There appears to be much discord over the concept of self in classical Daoist philosophy. Do the ancient Chinese even have a concept of self that reflects the typical Western notion of the term? How are we to frame the self? Should it be seen as a historical construct, a social or political identity, the mind or body, the embodiment of particular religious beliefs, or any of a dozen more traits? As will be shown in the first section of this chapter, there really is no consensus on how to define the ancient Daoist idea of selfhood. The heart of the problem lies not with the texts themselves but, rather, with whomever is writing about these texts. We search for the Chinese term(s) that closest approximates the notion of “self” in Western thought and assign it to an overarching framework through which it will be discussed. In the case of the Daoist text Zhuangzi, the phrases that most readily stand out are loss of self, forgetting self, and without self. These are then taken as pointing the way to freedom or soteriology. There is more to the story than this however.

The Zhuangzi is a text rich in allegory and metaphor. Its philosophy tests the imagination and any seemingly straightforward concept such as the self must be inspected with great care. Indeed, if we are to render the notion of selfness and personhood into language faithful to the spirit of the text, we must locate it firmly within the onto-cosmological framework of Daoism. Doing so will eliminate any erroneous understanding of the self while, at the
same time, paint a new picture of what the Daoist self actually entails. In light of this, I shall argue that the *Zhuangzi* views the subjective self (i.e., the ethical, political, and historical self) to be little more than a trace and as such, it is disingenuous. To uncover the foundational self—the traceless self—one must conjoin with Dao via the proxy of nothingness. Our Dao-self is thus neither illusionary, dualistic, or an exterior other; rather, it is a mode of thinking about being sustained by the openess of nothingness. This authentic self is hence a reflection of the nameless, formless flourishing of Dao.

I.

Before we uncover how the foundational self is traceless and consanguineous with Dao, let us take a moment to review what others have said about the Daoist self. During the heyday of postmodernism, David Hall read Daoism as espousing a doctrine of no-self that speaks directly to its pluralistic goals; indeed, the aesthetic consciousness of the postmodern self, Hall writes, not only lends credence to the Daoist idea of no-self, it actually benefits Daoism through said association.¹ Several years later, Chris Jochim took the opposite stance, arguing that Hall was in fact misled by the erroneous translations of Victor Mair, Burton Watson, and A.C. Graham in that *Zhuangzi*’s use of the terms “self” (*ji* 己, *wo* 我) and “no-self” (*wuji* 無己) were “only to identify traits that obstruct one’s carefree flowing with the world of living things.”² In order to counter *Zhuangzi*’s apparent nominalization of the self, Jochim finds a ready substitute in “body” or “personhood” (*shen* 身). His justification for this semantic switch is that the term *shen* “designates something that one should ‘cultivate’ (*xiu* 修) and it is almost always a bad idea to lose or to forget one’s *shen*, and the same goes for putting it in danger or taking it lightly.”³ Based on this, Jochim confidently states there is “no reason to take any of the other ways of negating *ji* 己 in *Zhuangzi*—by ‘losing’ (*shi* 失), ‘emptying,’ (*xu* 虛), ‘discarding’ (*qu* 去), or ‘forgetting’ (*wang* 忘) it—as implying that one ‘has a self’ and must get rid of it.”⁴ As we shall see, this line of reasoning is not convincing for it still clings to the idea that we possess multiple selves, one of which must be transcended or dissolved: “cultivation of the person involves letting go of certain bad habits that make life unsatisfactory . . . abandoning the (false) self in order that one can discover a deeper and truer no self ‘self.’”⁵

The notion of a true and false self was also picked-up on by Wu Guangming who spoke of the self in terms of an “authentic transcendental cogito” and “an identifiable, objectifiable self.”⁶ This dualistic way of thinking about the self was given a more mystical tone by Judith Berling when she wrote that it is the spiritual, true inner self that punches through the armor of the outer
social self. Robert Allinson likewise spoke of the transformation of self in religious language, saying: “Forgetting the self and transforming the self are more or less the same thing.” Wang Youru, however, defends the doctrine of no-self as being the “deconstruction of the identity of self or the self-identity of the human subject.” Tying it to the dyad of continuity and change, Wang is thus able to deconstruct the deconstructed self into three primary elements: the physical self, which is inescapably bound to change; the emotional self, which is also subject to daily transformation; and the thinking self, whose own subjectivity is an illusion. For Mark Berkson, a quartet of themes is utilized to expost the self—nature, time, society, valuation—while the no-self is a justifiable notion insofar as the “Confucians put forth an understanding of ‘self’ and Zhuangzi, since he denies precisely what the Confucians assert, can be seen as having a position of ‘no-self.’” The no-self is hence not something one strives for but involves a process of self-ridding through deconstructive language, meditative techniques, and skillful absorption. Finally, there is Zhao Guoping who intimates there is actually more to no-self than first meets the eye. He writes: “[Zhuangzi’s] notion of the self is not no-self, per se, but a self as non-being, a self whose ego and consciousness is dissolved in the pre-ego wholeness, a self that cannot set itself up in reflection and recognition, a self that cannot be in this sense . . . transcending all limited entities and beyond all boundaries and yet generating, completing all things.”

II.

Against the backdrop of the above explanatory models, it is quite apparent that most scholars view the idea of selfhood as being particular to the human subject, regardless of whether or not we are born with it. The human self is something we grow into or manipulate if we are to realize its true potential; its perfected state is procured through constant action, even if said action takes the form of restraint by way of meditation. What none of the aforementioned authors has thought to consider is the meontological self—the self qua the trace of Dao. Framing the self in terms of nothingness is not to make it a transcendent god-like entity, as Zhao Guoping does, but allow the self to persist in its true form as the non-self of Dao. In this section it will be argued that the Zhuangzi upholds the belief of a unitarily cosmological self whose tracelessness means it cannot be gotten rid of, transcended, overcome, and so forth. On the contrary, we all possess the same fundamental selfhood, one built upon the characteristics of Dao.

