




COGNITIO

Revista de Filosofia
Centro de Estudos de Pragmatismo

São Paulo, v. 26, n. 1, p. 1-14, jan.-dez. 2025
e-ISSN: 2316-5278

 <https://doi.org/10.23925/2316-5278.2025v26i1:e70745>

Being nature: how to shepherd ourselves to nurture life in the philosophical practice of Emerson and Zhuang-zi

Ser natureza: como conduzir a si mesmo para o cultivo da vida na prática filosófica de Emerson e do Zhuang-zi

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Abstract: Many comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuangzi have analyzed which Daoist concepts were imported within the transcendentalist intellectual movement. In this article I will follow a different methodology; with a theoretical approach I will try to define the ethical-cosmic core common to the two authors. For both, ethics is not a set of dogmas but rather a way of attending to the world. “*How shall I live?*” (Emerson 1983, p. 943) asks Emerson when opening *The Conduct of Life* and, as we shall also see for Zhuang-zi, the philosophical quest is oriented by an existential urgency in which the needle of the compass is *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία) or the good life. This concept has been present since the early days of the western philosophical discipline and was crucial especially to Aristotle, for which there is a predefined teleological end to be followed. Emerson and Zhuang-zi propose an alternative path, that of nurture: a daily exercise free of specific goals that aims to cultivate oneself in constant relationship with Nature. Well, why is it essential for both authors that humans immerse themselves in Nature to achieve a good life? To answer this question, I will first start from the metaphor of the pastoral attitude, outlined by both where, in Emerson, it is represented by the figure of Proteus associated with *natura naturans*, and, in Zhuang-zi, it is present in the concept of *yang-sheng* (養). The Emersonian metaphysical metaphor is also archetypal of an ethical model explicitly proposed in Zhuang-zi. As the shepherd lets the flock wander without dictating a direction, paying attention only to those who lag behind, so man should lead life by asking himself: what lingers in me? Following I will discuss how, from this common archetype, substantial metaphysical differences emerge between Emerson’s and Zhuang-zi’s concept of Nature; particularly between *natura naturans* and *ziran* (自然) and of the consequent relationship of self-transcendent, in the concepts of soul and *xing* (性). Out of this framework will emerge two different types of spirituality that nevertheless underlie a common disposition of listening and agreement to Nature and the Universe. This existential posture is not only ethical, but also cosmological because it crosses the boundaries of separation between man and Nature, placing them in harmony. The result is a philosophical quest that invites us to nurture life without aspiring to happiness, cultivating a gaze that is attentive to the present and not directed toward a future goal. We live in a society still tied to the concept of happiness as a fundamental indicator of an individual’s well-being, and we are constantly anchored to a universe teleologically oriented in a single direction, in which nature has become technique and development has become progress. Emerson and Zhuangzi, with their respective dispositions, show us an urgency that is more relevant than ever, which is to welcome the flow of becoming by respecting and listening to the rhythm of Nature, by becoming shepherds of ourselves.

Keywords: Ethics. Happiness. Nature. Self-transcendent. Spirituality. Vital nourishment

Resumo: Muitos estudos comparativos entre Emerson e Zhuangzi analisaram quais conceitos daoístas foram importados para o movimento intelectual transcendentalista. Neste artigo, seguirei uma metodologia diferente: por meio de uma abordagem teórica, procurarei definir o núcleo ético-cósmico comum aos dois autores. Para ambos, a ética não é um conjunto de dogmas, mas antes um modo de atenção ao mundo. “*How shall I live?*” (Emerson 1983, p. 943), pergunta Emerson ao abrir *The Conduct of Life* e, como também veremos em Zhuangzi, a investigação filosófica é orientada por uma urgência existencial

Recebido em: 17/03/2025.

Aprovado em: 28/09/2025.

Publicado em: 21/12/2025.



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em que a agulha da bússola é a Eudaimonia (εὐδαιμονία), ou a vida boa. Esse conceito está presente desde os primórdios da disciplina filosófica ocidental e foi especialmente crucial para Aristóteles, para quem existe um fim teleológico predefinido a ser seguido. Emerson e Zhuangzi propõem um caminho alternativo: o do cultivo (nurture), um exercício cotidiano livre de objetivos específicos, que visa a cultivar a si mesmo em relação constante com a Natureza. Por que, então, é essencial para ambos os autores que os seres humanos se imerjam na Natureza para alcançar uma vida boa? Para responder a essa questão, partirei da metáfora da atitude pastoral, delineada por ambos: em Emerson, representada pela figura de Proteu associada à *natura naturans*; em Zhuangzi, presente no conceito de *yang-sheng* (養). A metáfora metafísica emersoniana é também arquetípica de um modelo ético explicitamente proposto em Zhuangzi. Assim como o pastor deixa o rebanho vagar sem impor uma direção, atendendo apenas para aqueles que ficam para trás, o ser humano deveria conduzir a vida perguntando a si mesmo: o que permanece ou se arrasta em mim? Em seguida, discutirei como, a partir desse arquétipo comum, emergem diferenças metafísicas substanciais entre as concepções de Natureza em Emerson e em Zhuangzi, particularmente entre *natura naturans* e *ziran* (自然), bem como na consequente relação de autotranscendência, nos conceitos de alma e *xing* (性). Desse quadro resultarão dois tipos distintos de espiritualidade que, no entanto, compartilham uma disposição comum de escuta e de acordo com a Natureza e o Universo. Essa postura existencial não é apenas ética, mas também cosmológica, pois atravessa as fronteiras de separação entre o ser humano e a Natureza, colocando-os em harmonia. O resultado é uma investigação filosófica que nos convida a nutrir a vida sem aspirar à felicidade, cultivando um olhar atento ao presente e não orientado para um fim futuro. Vivemos em uma sociedade ainda presa ao conceito de felicidade como indicador fundamental do bem-estar individual e constantemente ancorada a um universo teleologicamente orientado em uma única direção, no qual a natureza se tornou técnica e o desenvolvimento se tornou progresso. Emerson e Zhuangzi, com suas respectivas disposições, mostram-nos uma urgência mais atual do que nunca: acolher o fluxo do devir respeitando e escutando o ritmo da Natureza, tornando-nos pastores de nós mesmos.

