

7. Discussion: Zhuangzi in Dialogue with Contemporary Animal Ethics

While contemporary debates in animal ethics are often framed in humanistic or posthumanistic terms—seeking to reinterpret or reform inherited moral concepts—Zhuangzi offers a fundamentally different paradigm for understanding nonhuman life and our ethical obligations toward animals. Rather than beginning with prescriptions about how humans ought to act, Zhuangzi poses a more radical question: *when, if ever, is human action justified at all?* This shift reframes ethics from rule-making to epistemic scrutiny.

Much contemporary scholarship critiques anthropocentrism for its systemic harms. Zhuangzi deepens this critique by showing that even benevolent or well-intentioned interventions can be harmful when they impose human categories of value, improvement, or flourishing. His cosmocentric philosophy challenges the assumption that humans are entitled to determine what is good for other beings. Ethical harm, on this view, arises not only from malice or neglect but from the unexamined elevation of a singular human perspective. Such elevation disrupts the autonomous unfolding of another being's *xing*—its constellation of capacities, tendencies, and context-specific needs. Ethical responsibility therefore demands radical restraint: intervention is justified only when it genuinely responds to the specific *xing* of the other.

Dialogue with posthumanist thinkers helps clarify Zhuangzi's distinctive contribution. Anna Peterson argues that instrumentalizing animals becomes morally irrelevant once ontological continuity is acknowledged (Peterson, 2013:p.112). Zhuangzi concurs but adds a crucial caveat: recognition of continuity is insufficient if humans still presume authority to define or enhance another being's flourishing. Likewise, Donna J. Haraway's emphasis on the "flourishing of significant otherness" and "becoming with many" (Haraway, 2007), alongside Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" (Barad, 2007), foreground the entanglement and mutual constitution of beings. Zhuangzi radicalizes this relational ontology by insisting that entanglement does not confer epistemic authority. Instead, it demands humility, careful observation, attunement, and responsiveness—together with acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding.

This epistemic humility directly challenges prescriptive frameworks such as Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which defines universal capabilities and assigns humans the task of creating conditions for their realization (Nussbaum, 2011:p.32). From a Zhuangzian perspective, flourishing cannot be externally

imposed according to a human blueprint; it must emerge through attentive engagement with a being's own *xing*. Relational concern, when untempered by epistemic humility, risks becoming a subtle form of domination—the imposition of human-defined goods. Ethical responsibility is thus grounded not in assumed authority but in restraint.

Zhuangzi's critique also anticipates contemporary concerns about human intervention in animal life. Cary Wolfe observes that practices such as domestication, management, and experimentation render animals intelligible only through human categories, erasing their specific modes of existence (Wolfe, 2012:p.97). Zhuangzi locates the deeper source of this harm in epistemic overreach—the presumption that humans can fully know or govern other beings. Moral agency, on this account, is not about maximizing control or optimizing outcomes according to human norms; it is about attentive, non-coercive engagement that respects the irreducible particularity of each life. Epistemic humility thus becomes the sine qua non of legitimate action.

Although the practical consequences of Zhuangzi's thought lie beyond the scope of this paper, one brief example helps illustrate its implications. Zhuangzi's framework urges us to critically reexamine even benevolent practices: for instance, is "saving" a feral dog from a forest, placing the animal in a shelter, or encouraging adoption necessarily aligned with the dog's own *xing*? Such actions may express human compassion, yet still risk imposing human assumptions about safety, comfort, and flourishing.

Importantly, Zhuangzi's principle of restraint does not entail paralysis. Humans can—and often must—observe, attend, and respond. As Mercedes Valmisa notes in her work on the early Chinese notion of action, ethical life involves inter-acting and co-acting with both human and nonhuman actors (Valmisa, p.7), provided that observation respects the limits of the other's perspective. Intervention grounded in presumed knowledge constitutes epistemic overreach. In practical contexts involving feral or domesticated animals, Zhuangzi's framework therefore asks whether human action genuinely responds to actual needs rather than human convenience.

Eric S. Nelson's work on Daoism and environmental philosophy further nuances this position. Drawing on early Daoist texts, Nelson articulates an ethics of "responsive attunement" (*gan* 感), emphasizing embodied emptying and forgetting as ways of encountering beings without fixing them in human categories (Nelson, 2021:p.61). This resonates with Zhuangzi's epistemic humility, though Nelson places greater emphasis on ongoing relational engagement rather than strict non-interference.

In contexts where humans and animals are already deeply entangled—such as farming or companionship—pure non-intervention may be impossible or undesirable. A Zhuangzian response nevertheless maintains two key qualifications: first, relational engagement must be continually examined for epistemic overreach; second, entanglement itself does not justify intervention. Often, the most responsive act is to step back, allowing beings to unfold according to their own natures.

By reframing moral agency as responsive non-interference, Zhuangzi's cosmocentric ethics invites a fundamental reconsideration of human–animal relations. It shifts ethical focus from prescriptive action to epistemic justification: not merely how we should act, but whether—and under what conditions—we are justified in acting at all. Animal resistance is no longer treated as a problem to be solved, but as a signal that human understanding has been exceeded. In challenging paradigms of control and mastery, Zhuangzi offers a philosophical resource for ethical coexistence grounded in humility—the capacity to listen, and sometimes, to listen by leaving others alone.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that a literal reading of Zhuangzi's animal narratives reveals a distinctive approach to animal ethics, grounded in a cosmocentric ontology and a perspectival epistemology. The narratives function as philosophical interventions, showing that human claims to moral authority over nonhuman lives rest on epistemic overreach: human knowledge is necessarily partial, situated, and incapable of determining what constitutes the good for other beings. From this perspective, ethical responsibility requires refraining from imposing human evaluative frameworks where epistemic warrant is lacking.