Whenever it describes selfhood, the Zhuangzi favors terms that convey constancy, emptiness, and oneness within multitude. The foundational self
is not generated from without nor does it arise from within; we deceive ourselves in thinking that it is either one of these when in fact it is neither. The genuine Dao-self is always already present in Dao and as such, does not phase in and out of existence in accordance with the wishes of humanity. We can see as much in one of the text’s favorite analogies—still versus moving water:

常季曰：彼為己，以其知得其心，以其心得其常心，物何為最之哉？仲尼曰：
人莫鑒於流水，而鑒於止水，唯止能止眾止。

Chang Ji said, “In focusing on himself, he uses his knowledge to reach his heart-mind, and uses his heart-mind to reach the constant heart-mind. Why do other things hold him in such high regard?” Confucius said, “Men do not mirror themselves in moving water but in water that is still. Only the still can use stillness to still others.”

Flowing water distorts the calm water below. Whilst the water at the surface is noisily creating and recreating itself, the water deep below is silent and still. The water at the surface is supported by that beneath it without knowing as such; the constancy of the depths is hence the wellspring from which the reality of the shallows comes to be. In the above passage, Chang Ji’s description of Wang Tai as using what is limited to his humanity (i.e., his heart-mind) so as to grasp what his humanity cannot limit (i.e., Dao) is akin to looking past the rushing water on the surface to the still clarity of the depths below. Although water can be spoken of as having different layers, each with their own unique properties, it is nevertheless a self-constituting and indivisible whole. In and of itself, water represents being in its most fundamental guise; it is being yet to be despoiled and indeed, can never become so. This is why Daoism views water as analogous to Dao.

When Wang Tai peers into the darkly deep pool, he experiences two things: an inner calmness in realizing that the true nature of things lies not in their outward busyness but with their quiescent heart-mind (心) and second, that there is a mutual dependency between inner and outer, dark and light, stillness and motion that extends through all things via the principle of oneness within multitude. If he had only recognized his reflection on the water’s surface as representing his true nature, Wang Tai would have been unable to reach the constant heart-mind of Dao; he would have remained stuck at the level of his own humanity. Since he realized that the reflection on the water’s surface was the result of an underlying stillness, he took that as a cue for how to look upon his own presence of being. By stilling his heart-mind he could conjoin with Dao and in being one with Dao, others
became affected by him. Stillness is thus a catalyst for change but it is a change brought about via non-deliberate doing (wuwei 无為).

Unmoving in his quiescent presence of being, the sagacious person of Daoism is held to be efficacious because he uses the unending depths of his Dao-self to illuminate the shallowness of the disgenuine selves of others. The virtue of the sage thus draws the non-virtuous towards him by mirroring himself in the face of others without retaining any of the impurities being reflected to him. Sage and non-sage encounter one another and in the process, the latter becomes absorbed into the former, much like adding muddied water to that which is clear. In their comingling, the two strata of identification—impure and pure—have no bearing upon the inborn nature of that which makes them so. In the case of Wang Tai, his humanity, while in the case of his reflection being clear or not, the water into which he gazes. And yet, even these—humanity and water—are strata in their own right. What makes them so is Dao and what makes Dao so is nothingness.

As I have discussed Daoist nothingness vis-à-vis the language of meontology elsewhere, I shall not go into its fundamentals here. As for how it is related to the aforementioned, and to the idea of selfhood in particular, let us look at the following passage from the Zhuangzi:

The teaching of the great man is like the shadow following a form, an echo following a sound. He answers only when questioned, exhausting all of his thoughts and in so doing blends with the world. He dwells where there is no echo and moves where there is no direction. Grasping your hand as you hustle back and forth, he takes you wandering in what has no beginning and enter what has no boundary. He appears ageless like the sun and his bodily form blends with the great unity. Blending with the great unity, he is selfless. As he is selfless, how can he possess things as his own! To fix one’s eyes on things is the way of the gentleman of old; to fix one’s eyes on nothingness is the way of the companion of heaven and earth.

The previous quotation ended with the expression “only the still can use stillness to still others.” Despite appearing many chapters earlier than the passage given above, the connection between them is quite apparent. Stillness is the primary trait of the great man, the sage, but what is still is not his body
but his heart-mind—his spirit if you will. Embracing tranquility, the sage becomes vast in his emptiness, like a shadow. What is unique about the shadow is its ability to absorb other shadows without losing its self-identity. Shadows coalesce into a penumbra and together they are cast forth by the object of their creation. The echo is likewise an empty trace of its root; it is a reverberating resonance whose self-identity is as hard to pin down as that of the shadow. But shadows and echoes are dependent upon movement for their sustainment—the former on its light source, the latter on the transmission of sound. Without said groundings, both will dissipate into the nothingness from which they arose. Indeed, nothingness undergirds everything in the Daoist universe, including Dao. Nothingness added to movement results in stillness; when added to brightness it results in darkness; when added to clarity it results in profundity; when added to sound it results in silence. These pairings are not oppositional but complimentary insofar as they bring balance and harmony to the world. If the sage is to rectify the shortcomings of the common people, should he not embody the traits they fail to cultivate?