Palavras-Chave: Alimento vital. Auto-transcendência. Espiritualidade. Ética Felicidade. Natureza.

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to compare Emerson's and Zhuang-Zi's ethical perspectives building a functional dialogue that can genealogically highlight the cosmological distinctiveness between them. We have chosen to start from a common image, the pastoral one, since it represents the emblematic piece of the incredible philosophical mosaic constructed by the two thinkers. Through the pastoral attitude it will be possible to understand from the outset what is the ethical heart that unites the two paradigms. Once we have dealt with the pastoral figure of Proteus, presented by Emerson, and the pastoral attitude in Zhuang-zi within the concept of *yang-sheng*, we will go on to investigate the metaphysical roots of nature, which are fundamental to understanding the differences between the two philosophies. The *natura naturans* described by Emerson and the movement of the *ziran* (自然) in Zhuang-zi, will be the fundamental junctures that will allow us to spin a path that will lead us to learn that vital nourishment is conveyed through the soul-for Emerson-and through the body, or rather, the actualized form *xing* (性) for Zhuang-zi. Although, therefore, there are profound metaphysical divergences between the two, both present a common ethical heart that lives in the rhythm of the present, in the original *polemos* of nature. The intent of this paper, therefore, is not intended to be a theoretical contribution to the history of philosophy, tracing analytically how Emerson was influenced by Chinese thought. It is rather a matter of creating a space of encounter between the two thinkers, who seem to be animated by the same ethical intent, that is to practice a philosophy oriented by the questions: "How shall I live?" and Zhuang-zi in turn asks: "If nourishment cannot preserve life, what deserves to be done in this world?" (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 163). The method that inspires this work has been presented, now, I would like to make explicit the title that opens it. Being Nature, for both Emerson and Zhuang-zi, means to transcend oneself in it, crossing the boundaries in which man has delimited and constructed his autonomy with respect to the world. "Being Nature", then, is not just to dwell in it, but instead expresses a springing connection with the ultimate reality that is a source of inexhaustible power, an exercise of self-transcendence that, while declining differently in Emerson Zhuang-zi, is for both a prerogative to achieve the fullness of the self. This translates into an eco-systemic and cosmological ethical perspective, as it dilutes and at the same time makes man aware of his infinitely small space within the universe. The end of this path is thus reunited with the beginning, with the image of the shepherd, who follows the flock by placing himself behind and

not in front, who possesses a sensitive and watchful eye and not a force of tractability and domination, the *hybris*, which has made nature a storehouse through technique, and movement solely progress.

2 The shepherd as an ethical archetype

The figure of the shepherd emerges in both Emerson and Zhuang-zi, and we will be guided by this common metaphor to identify how, in both with their respective declinations, the ethical paradigm that stands in a commonality with Nature. In Emerson the figure of the shepherd is configured in the mythical character of Proteus, a sea deity of Egyptian derivation, taken up by Homer in Book IV of the *Odyssey* (Omero 2016, IV 351-569) with the epithet “old man of the sea.” The latter is described as having exceptional metamorphic powers, the prerogative of deities connected with the marine environment. Well then, it is not surprising that Emerson chooses the figure of Proteus as a representation of Nature and its metamorphic progress:

But it is very easy to outrun the sympathy of readers on this topic, which schoolmen called *natura naturata*, or nature passive. [...] But taking timely warning, and leaving many things unsaid on this topic, let us not longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*, the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes, (as the ancient represented nature by Proteus, a shepherd,) and in undescribable variety. (Emerson, 1983, p. 545-546).

Here Emerson to present the dual character of Nature, of identity-metamorphosis, draws on two terms from a long philosophical tradition, *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. For now, we will deal with the second term representing the active power of nature sublimated by Proteus and relate it to the pastoral figure presented by Zhuang-zi. Emerson writes that the metamorphic proceeding of nature is an infinite set of variations, a multitude moving like a flock. Proteus, Poseidon’s shepherd, here represents the archetype of the ethical attitude to be maintained toward nature. Man, as well as a shepherd, does not stand in front of the flock but behind it, following its direction. Emerson dwells at more filmed on the impossibility of staying ahead of nature and its course, there is no way to place oneself outside of it, and to live in harmony one must follow its flow.