The relevant question is not whether humans can act, but whether they are justified in assuming the authority to do so. Allowing beings to flourish according to their own natures is not moral indifference; it is a constitutive requirement of ethical life. Intervention is ethically problematic not because action is intrinsically wrong, but because action grounded in unwarranted epistemic confidence risks distorting the very lives it intends to improve. Accordingly, *wu wei* is not mere passivity but an ethically demanding practice of disciplined non-interference, entailing sensitivity to relational context, attentiveness to the capacities of other beings, and respect for each being's *xing*.

Zhuangzi's cosmocentric ethics thus challenges anthropocentric assumptions. By integrating ontological continuity, epistemic humility, relational sensitivity, and

respect for autonomy, his framework reconceives moral responsibility as disciplined observation and responsive non-interference. Far from advocating passivity, this approach demands active ethical attentiveness: respecting interdependence while resisting coercion. By shifting the focus from action to epistemic justification, Zhuangzi compels us to reconsider not only how humans ought to act, but whether—and under what conditions—they are justified in acting. Ultimately, his cosmocentric ethics teaches that genuine moral responsibility begins not with acting, but with recognizing the limits of our knowledge and restraining ourselves from imposing our will on the autonomous lives of others.

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POSTUPATI PREMA PTICI KAO PREMA PTICI: ETIKA ŽIVOTINJA I GRANICE LJUDSKOG DJELOVANJA U *ZHUANGZIJU* (*ČUANG CEU*)

Rezime

Iako se ne-ljudske životinje često pojavljuju u premodernom kineskom tekstu Čuang Ce, one se najčešće tumače alegorijski, što njihov etički značaj ostavlja nedovoljno istraženim. Ovaj rad napušta isključivo metaforička čitanja i pristupa narativima o životinjama doslovno, s ciljem rekonstrukcije okvira etike životinja u Čuang Ceu. Tvrdim da je njegov pristup zasnovan na epistemičkoj poniznosti i nedjelovanju, koje proizlaze iz kosmocentrične ontologije i perspektivne epistemologije. Za razliku od savremenih, pretežno antropocentričnih ili utilitarnih okvira, Čuang Ce postavlja pitanje da li ljudi uopšte epistemički imaju pravo da intervenišu. Argument se razvija preko tri povezana koraka: ontološki, koji smješta sva bića u kontinuum qi-ja i dovodi u pitanje pretpostavke o ljudskoj izuzetnosti; epistemološki, koji naglašava parcijalnu i situacionu prirodu ljudskog znanja; te etički, koji iz toga izvodi orijentaciju ka nedjelovanju i uzdržanoj intervenciji. Analiza narativa o životinjama, kao što su Borbeni pijetao, Alegorija o morskoj ptici i Bo Leovi konji, pokazuje da čak i dobronamjerna intervencija može narušiti specifične oblike razvoja, pri čemu etička šteta proizlazi iz epistemičke pogrešne procjene, a ne iz zlobe. Udaljavajući se od antropocentričnih okvira i naglašavajući kosmocentrične i relacione dimenzije etike, Čuang Ce nudi model etičkog angažovanja zasnovan na pažljivom posmatranju, uzdržanosti i priznavanju ne-ljudske autonomije.

▸ ***Ključne riječi***: Čuang Ce, etika životinja, antropocentrizam, nedjelovanje, epistemička poniznost, epistemička uzdržanost, kosmocentrizam.

以鸟养鸟：《庄子》中的动物伦理与干预的限度

尽管非人类动物在中国前现代文本《庄子》中频繁出现，但它们往往被寓言化解读，从而其伦理意义在很大程度上未得到充分探讨。本文超越纯粹的隐喻性阅读，转而更为字面地解读《庄子》中的动物叙事，以重建一种动物伦理的框架。我认为，

《庄子》的思想取向以认识论谦逊与无为（wu wei）为基础，源于一种宇宙中心论的本体论与视角主义认识论。与当代主要以人类为中心或功利主义的框架不同，这些框架关注人类应当如何对待动物，《庄子》提出的问题是：人类是否在认识论上真正有权进行干预。

论证分为三个相互关联的阶段：其一为本体论层面，将所有存在者置于“气”的连续统一体之中，从而挑战人类例外论的假设；其二为认识论层面，强调人类知识的局部性与情境性；其三为伦理层面，从中引出以无为与克制性干预为核心的规范。对动物叙事的细读，如“斗鸡”“海鸟寓言”以及“伯乐之马”，表明即使出于善意的干预也可能破坏物种特定的发展，其中伦理损害源于认识论上的误判，而非恶意。通过去中心化人类立场，并强调伦理的关系性与宇宙中心维度，《庄子》提供了一种以专注、克制以及对非人类自主性的承认为基础的伦理实践模式。

▸ **关键词**: 庄子，动物伦理，人类中心主义，无为，认识论谦逊，认识论克制，宇宙中心论。