The common people of the world crave things that are tangible. They dizzily fall over themselves in pursuit of the correct standard of color, tonality, taste, and virtue. These standards are then applied to the notion of personhood and the world falls into disarray as a result. To judge things from the perspective of sight, sound, or taste is to merely focus on their transitory qualities whilst neglecting that which perpetually supports them. To make known the genuine condition of being, the sage must take your hand and embark on a journey into the realm of mystery, the abode of Dao. Having no temporal or spatial qualities, the sage wanders within the milieu of nothingness completely carefree for it is here where all things blend into one, becoming identity-less in the thoroughfare of perfect unity. To no longer identify with things via their physical or moral attributes is to behold them in their foundational state of being; it is to conjoin stillness with stillness, emptiness with emptiness, quietude with quietude, and darkness with darkness. The Dao-self of the sage is hence a selfless self, a self that identifies with none other than the non-self of Dao and is why Zhuangzi believes “there is no north or south, so he dissolves himself in the four directions and becomes lost in the immeasurable. To him, there is no east or west, so he begins with dark profundity and returns to the great throughway.”

To wander in the limitless possibilities of that which is beginningless is indeed the objective of the entire Zhuangzi; here, however, the focus is squarely on seeing the self in its true form. As the sage wanders carefree in the midst of Dao, he becomes one with things. In being one with the myriad things of the world, the sage thus unites with them in a grand awakening.
Zhuangzi spoke of a double awakening in his parable of the butterfly dream but in this case, the grandeur is not directed toward an undoing of rational thought but the notion that selfhood is attainable by way of Dao. The perpetuity of Dao occurs because of the constancy of nothingness; it is within this milieu of endless creative possibility that transient beings emerge. Dark profundity is the way of Dao, and such mysteriousness ensures its sustainability by acting as the great throughway. For the sage to assume an ageless aura he must constantly create himself anew. This recreating is, of course, metaphorical insofar as he follows along with the daily transformation of things. Such willingness to change necessarily entails that he no longer identifies with himself as a self and so is selfless. Selflessness hence leads to great unity amongst things and being one with the world is to see things through with Dao.

This is our first comprehensive notion of what it means to be selfless. It is, as Zhuangzi says, to no longer look upon the world as a stratification of possession wherein the more one accumulates the greater is one’s sense of self; rather, Zhuangzi asks us to introspectively gaze upon our root in ontological nothingness, thereby conjoining and befriending heaven and earth. Daoist oneness is not an event limited to the being of selfhood for it cannot be genuine oneness without taking into account its complementary opposite in nothingness. Refusing to take ownership of things, in whatever philosophical sense we might choose, does not imply transcendence or some other trick of circumventing the issue, but portrays a willingness to let things be and in so doing, preserve their inborn bond to Dao. Attachment to self thus results in a one-sidedness to living that is more akin to the life-praxis of Confucius or Mozi than to Zhuangzi. This is because one-sided living stems from one-sided thinking and thought that is guided by ambition, or allied to it, is blind to the true ways of Dao.

To be clear in thought is to look past the surface of the pool of water to its still depths while to be clear in vision is to look past the face of selfness into the selflessness of Dao. The heart-mind of the selfless person thus becomes the heartless-mindlessness of Dao wherein one returns to one’s original nature without discarding or disavowing it as such. The Zhuangzi explains thusly:

夫至人……審乎無假而不與利遷，極物之真，能守其本，故外天地，遺萬物，而神未嘗有所困也。22

The ultimate person ... examines what has no falsehood and so is unmoved by profit. In seeking the ultimate truth of things he can guard their root. Thus, he puts heaven and earth outside himself and abandons the myriad things and in this way, they never weary his spirit.22
And in another passage we read:

夫大備矣，莫若天地；然奚求焉，而大備矣。知大備者，無求、無失、無棄，不以物易己也。反己而不窮，循古而不摩，大人之誠。

Regarding perfection, nothing is comparable to heaven and earth, but when have they ever sought it out? He who knows perfection does not seek, lose, or reject it and so does not change himself on behalf of things. By returning to himself he discovers the inexhaustible; by following antiquity he discovers the imperishable. This is the sincerity of the great person.23

From the above, a number of observations can be made. To begin, Zhuangzi tells us that for the sage, truth in its ultimate form (i.e., Dao) lies not in the corporeality of things but in that which makes them so. The that-by-which, however, is not a thing of the world, which would limit its truthfulness to the facticity of things; rather, it incorporates the partiality of truths comprising our knowledge of said things into a singularity of experience known as the root. Since Dao qua the root escapes the clutches of nominal, empirical, and instrumental knowing insofar as it is the gate or pivot through which one conjoins with the mysteriousness of Dao,24 the sage must protect it from misappropriation. To accomplish this, his self needs to partake in the grand unity of Dao’s holism by shedding its pretense of autonomous individualism by embracing the truth of its own selflessness.

This, we are told, occurs when the sage puts heaven and earth outside himself by abandoning any and all differentiation from the myriad things therein, thereby returning to the root. The assumed here-ness of the self is not a self-referential claim whose truth lies in distinguishing it from the there-ness of heaven and earth, nor is it a nod to monistic reductionism; on the contrary, we can understand Zhuangzi’s phrase “to put heaven and earth outside one’s self” as indicating the exact opposite. It is the reverse in that there is nothing beyond heaven and earth, which, after all, are synonyms for Dao. If heaven and earth are to be taken as symbolizing Dao, and assuming there is nothing not covered by Dao, the act of putting Dao outside of oneself is in fact a misnomer. We are always already one with it, forever privy to its possibilities by way of nothingness. Thus, the there-ness of Dao’s otherness is not seen as oppositional to the here-ness of our selfhood but is its own internally superior truth. One stops thinking of the self in possessive terms and as a thing-in-itself that must be relinquished, transcended, transformed, and so forth, and gazes upon the world and its myriad selfless selves as simply a collectivity of that-from-which’s.
If Dao is the ultimate that-by-which, then whatever it gives rise to can be taken as a that-from-which. This by-from relationship is not only co-dependent and co-arising, it guarantees the cosmos remains in a state of perpetual harmony and balance. In light of this, we can understand why Zhuangzi thus wrote that the sage does not change for things but with them and is why his spirit never wearies over them. To put the world outside oneself is to no longer think of it as being apart or estranged from one’s inborn nature. Indeed, what alienates us from our genuine Dao-selves is our need to delimit being from our own non-being. This is because we view being only in terms of what is seen, never in light of what is invisible and unknown. Hence, the call to rethink what it means to live and be a being of Dao’s doing is an entreating by Zhuangzi to see the non-self that is our true Dao-self as an onto-phenomenological entity in its own right.