The method of nature: who could ever analyze it? That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. Its permanence is a perpetual inchoation [...] If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted, and if it were a mind, would be crazed; as insane persons are those who hold fast to one thought, and do not flow with the course of nature. [...] (Emerson, 1983, p. 121).

The method of nature, and thus its proceeding, its way, cannot be an object of judgment since it is an infinite chain of emanations. Nature is a flooding torrent in which we live, we share its current, and therefore it is impossible for us to stand in front of it, outside of it, in a position of control. The pastoral attitude then becomes central to understanding how man should let go of the flock by following it from behind, indulging its direction without imposing it, varying it without forcing it. When the mind gets stuck on a thought instead of flowing along with the natural course of events, it becomes sick, making the individual neurotic and completely overwhelmed. This ethical posture of agreement to Nature is also present in Zhuang-zi in the concept of nurturing life: *yang-sheng*. We find this pastoral image in the *Chuang-tzu* in the chapter: “*Having Full Understanding of Life*.” In the opening we find a fundamental question for the purpose of our work: “If nourishment cannot preserve life, what deserves to be done

in this world?” So, we learn that the pastoral attitude toward nature, and therefore toward life, is aimed at its preservation and that is why it is in a posture not of opposition or control but of agreement and commonality. Zhuang-zi proceeds:

“Don’t apologize, Master Tian,” said the duke, “I wish to hear your opinion on this matter.” “Here is what I learned from the master,” said Kai-zhi. “He who knows how to take care of his own life imitates the shepherd who whips the last sheep of the flock” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 163).

So, caring for life means paying attention to what lingers, urging it to reunite with the evolutionary way of life that unites man and nature, namely metamorphosis. As we have seen, Emerson also invites us to pay homage to the way of nature: “let us not longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*” and to go along with its flow. This efficient nature, as we shall see, for Emerson is pantheistical interchangeable with the divine figure of God, which is also supreme rationality. This transformative efficient power for Emerson means the metamorphosis of forms, which is synonymous with the continuous transition of forms from the simplest to the most complex. This will be even more explicit in other essays by the American thinker, such as in *Fate* where the indissoluble link between the metamorphic proceeding and fate is made explicit. Fate is simply the tip of the iceberg of the concatenated web of efficient nature. The ethical attitude to be practiced will be to swim by exploiting the current of nature and fate rather than fighting it.

But every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us, is convertible by intellect into wholesome force. Fate is unpenetrated causes. The water drowns ship and sailor, like a grain of dust. But learn to swim, trim your bark, the wave which drowned it, will be cloven by it, and carry it, like its own foam, a plume and power. (Emerson, 1983, p. 958).

Here the power of fate is described as the force of a wave, drown both boat and sailor, the only solution is to learn to swim in the endless sea of nature. Also, in Zhuang-zi we find numerous references to fate and the same ethical posture. Often the Tao, which is but the way, the method of nature and life, is described as a sea or an immense river in which man is immersed.

“Fish are born and live in water”, Kong-zi said, “just as humans are born and live in the Tao. Those who are born and live in water rummage in the mud and draw their nourishment from it. Those who are born and live in the Tao do not act and attain serenity” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 65).

For Emerson, too, it is essential to remain anchored in our common root with Nature and life: “For, if fate is so prevailing, man also is a part of it” (Emerson, 1983, p. 958). Fate, which represents the manifestation of the metamorphic character of nature, is also present in man since he is inevitably immersed in its flow. Therefore, nurturing life with a pastoral attitude, as we have seen, means having a deep awareness of the inseparable union between man and Nature, and therefore, to lead a peaceful life, it will be necessary to practice an exercise of constant harmony and realignment, weighing circumstances within the infinite chain of networks and relationships of which the Universe is made. Zhuang-zi in this regard writes: “‘He who knows the Dao’, replied Ruo of the North Sea, ‘necessarily understands the order of the universe; he who can weigh circumstances escapes the harm that external things might cause him. [...]’” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 149). Well then, to nurture life means to rummage even in the mire of fate as we have seen and derive vital potential from it. It is thus an exercise in renewal, and not progress, the shepherd stands behind and not in front of the flock, prodding that which does not follow the natural and necessary flow of life’s metamorphosis. The *Yang* synogram of the *Yang-Sheng* concept, suggests

a nourishing activity in the sense of regenerative in which the key to food and the radical of mutton is present, as suggested by sinologist François Jullien:

But why specifically the rams? Perhaps simply because the synogram yang, meaning to feed, is composed of the key to food and the radical of ram. Even more surely because the attitude to be held with respect to one's nourishment is that of one who shepherds his flock, letting it advance as it comes, at its own pace, as it pleases, while never losing sight of stragglers. (Julien, 2005, p. 28).