By bracketing the word self, it loses any self-importance and limitations, becoming inexhaustibly imperishable. With an undivided non-self now at his disposal, the sage roams the world carefree, walking in fire without being burned and wading into water without getting wet, not because he has become a transcendent figure but because he no longer identifies with the difference between his presence-of-being and that of the object being encountered. In other words, the ultimate person is one who does not hold the view that between two objects, including the self and no-self, one must hold greater value while the other is of lesser value; rather, he comprehends the world as the perpetual unfolding of Dao’s wondrous potentiality.

To be selfless, Zhuangzi says, is to forgo viewing things as separate from one’s self, as lesser or greater in importance, thus preserving one’s spirit intact whilst realizing one’s intellectual and moral sincerity. The crux of this attitude, however, is that the paradigmatic individual does not regard himself as having received anything in return for his ability to selflessly subsist:

無為名尸，無為謀府，無為事任，無為知主。體盡無窮，而遊無朕，盡其所受於天，而無見得，亦虛而已。至人之用心若鏡，不將不迎，應而不藏，故能勝物而不傷。

Do not be a presider of names, do not be a treasury of schemes, do not be a bearer of affairs, and do not be a master of wisdom. Embody completely what is inexhaustible and wander where there is no trace. Take to completion all you receive from heaven without thinking you have received anything. Be empty, nothing more. The ultimate person uses his heart-mind like a mirror: neither transmitting nor receiving anything, responding without storing. He can thus excel with things without injury.
As we saw earlier with the example of the pool of water, it is still emptiness that reflects the purity of selflessness. What Zhuangzi adds to that scenario are the qualities of namelessness, formlessness, and ignorance. If we read him carefully we will see that his target is not language, deeds, and knowledge per se but, rather, our authoritative claim to them. Language is but the natural utterance of sounds and is common to all living things; behavioral matters are likewise also seen throughout the natural world, as is the innate knowledge of said world by the myriad things dwelling therein. However, humans have coopted the foundationally natural way of being and turned it into something exclusive. Indeed, we even come to define and identify our life-world with the realms of names, schemes, affairs, and wisdom.

So, what then, are we to do about this? Zhuangzi’s response of “embody what is inexhaustible and wander where there is no trace” implies a transcendental encounter whereby one’s self must literally be discarded but that is actually not the case. Embodiment of the limitlessness of Dao is only possible when one simultaneously wanders in the tracelessness of nothingness. Sensible as this may sound, it is not apparent how one can proceed to do so without disavowal of the self. In fact, we are told the solution one sentence later: “Take to completion all you receive from heaven without thinking you have received anything.” It is of paramount importance to stress the fact that what we receive from heaven is not the self, but the empty potential through which the self then mutates and flourishes. We are born with the virtue of Dao, a selfless thread that strings all things together into a harmonious unity. The authentic self hence has a disposition to be true to itself and in being true to what comes to itself naturally, it is thus true to Dao.

Wandering in the that-by-which no trace is left is to roam in the mysteriousness of nothingness, and to take refuge there is to no longer speak, see, act, or think of oneself as being different from anything at all. The sage is thus tracelessly traceless, onto-phenomenologically speaking, because he no longer frets over what is bestowed to him by heaven and what is not. He has only to look upon his own presence-of-being to understand the way of Dao and yet, the way of Dao is no-way. Since the way of Dao is applicable only to itself, to claim one has received something from it is to make the gravest of errors. It is erroneous insofar as Dao is empty, as are we. To be empty is thus to embody the most esteemed of Daoist virtues because only in empty nothingness can the self-identifying heart-mind reach a mirror-like state of transparent reflectivity.

As for why Zhuangzi says the sage does not transmit or receive things but responds emptily, we can say this: to do otherwise is to lend credence to the claim that human agency is the highest form of self-identity in the world. To
put it into clearer terms, transmission implies a degree of authority and attached to authority is a self-assuredness that lifts one’s view of oneself beyond the plane of holistic unity to that of dominator. Transmission also entails the capitulation of one’s Dao-self to the human-self that is arbitrarily molded by speech, sights, actions, and calculative thinking. Wherein genuine transmission arises is through non-transmission, the act of letting-be and letting-go, such that things are allowed to follow their own life-course unhindered. In this way, what is transmitted is not the tangible facticity of being but the intangible profundity of Dao. And so, the sage selflessly transmits the non-transmittable and in so doing receives nothing but responds to things with quiet emptiness. This is why Zhuangzi writes that the sage injures none yet successfully interacts with all.

With all of the above in mind, we can summarily state that Zhuangzi’s vision of selfhood is more introspective than outwardly directed, driven by inclusion rather than exclusion, endeavors to embody spontaneity over moralistic conformism, and so forth. In other words, the picture of the self as painted by Zhuangzi is one that decries our adherence to the very word “self” for it is but a trace of what, in its authentic state, is otherwise traceless:

吾所謂臧者，非仁義之謂也，臧於其德而已矣；吾所謂聰者，非所謂仁義之謂也，任其性命之情而已矣；吾所謂明者，非謂其聞彼也，自聞而已矣；夫不自見而見彼，不自得而得彼者，是得人之得而不自得其得者也，適人之適而不自適其適者也。

What I call good is not what is called benevolence or righteousness; goodness is just one’s Dao-given virtue and that is all. What I call good is not what others call benevolence or righteousness; goodness is just the state of one’s allotted fate and that is all. What I call good hearing is not what I call listening to others; good hearing is just listening to oneself. What I call good vision is not what I call seeing others; good vision is just seeing oneself. The person who does not see himself but sees others, who does not grasp himself but grasps others, is simply grasping what others have obtained without grasping what he himself has obtained; he thus takes comfort in the comfort of others without taking comfort in what comforts himself.27

True goodness is no more to be found in others than is the authentic self. To claim that the self is knowable through sensory experience or analytic thought is to believe that the beclouding of our Dao-self can be unveiled through the appropriation of what others claim to be true. The authentic self might be unknowable but that does not mean it is unrealizable. As we
shall see, Zhuangzi offers a number of methods by which to let-go of the inauthentic self so as to shine light upon the genuineness of selflessness. It is these accounts of letting-go of the self in order to push forward our inner no-self that have shaped the scholarly debate outlined in the opening section of this chapter. However, in light of the preceding descriptive analysis of what Zhuangzi takes to be the self, our interpretation of the passages offered below will demonstrate that what is meant by forgetting or losing the self should not be construed in its literal sense but as a rethinking of our traditional association of self with being into one whereby the self symbolizes the non-self of Dao. Only then can we grasp the import of the paradigmatic individual and his unique tendency to wander carefree in the world without being affected by the things therein.

III.

Having looked closely at some of the more informative depictions of selfhood in the Zhuangzi, it is time to address the question of selflessness and to what extent it steers our thinking from self qua being towards a more foundational encounter in the form of self qua nothingness. As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Zhuangzi uses a pair of terms to set the stage for his doctrine of no-self: losing one’s self (shiji 失己 or sangji 傷己) and forgetting one’s self (wangji 忘己). Interestingly, these two notions are synonymous, not semantically, but owing to the fact that both are imbedded in Zhuangzi’s life-praxis of non-deliberate doing (wuwei 無為). Paradoxically, releasement of the inauthentic self cannot take place without wuwei and wuwei cannot be utilized wherein presence of self endures. Skipping such circularity and going straight to the desired outcome of no-self would make wuwei tautological and no-self soteriological; such arguments have already been put forward, as we have already seen, however, both fail to account for the role played by nothingness, to which we now turn.

Let us begin with the shortest of the three examples we will examine pertaining to the loss of self:

喪己於物, 失性於俗者, 謂之倒置之民。

To lose one’s self to things and lose one’s inborn nature to vulgarity, such people are referred to as being upside-down.29

Although written in the context of two types of joy man receives—the genuine joy of following along with Dao and the fleeting joy experienced
through the accumulation of fame and wealth—the sentence cited above that concludes said discussion is nevertheless pertinent to our analysis of personhood and selflessness in that it attests to the feebleness of what we call the self. Indeed, the joy we derive from fleeting sensory encounters is incomparable to the constant joy one feels whilst in unison with Dao. Zhuangzi’s point is that identifying the self with what is inherently transient and morally corrupting is not as good as associating the self with what is perpetually good and life nourishing. To lose one’s self in the latter is hence to fuse one’s inborn nature and fate to that which endlessly changes and transforms itself for itself; to recognize the futility and destruction that arises from allowing the heart-mind to lust after superficialities is to lose sight of what is genuinely foundational in nature. It is for this reason that Zhuangzi states he who gives priority to things over one’s authentic Dao-self, and vulgarity over one’s genuine Dao-nature, is topsy-turvy.

Inverting one’s self such that it is topsy-turvy stems from an inversion of the heart-mind; to have an inverted heart-mind is to furthermore define one’s life-world in resistance to one’s inner self-unfolding. Unfolding into one’s inner Dao-given nothingness, the self loses its subjectivity and claims of association, both towards its own trace-presence and that of the myriad things too. We can thus conclude that to live in an upside-down manner by following the patterns of propriety and wisdom whilst clinging to the ways of benevolence and righteousness destroys the Dao-self by blinding our heart-mind to what it means to be selfless. Indeed, to lose one’s self is not the root of our concern—such concern falls to the notion that fame, wealth, and the like, are the ultimate realm of joy—instead, loss of self in the comfort of nothingness is liberating, not to mention transformative. Zhuangzi coined a phrase to represent this metamorphosis—withered wood and dead ash:

南郭子綦隱機而坐，仰天而噓，荅焉似喪其耦。顏成子游立侍乎前，曰：何居乎？形固可使如槁木，而心固可使如死灰乎？今之隱机者，非昔之隱机者也。子綦曰：偃，不亦善乎，而問之也！今者吾喪我，汝知之乎？