We have so far seen the similarities between Emersonian and Zhuang-zi ethical thought through their respective pastoral figures. Now it is necessary to understand in what terms they differ, and to do that, we will investigate the metaphysical structures underlying the two philosophical paradigms. We saw Emerson's interpretation of metamorphosis and how it is configured in connection with the ethical attitude in relation to its manifestation in the everyday life, that is, confronting with fate. Zhuang-zi while arriving at a related ethical proposition develops the concept of change differently, to see in what terms we will have to delve into the underlying metaphysical framework.

3 Nature, power and meaning

We have seen how, in both authors, the ethical attitude, presented with the pastoral metaphor, is related to nature with its metamorphic proceeding and, therefore, to life. Now it becomes essential to investigate more deeply their respective conceptions of Nature, that will help us understand how Emersonian and Zhuang-zi thought diverge and then come together in the ethical call for cosmological harmony. The two terms that will be considered will be the previously encountered Emersonian *natura naturans* and its Chinese counterpart *ziran* (自然).

3.1 The *natura naturans*

It has been seen how in Emerson the *natura naturans* parallels the figure of Proteus and his metamorphic power. We are left to investigate the metaphysical substratum underlying this classical dichotomy *natura naturata* - *natura naturans*. Emersonian thought is nourished by numerous philosophical references, as far as the metaphysical framework is concerned, however, there is certainly a bearing of idealism, both Neo-Platonic (in particular in the aesthetic value see Guardiano 2014) and German, particularly from Schelling (Esposito, 1977; Anderson, 2007; Sini, 1972, p. 24). If metaphysics means the study of the ultimate cause of reality, Emerson locates it in the unity in which the divine character expands pantheistical throughout the cosmos. He calls it in many ways: "first cause," "over-soul," it is an inescapable spiritual substratum present in all his essays, as Joseph Urbas points out:

Emerson's evocation of the First Cause in "Experience" (CW 3:42) is not a fluke, a piece of irony, or a passing fancy, any more than his reference to the "Supreme Cause" in "Self-Reliance" (CW 2: 40), to the "aboriginal abyss of real Being" in "Compensation" (CW 2:70), to the "eternal generator" in "Circles" (CW2:188), to the "eternal Cause" in "Montaigne" (CW 4:105), or to the "First Cause" again in "Power" (CW 6:39). Emerson's attachment to a causal and ontological Abgrund is in abundant evidence throughout the canon (I count over seventy references to the Cause alone). (Urbas, 2021, p. 43).

Emerson's monist view, as we shall see, differs from Zhuang-Zi's mainly because it is interwoven with a partially idealist view of reality. This is most evident in the concept of moral sentiment that is based in the intellect.

The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws. [...] The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. [...] If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God does enter into that man with justice. If a man dissembles, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. A man in the view of absolute goodness, adores, with total humility. Every step so downward, is a step upward. The man who renounces himself, comes to himself. See how this rapid intrinsic energy worketh everywhere, righting wrongs, correcting appearances, and bringing up facts to harmony with thoughts. (Emerson, 1983, pp. 76-77).

For Emerson, despite standing in sharp criticism of Descartes and his dualism, reality and man remain imbued with an idealistic vision in which it is the soul that guides the body, and it is spiritual law that guides life; it is no accident that one of his essays is named *Spiritual Law*. Nature, understood as *natura naturans*, has both creative and metamorphic power, and this emanates from a monadic principle that, though immanent remains idealistic: “Everything was first a thought, only thinking makes things” (Urbas, 2021, p. 47). Emersonian monism is related to the Western metaphysical tradition well identified by Samantha Harvey who summarizes it by describing the romantic God-Nature-Man trinity. (Harvey, 2013). The Emersonian metaphysical paradigm is partly teleological because there is a belief in the becoming of the spiritual law of Nature that always has an inherent beauty. Both Emerson and Zhuang-zi, link ethics, that is, man’s authentic self, to the ultimate reality, that is, Nature. With the difference that for the former there is a spiritual power while for the latter bio spiritual. Both think of ultimate reality on the immanent plane, with the difference that in Emerson the idealistic framework prevails in which the soul and the over-soul are privileged with a teleological trust. For Emerson, spiritual power in efficient nature has a teleological direction, is guided by a *telos* (τέλος), therefore oriented by a purpose that is linked to ultimate values. These values can be summarized in three essentials: goodness, beauty and truth:

The world thus exists for the soul to layer the desire for beauty. Extending this element to the extreme, I call it the ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its broadest and deepest sense, is an expression of the universe. God is all right. Truth, goodness and beauty are but different faces of the same.» (Branch; Mohs, 2017, p. 83 *apud* Gao, 2023 , p.5).

There is thus a definite value pattern that is not revealed in Zhuang-zi since, as we shall see, he presents the law governing nature as completely spontaneous.

3.2 *ziran* (自然), the spontaneous movement of Dao

The translation of the Western conception of nature is rendered by the term, also used by Zhuang-zi, *ziran* composed of two Chinese words: *zi* (自) and *ran* (然). The character *zi* (自) is a reflexive pronoun, and *ran* (然) means to be in a certain way. Thus, *ziran* means to be so-of-oneself or to be “self-so” (for a thorough discussion, see Bruya 2022). The role of *ziran* (self-so) is similar to the role of *causa sui* (self-caused) in European philosophy. Submits Perkins in this regard:

While classical European metaphysics attempts to isolate self-causality in a transcendent God, the Chinese took it as the very nature of existence. In this approach, there are similarities with Spinoza’s identification of being and *conatus* (striving) and even with Nietzsche’s “will to power”. (Perkins, 2023, p. 11).