Nanguo Ziqi sat behind his desk, exhaled and turned his head towards the sky, his expression stupefied, his relational self seeming to have left him. Yancheng Ziyou, who stood in attendance before him said, “What is this? Can the body appear like withered wood and the mind like dead ash? How is it that your sitting behind your desk now is not the same as when you sat here previously?” Ziqi said, “Yan, the question you ask is a very good one! Just now I forgot myself, do you understand?”
We can say two things about the connection between wood-ash and body-mind and the mystery behind Ziqi’s losing his self. First, the self, as we have said, is a trace-like shadow of the genuine Dao-self; the relationship between withered wood and dead ash operates in a similar context—the disgenuine self that we associate with the being of our body and the vainglory pursuits of the heart-mind succumbs to the weathering and toil of such endeavors and so degenerates into a withered form of its former self; it becomes little more than dead ash, a trace of what previously existed. Common men of the world are enamored with and bedazzled by the physical world of things and the emotional value we invest in them. The sage, however, cares not for such things and so remains impervious to their destructive allure. He is indifferent because he sees the value inherent in ash whereas the wood, withered as it might be, still remains in the world of corporeal things and norms tied to the flesh of being. To elaborate, dead ash does not simply mark the end of the wood’s existence but is a signpost for the regeneration and renewal of life; as is said over and again in Daoism, life cannot exist without death and vice-versa, therefore, dead ash cannot come into being without first having gone through the state of withered and healthy wood. It is a self-fulfilling cycle of generation and regeneration, of nothingness and being, of no-self and self. The factor common to wood and its ash, the body and its heart-mind, is that they all trace their root to Dao and Dao’s tracelessness is sustained by nothingness.

For Ziqi, a disciple of Confucius but here presented as a paradigmatic person of Daoism, the act of becoming selflessly traceless is indescribable other than saying “I have lost myself.” Part of the confusion of those scholars mentioned at the start of this chapter stems from their disvaluing of the term “lose”; they take it to be a deliberate discarding without giving consideration to the accidental, involuntary loss that takes place when one’s mind is distracted or otherwise engaged. In other words, Ziqi losing himself is not a purposeful course of action but rather the outcome of letting-go of what is ostensibly not his to begin with. Ziqi, a sage, has no use for names or things and so takes shelter in the nameless formless abode of Dao. His ash-like self is but a husk of his true Dao-self and so he loses it as easily as a cicada molts or a snake sheds its skin. Owing to this, we can appreciate Zhuangzi’s observation that those persons who cling to their husk-like self live as if inverted; lacking Dao, they cannot comprehend or appreciate the marvelous arts of Dao or how said arts constantly and mindlessly inform the nature they are themselves born with. How can Yancheng Ziyou possibly make sense of such profundity!

To put the idea of losing oneself into more accessible language, Zhuangzi writes:
故樂通物，非聖人也；有親，非仁也；天時，非賢也；利害不通，非君子也；行名失己，非士也；亡身不真，非役人也。

Hence he who tries to share his joy with others is not a sagely man; he who shows his feelings is not benevolent; he who adheres to the time of the seasons is not worthy; he who views profit and injury as different is not a gentleman; he who takes action on behalf of names and loses his self in the process is not erudite; and he who loses his body in an unauthentic manner is not fit to be of service to others.  

The above passage has much to offer but what is most interesting is the negative formulation used to portray the esteemed person. Indeed, the opening clause has been taken to paint followers of Daoism as pseudo-automatons devoid of emotions and moral rectitude. Correcting such an inaccurate and unflattering understanding is beyond the scope of this chapter however. Needless to say, it must be noted that what Zhuangzi is arguing is not the uselessness of emotions such as joy and compassion but that our justification for the time and place of their employment is unnatural and prevents the self from attaining its complete potential in the cosmic collectivity of selfless oneness.

Upholding the idea that nothing surpasses Dao, any endeavor to claim otherwise will prove futile. There is no joy richer than that of Dao, no time that supersedes the non-temporality of Dao, no name that encompasses the myriad things more so than the namelessness of Dao, no wisdom more profound than the unknowing emptiness of Dao, and no self more complete than the traceless nothingness of Dao. Therefore, the scholar of the arts of Dao does not seek anything that is not already at hand in his inborn nature—still, empty quietude—and so he returns to what has no beginning, dwells in what has no boundary, and takes peace of mind in knowing that the mystery of oneness is unsolvable and so stops there. Wandering in the wilds of unknowability is to engage in the equalization of gain and loss, leave the world to its own devices, and drift with the transformation of things. Such is the course of the sagacious individual for he dissolves the titles of king and ruler, darkening himself in the imperturbable wholeness of Dao and its virtue.

When it comes to forgetting the self, one might at first blush take it to be a meditative event. If, however, we employ the language of loss to approach self-forgetting, as opposed to forgetfulness in general, the case can be made that the two are in fact equivalent. Take the following passage as an example:
Men have their moving and stopping, death and life, decline and arising—of these he can do nothing. And yet, there are those who believe the governance of such things lies with man. He who can forget things and forget heaven shall be called a forgetter of the self. For those men who have forgotten the self, we can say they have entered heaven.”

We can supplement it with Zhuangzi’s statement that “in clinging to outward form I have forgotten my own body, just as staring into muddied water has misled me into taking it for a clear pool.” These, however, are not the most famous examples—that honor falls to the dialogue between Confucius and his beloved pupil Yan Hui:

Yan Hui said: I can sit in forgetfulness. Startled, Confucius asked: What is this thing you call sitting in forgetfulness? Yan Hui replied: I smash up my limbs and body, drive away wisdom and perception, discard my form and expel knowledge, thus conjoining with the great thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting in forgetfulness.

Forgetting the self is not something that comes easily—one has to work at it. Does this make it meditative? Perhaps, but not in the traditional sense, for the target of one’s pondering is an object that is neither exterior nor interior to the self but the stratum undergirding it. In other words, the task of forgetfulness is not to annihilate the self but release it from the chains of rational thinking so readily affixed to it by humanity. Selflessness through forgetfulness is thus a productive, not reductive, process as the goal is to openly meld with the mundane things of the world in oneness rather than seek out a divine overlord. The thoroughfare of which Zhuangzi speaks is hence the means by which Dao imbues its traceless non-self in the world, and owing to its non-ness, the throughing of Dao occurs via nothingness. What is more, this threading of things together with nothingness means that Daoist meontology is not nihilistic but onto-generative.