Emerson, too, speaks of power of life as surplus that can be traced back to the Spinozian philosophical

groove (Fabbrichesi, 2019, pp. 103-118, Fabbrichesi 2023, p.4) but as we have seen, he remains partly anchored in idealism especially in the concepts of moral feeling and over-soul. In considering the proceeding of nature completely spontaneous two important points follow. First, existence is seen not in terms of abstract being but rather as *sheng* (生): life, growth, birth, vitality. The fundamental role of *sheng* appears explicitly in the “*Xici*” commentary on the Yi Jing, which says that the foundation of the Changes is *sheng-sheng*, “generating and generating,” “growing and growing,” “living and living,” or “*natura naturans*” (Gao Heng, 1998, p. 388). This phrase inspired the famous description of nature as *shengsheng buxi* (生生不息): generating, generating, never ceasing! Second, if spontaneous generation is the very nature of being, then one can legitimately attribute *ziran* to both the ultimate and to things themselves. This immanence contrasts with the common division between God as self-caused and everything else as caused by God, a view which ultimately sees being as divided into two fundamentally different kinds. In employing a univocal conception of being as *sheng*, Chinese philosophies did not segregate self-generation from the world. So, we learn that for Zhuang-zi, there are no spiritual principles that guide human action and are somehow above the Tao and its spontaneous *ziran* flow. Truth follows the flow of the alternation of ying and yang that together form the metamorphic becoming of Nature. For Emerson, although this same polar play of opposites can be found: “Things are, and are not, at the same time; and the like. All the universe over, there is but one thing, this old Two-Face, creator-creature, mind-matter, right-wrong, of which any proposition may be affirmed or denied” (Emerson, 1983, p. 585.), but it remains clear that ultimate reality is permeated by a divine character-the over soul-that is teleologically oriented. We can find this for example in Fate: “Fate involves the melioration. No statement of the Universe can have any soundness, which does not admit its ascending effort. The direction of the whole, and of the parts, is toward benefit, and in proportion to the health” (Emerson, 1983, p. 930). The concept of *ziran* in Zhuang-zi shows that at the root of existence there is no fixed value other than life itself. Unlike Emerson, there is no external value to life as it flows, no teleological principle guiding its progress, and it is therefore purposeless. Shan Gao stays to clarify this point:

It has the meaning of purposiveness without purpose. In terms of the concept of *ziran*, many traditional views on it stress the value of freedom. However, recent scholarship has given this concept more attention. Professor Wang Bo provides us with an insightful viewpoint suggesting that the concept of self-so is not value-neutral but value-laden (Wang, 2018, pp. 43-53; 128-129). (Gao, 2023, p.6).

Based on in depth linguistic studies of the etymology of *ziran*, one can confirm that everything, that is, self-so, has value for itself. For Zhuang-zi, truth as life is not related to any spiritual principle, as Emerson claims, but rather refers to the spontaneous process of vital, bio-spiritual energy. This process is spontaneous, which means that it is not directed by any power external to itself. Thus, the ethical principle of no action *wuwei* (无为), which has the pastoral figure as its archetype, is declined in Zhuang-zi unlike Emerson, without a substratum of values that refers to a definite spiritual unity. Nathaniel Barrett pointed out this very clearly:

Thus, the act of skillful spontaneity is taken to be a manifestation of this ultimate reality rather than the work of a personal will. Or, alternatively, the activity is experienced as the work of a harmonious plurality of spontaneous entities with no overarching or underlying order. Either way, what Csikszentmihalyi described as the condition of “emergent motivation” — activity without a preexisting intentional structure — is interpreted as a profound fact of reality, and, in turn, this view of reality informs the experience of flow as a kind of transcendence, that is, the transcendence of personal agency by means of direct engagement with the completely unfettered spontaneity (*ziran*) of reality itself. (Barrett, 2011, p.700).

Zhuang-zi's ethical agency, unlike Emerson, is not nourished by any principle of intentionality in accordance with a value system but is simply an expression of the spontaneous alternation of ying and yang, the engine of change. Also Eske Møllgaard express the concept of *wuwei* well:

Here, surely, we can see the structural similarity to the “nonact (*wuwei*) implicit in Zhuangzi's moral imperative. For nonaction is not the absence of action; it is, rather, the highest and most ethical form of action. This is expressed in the well-known formulation “in doing nothing, nothing is not done” (*wuwei er wubuwei*). In Zhuangzi, more specifically, it is the absence of technical, purposive “action” (*wei*) the source of truly ethical action. (Møllgaard, 2003, p. 368).