Yan Hui’s claim to sit in forgetfulness is thus translatable as: Yan Hui does not sit down and then forget his self but rather, he is already selfless at the moment of his sitting. Being carried along the great thoroughfare of Dao makes him selfless; were he still with self, he would be unable to intuit it.
course, the great thoroughfare is but a pseudonym for Dao, an alias that protects its mysteriousness through selflessness. Thus, to forget things and heaven alike is to be without self, and that which enriches the cosmos selflessly may be said to have entered heaven. But how can one forget heaven and yet still enter it? The answer is that one does not need to literally enter it, for that would make Zhuangzi’s philosophy soteriological. It is, on the contrary, an imaginary sojourning, a wandering in the throes of meontological coherence during which the artificial, calculative self dissipates into its own selflessness. Our muddied vision of ourselves henceforth clears and we are able to cast our sight into the dark depths of Dao.

What is forgotten is the need to forget and with the absence of a need to cast things away, we at the same time rid ourselves of the need to remember, to cling to names and their uprightness. No longer do we depend upon the solidity of the earth to support and shelter us in the everydayness of our being but, conversely, we can take to the air, riding atop the clouds as if Liezi. Our starting and stopping, rising and sinking, breathing coarsely or sighing gently, these are the revolutions of Yin and Yang, the rotations of being and nonbeing. There is nothing more natural than these so why should we see the transition from self to non-self any differently? With the twitch of a muscle we blink an eye but does that change the inborn nature of the eye? With the slightest vibration of air we can hear sound but does that change the inborn nature of the ear? With the smallest of words we can acquire knowledge but does that change the inborn nature of the heart-mind? Each of these sensory experiences depend on something else to stir them into action and yet, when left alone, they are empty and silent. This is their authentic nature, the true condition of their selfhood; indeed, everything in the world is, at its root, in such a state of perpetual ease and calmness. Sights, sounds, and words stir them up however, causing them to be self-muddied and muddled, unaware that formerly they were simple and unadorned. This is why Ziqi was dumbfounded when Yancheng Ziyou’s composure became one of withered wood and dead ash.

Ziqi saw in his friend what he himself possessed but could not comprehend because the self of being had veiled and distorted his ability to access his inner non-self. To restore the balance between himself and the world he was required to forget both, to return to the time of his birth when the notion of self had yet to take hold of him. It is because of this, Zhuangzi says, that the sage, in “returning to himself discovers the inexhaustible; in following antiquity he discovers the imperishable.” What remains to be seen is how Zhuangzi frames the correlation between no-self and the endlessly shifting creations of Dao, an issue to which we shall now turn.
Before beginning our look into the importance of no-self for Zhuangzi, and indeed Daoism as a whole, we would be well served by first turning to a diagram that illustrates how the subject frees itself of selfhood by getting rid of the need to possess things:

A Person \(\rightarrow\) The Subject
A Physical Object \(\rightarrow\) The Self
Possession \(\rightarrow\) Control of the Subject by the Self
Loss of Possession \(\rightarrow\) Subject Freed from Control by the Self

Regarding the first level, this chapter has already shown the correlation between personhood and subjectivity; indeed, this is true of the second level wherein the self is established via our sensory faculties of sight, hearing, and speech. On the third level, that whereby possession of things leads to the self exerting control over its own subjectivity, we have made the case that it is not quite so black and white; what Zhuangzi calls mental blindness—of the sensory sort but also arising from the erroneous belief in the authority given benevolence, righteousness, etc., which comprise the Confucian concept of virtue, but more significantly, blindness to the gift of nothingness due to the plundering of thinking at the hands of being. As for the fourth level, abandoning the need to possess things is certainly a vital element but it goes beyond that as we saw with the story of Yan Hui and Confucius. Freedom is not contingent on loss of possession being equal to loss of control of the self but, rather, it results from one’s conjoining with Dao through nothingness, and the embracement of nothingness can only arise when one has returned to the root of being, and by implication, to a rethinking of being:

In the great beginning there was nothingness, nonbeing, and namelessness. From it arose the One, an oneness that was without form. When things obtained it they were thus born and this was called virtue. Before there were forms and divisions, they were innumerable though without separation, and this was called the order of things. From this flowing and moving things were born and once they became complete they gave birth to principles that were called forms. These forms and their bodies contained spirits, each having its own qualities and regulations and this was called the inborn nature. When the inborn nature is cultivated one will return to virtue, and virtue at its ultimate is identical to the beginning. Being identical it is empty, and being empty it is great.
Although this passage is clearly addressing Daoist cosmogony, it nevertheless sheds light on the meontological nature of selflessness. Indeed, what is most striking about the above account is the lack of any mention of selfhood; things have their inborn nature but this is not equivalent to the self. To extend the inborn nature to the world at large is to risk losing it hence one must preserve it by returning to the pure virtue of Dao. Dao’s virtue, its inborn nature, is still quietude; it is perfect emptiness, one that delimits the beginning of all things as a state of imperturbable selflessness. To be without self is to identify with the living nothingness of the universe that is imbued with the potentiality of Dao. Associating oneself with nothingness means one no longer sides with being but with nonbeing, with the namelessness of formless possibility. Put into such terms, the question of thinking about being becomes one of thinking through nonbeing; it is an event whose horizon lies not in the distant future but the atemporal perpetuity of Dao symbolized via its traceless trace. The concept of no-self is hence neither denial of the self—as in there is literally no self, or no possessive claims to the self exist—rather, the authentic self is a not-self, a non-self whose groundlessness defines it as such. It is, in other words, a non-reified self whose belonging to the world stays the path of constant equanimity within the ever-changing milieu of Dao’s own mystery. It is why Zhuangzi said: “The ultimate person is without self, the spiritual person is without attainment, and the sage is without name;”41 “the person of Dao does not make himself known, ultimate virtue is unattainable, and the great person is without self.”42

He who is great is unfamiliar with the value of selfhood while he who is petty knows only how to cherish it. Since the self is not an innate feature of one’s inborn nature, how can one dismiss it as if it were? We constantly battle with ourselves to be cloaked in self-assurance and familiarity, an act of deception so intimate we are none the wiser of what has transpired. To free our self from ourselves requires nothing more than embracing the truth that we are all impregnated with the selflessness of Dao; it is our inborn nature to be as such. There is no quest for transcendence, no search for divine salvation, no requirement to divide ourselves into multiple others; what our life entails is to simply be as we were meant to and let the world be as it was meant to. To be without self is to be free of the anxieties that plague the minds of those who impose selfness upon themselves; to be without self is to be free of the labors that tax the bodies of those who are beholden to such a narrow and naïve manner of thinking of existence. All that is required is to model oneself after Dao; such modeling is as natural as can be and when naturalness is the only guide one employs to live out one’s years, of what use is the self? There is thus no higher ethical standard that selflessness because there is no higher example of what selflessness can accomplish than Dao and
yet, Dao is always already within us. If we can overcome our blindness to our selfhood we can conjoin with the root of selfhood, a root that meontologically flourishes before our very eyes.

V.

In this chapter we have surveyed the arguments for and against the postulation of selflessness as a viably attainable construct. We thenceforth delved into the variety of ways in which selfhood is envisioned and its connection, however tenuous, to Dao. This allowed us to gain a complete feel for what it means to be selfless and how, having acquired said state of mind, one could succeed in cultivating a genuine state of no-self. Throughout all of this, we witnessed Zhuangzi’s unique and fascinating manner of philosophical argumentation and creativity, both of which truly endeavor to stimulate a reformulation of the traditional identity of self with being to one whereby freedom of non-self is fed by the ontological gift of nothingness. The spirit of Daoist meontology thus vibrantly celebrates the usefulness of all that is taken for granted; it relishes wandering in the dark mystery of Dao’s unknowability and therein finds bliss of the highest order. Such is its ethical vision, a way of partaking in and thinking about the world and humanity’s place therein, that turns everything upside down and in so doing, somehow makes it right.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 47.
4. Ibid., 54.
5. Ibid., 68.
10. Ibid., 352–3.
12. Ibid., 296.
13. Ibid., 308.
15. Zhuangzi, ch. 5; see Guo, 192.
17. Zhuangzi, ch. 11; see Guo, 395.
18. See Zhuangzi’s story of the penumbra and shadow in chapter 2.
19. See Zhuangzi’s parable of the breath of the earth and the various sounds it produces in chapter 2.
20. “When men cherish their vision then the world will not prove dazzling. When men cherish their hearing then the world will not prove wearying. When men cherish their knowledge then the world will not prove deceptive. When men cherish their virtue then the world will not prove depraved. 彼人含其明，則天下不鑠矣；人含其聰，則天下不累矣；人含其知，則天下不惑矣；人含其德，則天下不僻矣.” Zhuangzi, ch. 10; see Guo, 353.
22. Zhuangzi, ch. 13; see Guo, 586.
23. Zhuangzi, ch. 24; see Guo, 852.
24. For more on the gateway in the Zhuangzi, see ch. 23; for more on the pivot, see ch. 2.
25. See Zhuangzi, ch. 6; see Guo, 226.
27. Zhuangzi, ch. 8; see Guo, 327.
29. Zhuangzi, ch.16; see Guo, 558.
30. Zhuangzi, ch. 2; see Guo, 43–5.
31. See for instance Zhuangzi, ch. 2.
32. To the aforementioned list of scholars we can add Edward Slingerland who writes: “Metaphorically, then, Zi Qi’s meditative technique has allowed him (the Subject) to escape the control of the Self—which is a common way to understand Zhuangzian spiritual attainment.” See Slingerland, 2004: 335.
33. Zhuangzi, ch. 6; see Guo, 232.
34. Zhuangzi, ch. 12; see Guo, 428.
35. Zhuangzi, ch. 20; see Guo, 698. The Chinese reads: 吾守形而忘身，觀於濁水而迷於清淵。
36. Zhuangzi, ch. 6; see Guo, 284. A similar account also appears in ch. 11; see Guo, 390: “You have only to rest in inaction, and things will transform themselves. Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget you are a thing among other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless. Undo the mind, slough off spirit, be blank and soulless, and the ten thousand things one by one will return to the root—return to the root and not know why.”
37. Zhuangzi, ch. 23; see Guo, 800 says: “The gate of heaven is nothingness and it is from here that the myriad things emerge. Being cannot use being to create being, it must arise from nonbeing; however, nonbeing is itself nothingness.” The Chinese reads: 入出而無見其形，是謂天門。天門者，無有也，萬物出乎無有。有不能以有為有，必出乎無有，而無有一無有。
38. See Zhuangzi, ch. 1.
40. Zhuangzi, ch. 12; see Guo, 424.
41. Zhuangzi, ch. 1; see Guo, 17. The Chinese reads: 至人無己, 神人無功, 圣人無名。
42. Zhuangzi, ch. 17; see Guo, 574. The Chinese reads: 道人不聞, 至德不得, 大人無己。

WORKS CITED