And that's why Zhuang-zi refers to the invisible virtue: “‘What is the invisible virtue?’” asked Duce Ai. ‘the surface’ replied Kong-zi ‘is the fullness of the calm waters. Virtue is the maintenance of perfect harmony’” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p.55). This is also clearly reflected in considerations of vital nourishment; there is no value attached to it as in Emersonian thought, there is simply life flowing and adaptation to its circumstances. It is no coincidence that when describing this attitude Zhuang-zi seems almost not to really answer the question: “‘What does it mean to know how to preserve life?’ he replies as follows, ‘How can I tell you what I learned from my master?– Kai-zhi replied– I had no other task than sweeping, being in his service by the courtyard door’” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 167). The action of sweeping the door already carries with it the method of renewing life, an unobtrusive but effective maintenance, which in its exercise cleanses and makes space.

4 Breathing the power of life through the soul or body *xing* (性)

I discussed the metaphysical differences between Emerson and Zhuang-zi. It has been seen that for both, ethics is hooked to nature since our self is derived from the ultimate reality. It is now necessary to proceed by investigating the link between metaphysical interpretation of nature and self-transcendence. To fully understand the two types of ethical paradigms, we must first start with the type of self that the two thinkers theorize. Emerson speaks of soul and Zhuang-zi speaks of body, it is good to understand the nuances that these two concepts have within the two philosophical thoughts.

4.1 The actualized form *xing* (性)

In Chinese philosophical thought there is no soul, but process of animation which, by progressive purification leads to full vitality. The European meaning of body is substantialized as well as that of soul. Chinese philosophical thought and particularly that of Zhuang-zi, presents more elastic concepts, less crystallized in an autonomous definition. The term Zhuang-zi uses to talk about the body is *xing*, which is linked to *shén*, the transcendent personal animating entity. This goes hand in hand with the function of moral consciousness and heart-spirit knowledge (*xin*) that governs it. (see Jullien, 2005, p.74). Constitutive being is nothing but the materialization by condensation of the breath of energy (*qi*). So, when Zhuang-zi speaks of the body this is already a constituent whole of numerous elements, it remains wide-ranging and is an organic *unicum*. So, globally in Zhuang-Zi's language what I call “my body” becomes the actualization in continuous modification that, as such, fully constitutes me. There is materialization by continuous concretion (*ying*) and at the same time, animation that unfolds it (*yang*), so the actualization that constitutes me (*xing*) is understood merely as a function of the process of concentration and emanation. In Emerson, on the other hand, although there is no Cartesian division between soul and body, there is certainly a predilection for giving the intellect a special status. For Zhuang-Zi, our cognition is deeply dependent on the body. “The consciousness of living creatures depends on

their breath” (Zhuang-zi, 2009, p. 113). Nurturing life will therefore mean not squandering the breath of energy (*qi*) with which we are disposed in communion with nature. The breath of energy has vitalizing power because of its circulating and irrigating character. On earth we can encounter it in its minimal actualizations in the landscape, see the notion of wind-landscape *feng-jiing* in this regard (Jullien, 2005, p. 89). In this framework it is therefore not surprising that breathing is the simplest and most effective activity of nourishment and awareness. What characterizes the sage, says Zhuang-zi (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 228), is his breathing: “deep-deep”. And again: “The authentic man breathes starting from the heels, that is, down to his base radically; while the ordinary man breathes only starting from the chest” (ibid.). Authentic man, our true-self for Zhuang-zi is both rooted to the earth and a participant in Heaven together with other beings. The union of Heaven and Earth, ying and yang, constitute the movement of nature (*ziran*) in which man is immersed, who, to live serenely and peacefully, must continually and consciously practice this connection. “Union with the great whole excludes all particularity, unceasingly evolving excludes all fixity. You are truly wise. From now on I will follow you” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 68). Well, even in Emerson there is a focus on experiencing the thickness of the present by breathing, but this is always conveyed by the intellect: “breath of will blows eternally through the universe of souls in the direction of the Right and It is the air which all intellects inhale and exhale, and it is the wind which blows the worlds into order and orbit” (Emerson, 1983, p. 935).

4.2 The power of the intellect and the courage of the soul

In Emersonian thought we have seen that the intellect, where the moral feeling and the soul are based, are fundamental concepts, pillars of its metaphysical paradigm. The soul participates and is part of the “Over-Soul”, which is synonymous with efficient nature, reason, Spiritual Law and God:

All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but is a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, — an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed..... When it breathes through his intellect it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through affection, it is love. (Emerson 1983, pp. 386–87).

This passage summarizes both the metaphysical and ethical fundamental points of Emerson’s thought, since it describes the triad of intellect, virtue and love, that is sublimated through the soul which shares the divine with God. This gives an orientation to the ethical value plant: “Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law” (Emerson, 1983, p. 159). For Zhuang-zi, as we have seen, our cognition is incorporated while for Emerson it is mainly conveyed by the intellect, the moral feeling is the virtue through which our perception expands embracing God and therefore Nature. The vital nourishment in Emersonian thought is conveyed by the power of intellect and courage of soul, expressed by the temperance of self-reliance, while in Zhuang-zi we find no reference to a particular virtue or predisposition precisely because the *ethos* does not embrace any position but flows to the rhythm of *ying* and *yang*. In Emerson we find a *polemos* at the root of the movement of nature and life, but in this is projected a strictly moral vision of the world as seen particularly in the essay Compensation for example: “Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in the ebb and flow of waters; in the systole and diastole of the heart [...]” (Emerson, 1983, p. 156). Emerson reports a precise value-based system from this equilibrium, while the same dualistic scheme in Zhuang-zi of opposition between *ying* and *yang* does not report any idea of Good. The Chinese dualism, which is not part of the western ontological grammar based on the trinity, never predicts an excess outside the simple polar iteration. The *Dao* is simply the way, it does not serve as a constituent background of being as

happens in Emerson with the concept of God, who is indeed nature but is also the One that brings together. This means considering an ethical fabric studded with values that, like stars, illuminate the human journey in life. Whereas, in Zhuang-zi as we have seen, it is already the action of sweeping the door, embodied in a body posture permeated by *qi*, that represents the ethical paradigm of the Chinese thinker. There are no values or virtues but bodily actions that already sublimate the way of the *Dao*. Although presenting a different metaphysical grammar, in Emerson we find the same concept of vital potential expressed by Zhuang-zi. The soul - like *qi* - exists and is above all real: “The soul is not a compensation, but a life. The soul is” (Emerson, 1983, p. 193). Being, which for Emerson is God who is also Nature, is not beyond the world, but it is vital sap that flows to its peripheries. “Beneath this sea of circumstances flowing, whose waters flow and flow back in perfect balance, is the aboriginal abyss of the true Being” (ibid.). Although Emerson and Zhuang-zi carry the vital nourishment ethical on two different ways — the first in the groove of the intellect and soul and the second in the groove of the body — both share the need to transcend towards nature since they identify it as a unique and ultimate reality of reference. This is especially true in considering it as an organic and non-abstract nature, in which Emerson departs from an idealistic vision by criticizing it harshly:

Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world’s being. One is perfect; the other, incapable of certainty; the mind is part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream, from which we can awaken at this moment to glories and certain bonds of the day. Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry. (Branch; Mohs, 2017, p. 103 *apud* Gao, 2023, p. 10).

Emerson characterizes God and therefore nature, not as an abstract entity but as a life force, like Spinoza who conceives divinity as *potentia agendi*. In this thought, which goes from the concept of pre-Socratic *physis* to Spinoza, also Emerson is inserted declining as we have seen his way the idea of God and nature. In this path of philosophical thought, Emerson and Zhuang-zi meet with some differences, sharing the need to mend a deep familiarity with nature and with the flow of life.

5 Nourishing life by forsaking happiness

We have seen in depth how Emerson and Zhuang-zi deal with establishing what is the basis for a good life, Emerson asks himself in the opening of the essay *Fate*: “How shall I live?” (Emerson, 1983, p. 943) and Zhuang-zi in turn asks: “If nourishment cannot preserve life, what is worth doing in this world?” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 163). We start from a pastoral archetype to identify the common pattern that, seems to me, to be fundamental despite the different inclinations present in the two philosophers. Why is the figure of the pastor central? We responded with Emerson taking the figure of Proteo and with Zhuang-zi, thanks to the concept of *yang-sheng*. Further, it was seen that, the thought Emersonian – despite its anchoring to the intellect and function of the soul – shares with Zhuang-zi the idea that the subject’s hermeneutics (Foucault, 2001) has its foundation in organic nature and not abstract, presented as the ultimate reality in the two senses of *nature naturans* and *ziran*. It is no coincidence that again François Jullien, in another of his writings, shows how Foucault’s latest studies – turned to self-care and thus to hermeneutics of the subject – can build a bridge with Western philosophical thought.

It is true: ever since Michel Foucault opened a new genealogy for the hermeneutics of the subject in his last courses, showing the relevance of the ancient admonition of self-care (*empimeleia heautou*) as opposed to “know thyself,” one has seen in the call to those spiritual exercises a new bridge with Far Eastern thought, an unconscious but still effective bridge. (Jullien, 2019, p. 241).

This implies two fundamental consequences: 1) the ethical attitude is inseparable from the natural flow of events, so that the subject is not autonomous but inserted in an infinite chain of relations with the world. (Møllgaard, 2003) It is not the Cartesian subject, and neither is the Kantian one shaped by Emerson and Zhuang-zi. In both the existence precedes the essence, in both the subject is constituted in its union with nature and with all beings. Today we live in a society where connections seem much easier but where the bonds are broken and the subject acts as if he were isolated. Nature is seen as a storehouse of usable resources and not as the flow of life in which man is also immersed, man not only uses the resources of the planet in which he lives but wears them out, as Heidegger pointed out with the two terms *Nutzung* and *Vernutzung*. (Heidegger, 1976, XXVI p. 60). Some scholars have theorized a new geological era based on this: the Anthropocene (Stoppani, 1873; Crutzen, 2002) where, as the term suggests, man with his activity prevails and shapes the environment. But what power is it? The real, life-based power that is founded on human-nature communion, has been eclipsed by *hybris*, the arrogance of an attitude which does not recognize domain limits. The power expressed by Emerson and Zhuang-zi is not characterized by force but on the contrary, it is constituted by the reflection of the energy of Nature. Emerson describes it as a delicate fiber of iodine that lights up in the presence of light:

So, the great man, that is, the man most imbued with the spirit of time, is the impressionable man, of irritable and delicate fibers, like iodine to light. He can feel the infinitesimal attractions. His mind is righter than others, because he yields to a current so feeble as can be felt only by a needle delicately poised. (Emerson, 1983, p. 965).

We learn that the more we abandon ourselves to nature and the course of events, the more we sharpen our sensitivity to the smallest details of each moment, and this becomes the true potential for life that we have. In this framework, where nature is replaced by technique and where sensitivity is crushed by the need for domination, a fundamental paradox arises, a promethean unevenness (Günther Anders, 2018) in which the human being no longer has control over what he produces, it is controlled by what it has produced. The power that arises from this, completely alienated from life, enslaves not emancipates, weakens and does not strengthen. This leads to the second consequence. 2) Happiness, in a time defined by the power of technique, represents the ability to phagocyte objectives in a performative bulimia defined by what is possible to achieve. In the history of western philosophical thought, the concept of happiness has undergone a major change. In the pre-Socratic thinkers happiness was connected to the figure of the *daimon*, that is a guiding spirit, a voice of the soul. Happiness was translated by the Greek term *eudaimonia*, which means good demon, and therefore suggested a practice of inner listening independent of external causes, as Democritus asserts: “*the eudaimonia does not consist in herds and not even in gold but the soul is his dwelling*” (Democritus, fr 170-171). From Plato and with Aristotle especially, we witness an evolution of the ancient concept of *eudaimonia* that is sewn together with *telos* with the connotation of “tending to”, *ephiesthai*, verb that opens the *Ethics to Nicomachus*. (Jullien, 2005, p. 125; Aristotele, 2000; 1094a p. 7). The link between purpose (*telos*) and happiness is welded from Aristotle onward and permeates Western philosophical thought, solidifying a tradition that reaches to the present day, as François Jullien shows:

Purpose and happiness: the link between them is firmly anchored in European thought and constitutes therein an interminable tradition, makes it its role, its strain, forms therein a fold. it is on this link that Aristotle’s *Ethics to Nicomachus* (books I and X) opens and closes and makes it his anhypothetical articulation, beyond which he does not consequently imagine going back, which he does not even think of questioning. (Jullien, 2005, p. 115).

Now, as François Jullien notes, the *eudaimonia* of ancient Greek philosophical thought approaches that of Chinese: “From the absorption of the aims within a logic of the consequence is derived the

reduction of the idea of happiness. In this sense it is close to what was initially the eudaimonia of the Greeks” (Jullien, 2005, p. 124.) We have seen that, both for Emerson and for Zhuang-zi, the practice of nourishing life does not attach itself to any external projection but is rooted within, conveyed through the soul or body, branched into a cosmic perspective in which we breathe the present without future expectations. One does not aspire to happiness but tastes joy for simple existence, it is a primordial experience that Goethe, widely appreciated by Emerson, describes with the term *Urphänomen*: “The joy inherent in existing is an Urphänomen, an original phenomenon, which allows glimpse of the unexplorable” (Hadot, 2009, p. 156). Now, also Zhuang-zi speaks of joy, he calls it the joy of heaven: “This means that having found emptiness and stillness, he extends them to the whole universe and communicates them to all beings: this is what is called the joy of heaven. The soul of the Saint, in harmony with the joy of heaven, nourishes him” (Zhuang-zi, 1982, p. 116). In this ethical perspective, where “ocean feeling” is guiding (Roland, 1998, pp. 31-36; Ostow, 2006; Parson, 1999) there is no room for an ego-centered man, since the authentic man lives and breathes in an eco-system not in an anthropocentric ego-system. The exercise of transcendence in nature described by both Emerson and Zhuang-zi, allows man to float with it receding from its fundamental original rhythm. Both offer us a philosophical thought that invites to refine the senses feeding on the present in the awareness that this rhythm of inspiration and exhale, is also the rhythm of nature and the world. Philosophy thus becomes a constant exercise of tuning and, in this time more than ever, there is a need to cultivate it despite the radical abdication of ego: “The most difficult thing in the world is to get on the diapason of being and to affirm its tone” (Cioran, 1986, p. 118). But once practiced this exercise happiness is no longer necessary, man is finally dispensed from it, his vital potential can radiate moment after moment, step by step, in the pastoral attitude of those who have cultivated the art of following the flow of nature: “Every step so downward, is a step upward. The man who renounces himself, comes to himself. See how this rapid intrinsic energy worketh everywhere, righting wrongs, correcting appearances, and bringing up facts to harmony with thoughts” (Emerson 1983, pp. 76-77).

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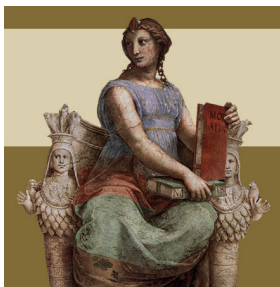
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COGNITIO

Revista de Filosofia
Centro de Estudos de Pragmatismo

São Paulo, v. 26, n. 1, p. 1-14, jan.-dez. 2025
e-ISSN: 2316-5278

 <https://doi.org/10.23925/2316-5278.2025v26i1:e70745>